

H M satisfied with nation's progress

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik presided over a meeting of the Council of Ministers at Al Barakah Palace on Tuesday.

After giving thanks and praise to Allah, the Almighty, for the bounties He has bestowed on Oman and its loyal people, His Majesty the Sultan reviewed local, regional and international conditions.

He opened the meeting by exploring the economic, fiscal and social indices achieved last year. His Majesty voiced his satisfaction with the positive outcome of the national action at all levels. He underlined the significance of maintaining the pace in implementing the strategies, plans and programmes aimed at realising sustainable development and preserving the national gains.

His Majesty the Sultan spoke about the efforts undertaken to attract more local and foreign investments, develop sources of economic diversification and augment the share of non-oil investments in the gross domestic product.

After reviewing the executive status of initiatives and programmes being implemented by the authorities concerned, His Majesty the Sultan laid emphasis on the necessity of follow-up of these aspects. In particular, he gave directives to consolidate investment and diversify its sources, streamline related procedures and address challenges



His Majety underlined the importance of raising the awareness of youth about global standards of work culture and the need to encourage them to undertake self-employment

in a way that can reflect positively on investor confidence and enhance Oman's competitive indices.

The Council of Ministers listened to a briefing about the fiscal performance of the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) and

its role in boosting the national economy. His Majesty the Sultan commended the performance of the OIA and its ability to realise good financial gains since its inception. He gave directives to channel the OIA's investments towards achieving added value in

the national economy and consolidating production frameworks in a manner that can augment local content and generate more jobs for citizens.

His Majesty the Sultan touched on the executive position of employment initiatives and programme. He underlined the importance of raising the awareness of youth about global standards of work culture and the need to encourage them to undertake self-employment. In this context, he instructed the departments concerned to create appropriate environment for citizens to take all types of jobs

and enterprises.

His Majesty the Sultan also reviewed the assessment of the performances of government units in 2022 as done by the Government Performance Measurement Unit, which indicated tangible improvements. He stressed the need for continuous upgradation of government performances at all levels to achieve the desired goals, visions and aspirations - keeping pace with global developments. He urged all institutions to study the areas of strength and weakness and to find the best ways to address the challenges facing them.

After reviewing the results achieved through the 'Manjam' labs on streamlining government services, His Majesty the Sultan stressed the need for effective participation in the upcoming stages of the laboratories. He instructed that such actions would be undertaken in accordance with regulatory standards of governance based on institutional partnership to achieve the satisfaction of Oman's citizens, residents and the business sector.

In this context, he lauded government departments' improved performance in the Digital Transformation Programme, giving di-

rectives to maintain such efforts.

While reviewing the progress made in conducting the municipal councils' elections, His Majesty the Sultan hailed citizens' earnest quest to engage in the elections, both from abroad and within Oman, as they competed to select the members who now represent them in the 3rd term Municipal Councils. He also commended the application of technology which empowered the citizens to remotely vote through smartphones and enabled those interested to follow up results of the elections.

Continued on Page 02

Arrivals at airports increase by 153%

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The number of arrivals at airports across Oman recorded an increase of 153 per cent from January to October 2022, compared to the same period in 2021.

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) data, the total number of arrivals, departures and transit passengers was 7,807,908 in Oman's airports in the first ten months of 2022. The number of outbound passengers also rose by 115 per cent compared to the corresponding period in 2021.

The total number of international and domestic flights at Oman airports (Muscat, Salalah and Sohar) went up by 137.6 per cent till October 2022 to reach



51,017 compared to 21,466 flights during the corresponding period in 2021.

Muscat International Airport witnessed a 116.6 per cent increase in the number of international and domestic flights as it handled 54,165 flights in all. The total number of passengers (arrivals, departures and transfers) at the airport was 6,744,565 till October 2022 against 2,784,037 passengers during the same period of 2021.



Oman projects 5.5% growth in GDP this year

Isolated rains to hit Oman for four days

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The northern parts of Oman are expected to receive light to moderate rainfall starting from Thursday, due to air trough affecting the sultanate.

The latest weather maps and analysis of the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre show that the upper air trough is likely to affect Oman till Sunday, January 8.

According to the Directorate General of Meteorology, the governorates of Musandam and North Batinah are expected to receive light to moderate rainfall and thundershowers from Thursday to Sunday.



Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr look to 'galactico' era with CR7



Public Auction Announcement

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), in partnership with Worley Oman, is pleased to announce the sale of the following written-off materials on "As Is Where Is Basis" through online bidding as detailed below:

Auction Ref	Description	Location	Viewing Date	Last date for Document Submission	Online Bidding Date	Cheque Guarantee Amount
A1/2023/S30K	Assorted Scrap /line pipes / tubing/casing, sucker rod, structural materials etc. (Qty: 30,000 Tons)	Nimr/Amal/ Rima/Bahja	10-01-2023	16-01-2023 3:00 pm	22-01-2023	OMR 50,000/- (Fifty Thousand Omani Rials)
A1/2023/N15K	Assorted Scrap /line pipes / tubing/casing, cable drums, scrapped equipment, structural materials etc. (Quantity: 15,000 Tons)	Al Hwaila/ Yibal / Fahud	11-01-2023	16-01-2023 3:00 pm	22-01-2023	OMR 35,000/- (Thirty-five Thousand Omani Rials)
A1/2023/CD2*	Used/Scrapped cables with metal drums (Qty: 600 tons)	Bahja	10-01-2023	16-01-2023 3:00 pm	22-01-2023	OMR 10,000/- (Ten Thousand Omani Rials)
A1/2023/IT	Used IT equipment's & accessories	MAF -Muscat	12-01-2023	16-01-2023 3:00 pm	22-01-2023	OMR 5,000/- (Five Thousand Omani Rials)
A1/2023/TY	Used & Un-used Vehicle Tyres	Challa -Muscat	12-01-2023	16-01-2023 3:00 pm	22-01-2023	OMR 3,000/- (Three Thousand Omani Rials)

- This auction is open to all registered companies under the Ministry of Commerce & Industry and Investment Promotion with activities of buying /selling scrap or Omani smelter factories or activities covered under the scope of sale items.
- * International buyers (Outside Oman) are only allowed to participate in the auction lot A1/2023/CD2.
- All interested bidders shall be registered with Oman Environmental services Holding Company (Be'ah) for the activity of scrap metal collection and trade.
- Bid documents, photos and details of LOTs offered for sale can be accessed via the following link: https://supplychain.requis.com/share/oman_pdo_assets
- The value added tax (VAT) of 5% of the value of the bid amount must be paid by the buyer.
- All interested companies/parties must confirm their participation for the material viewing with e-mail confirmation to the "Auction Focal Point" by attaching copies of valid ID cards on or before **09 January 2023 (02:00pm)**. Prior registration for the visit is mandatory to organise entry permits for the visitors.
- The "Auction Focal Point" shall communicate the visit schedule / meeting points and other logistic details via e-mail and/or phone conversations to all registered bidders.
- This auction is in line with PDO HSE Policy & HSE specifications SP2000 and SP2001 (Policy/Specifications can be viewed online through the following link: <http://www.pdo.co.om/hseforcontractors/> username: pdohse01 and password: contractor01). All HSE rules on safe handling and transportation of materials from PDO sites will be applied. Please ensure that you are familiar with the PDO HSE requirements before participating in this auction.
- Only two personals from each company are allowed to attend the material viewing event as per above schedule. Unregistered visitors will not be permitted in the material viewing and it will be reported to the authorities.

For any clarification about this auction, please contact the Auction Focal Point (Tel: +968-24473498 or via email: Auctions.Focal@worley.com)



شركة تنمية نفط عمان
Petroleum Development Oman

HM ADMINISTERS OATH OF OFFICE TO 3 ENVOYS



Before His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, three ambassadors took the oath of office at Al Barakah Palace on Tuesday. The three ambassadors are (from top): Eng Nasser bin Said al Munawari, the Sultanate of Oman’s Ambassador to the Republic of the Philippines; Sheikh Mohammed bin Ahmed al Shanfari, the Sultanate of Oman’s Ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia; and Issa bin Saleh al Shaibani, the Sultanate of Oman’s Ambassador to the Republic of India (ONA)



National Life & General Insurance Company completes the purchase of minority shares in Al Ahlia Insurance Company

Muscat, 4th Jan, 2022: Further to the public announcement made on 20 November by National Life & General Insurance Company SAOG (NLGIC) to purchase the minority shares of Al Ahlia Insurance Co. SAOG (Al Ahlia), a subsidiary of Royal & Sun Alliance Insurance (Middle East) B.S.C. (c) (RSA Middle East), and after obtaining relevant approvals from the regulators and shareholders, NLGIC has completed the purchase of minority shareholding in Al Ahlia of 47.5%. RSA Middle East, a subsidiary of NLGIC Group, remains the majority shareholder of the remaining 52.5% of Al Ahlia.

This transaction will not only help NLGIC expand its customer reach in the region but will also bring together potential synergies between both companies in terms of resources and technologies to provide a wider range of insurance products and services to both individual and corporate customers, thus creating a well-diversified insurance player in the region.

About National Life & General Insurance Co. SAOG (NLGIC)
NLGIC is the market leader and the largest insurance company in Oman with branches in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait. NLGIC has been in the insurance industry for more than 25 years, offering a wide range of insurance solutions in Medical, Life and General Insurance segments with a successful track record of business performance across various financial parameters. NLGIC is the market leader in Oman in the Motor and Health Insurance segments and one of the major players in the UAE and growing fast in its new markets including Kuwait.

About Al Ahlia Insurance Co. SAOG (Al Ahlia)
Established in 1985, Al Ahlia is one of the longest serving non-life insurance companies in Oman. Al Ahlia offers a wide range of products and services in the retail sector including Motor, Travel, Personal Accident and Home products. With 24 branches, over 26 exclusive agents, a dedicated call center and a convenient online platform, the company provides its customers with unmatched sales and service support. It also offers a wide range of commercial insurance products including Property, Casualty, Motor, Construction, Marine, Specialty lines and SME solutions. Al Ahlia has received consistent recognition and awards such as ‘Oman Insurer of the Year’ & ‘AIWA Award for Best Performing mid-cap company’ for many years at regional and local award platforms.

About Royal & Sun Alliance (Middle East) B.S.C. (c) (RSA Middle East)
RSA Middle East is a leading provider of property and casualty insurance in the Middle East with operations in Bahrain, UAE, Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It offers solutions for both commercial and retail clients, across a range of product lines, including motor, property, medical, SME as well as tailored solutions for large corporates. It has operated in the region for over 60 years, bringing best-in-class international solutions and expertise to the Middle East.

Teenage golfer to attempt 54 holes for charitable cause

Our Correspondent Muscat

With an aim to raise money for a playground for the Association of Children with Disability, teenage golfer Ayman al Busaidi will challenge himself to play 54 holes on three different golf courses on Thursday.

It will take around 12 hours to complete three courses in Ghala, Al Mouj and Ras Al Hamra golf clubs of 18 holes each.

The 16 year old has been a member of the Oman National Golf Team for seven years. Speaking to Muscat Daily, Busaidi said, “Playing golf is something that I enjoy, and it has given me many opportunities.”

Elaborating on his target for the noble cause, he said, “The playground will be an important asset for the children to boost their physical and mental growth through walking and running, and other activities that can help them increase their attention span and self confidence.”

The idea for this initiative came when Busaidi was an International Baccalaureate (IB) student. During a volunteering stint, he developed an emotional connection with a young boy with autism.

“I started looking forward to attending those sessions and I saw the happiness in his eyes when I helped him climb a frame, a target which we had been trying to achieve for months. I then



Busaidi thanked Omantel, ABQ and Kempinski for being the sponsors of the event.

“I would also like to thank Al Mouj, Ghala Golf Club, Ras al Hamra, the Oman Golf Association for their support.”

Talking of the future plans, he said that he would like to continue with his studies preferably from a top tier university in the US or the UK. “No matter what I decide to do in the future, I will always attempt to grow the game of golf in Oman.”

During a volunteering stint I realised how important it is to integrate kids into community life and what role we can play in their rehabilitation

AYMAN AL BUSAIDI

Busaidi currently gives free coaching to young Omanis at Al Mouj and Ghala Golf Club to make the game popular in Oman.

While there are company sponsors for the event, an individual can also contribute to the cause through the official website: <https://donate.om/DonationsPortal/Home/CharitySelection.aspx?d=6&csrt=14291705567097338935> or through Bank Muscat account No 0423010744980021 and charity boxes placed at the golf clubs.

CAA launches programme to improve early warning system

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has launched a new programme to enhance the level of accuracy of the meteorological services and early warning system, which would allow governments, communities and individuals to act better to minimise the impact of any hazardous weather on its way.

The new programme ‘Muzn’ aims to develop the quality of alerts, meteorological services, early warning, and improve systems and devices in the National

Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre, said a statement issued by CAA.

‘It will also improve the technology solutions and digital transformation processes, and train and qualify the national cadre, technically and practically.’

A good early warning system saves lives and jobs, land and infrastructures and supports long-term sustainability.

Early warning systems will assist public officials and administrators in their planning, saving money in the long run and protecting economies.

Oman had launched the Na-

tional Multi Hazard Early Warning System in 2015. The system, implemented with the technical support of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of Unesco, was designed to respond to natural hazards, including tsunamis, cyclones and flash floods.

The system was the result of a collaboration between the IOC - Unesco and Oman that began in 2009. It supports monitoring conditions of weather and sea, data processing and standard operating procedures, as well as training of personnel and the operation of sea-level stations.

Qurum, Naseem parks to be closed in preparation for Muscat Nights

Our Correspondent Muscat

Muscat Municipality on Tuesday temporarily closed the Qurum Natural Park and Al Naseem Public Park in preparation for Muscat Nights 2023.

A statement issued by Muscat Municipality said, ‘We wish to inform the public that the Qurum Natural Park and Al Naseem Public Park will be closed to visitors starting from Tuesday, January 3; to prepare for Muscat Nights 2023, which will be held from January 19 to February 4.’

His Majesty satisfied with nation’s progress

Continued from page01

His Majesty the Sultan expressed his satisfaction with the efforts exerted by the authorities concerned in organising the elections. He gave his blessings to the new formation of municipal councils. He also laid emphasis on the collaboration of efforts, in the next stage, to develop municipal services and develop governorates so that they could play their prospective roles in the nation building process.

While referring to the data on the spread of drugs and psychotropic substances, His Majesty the Sultan valued the efforts made by the departments concerned in combating the phenomenon.

He pointed out that a five-year national strategy was endorsed to address drugs and psychotropic substances in the Sultanate of Oman (2023-28). He gave directives to authorities to take necessary actions to limit the negative (health, social, eco-

nomic and security) impacts of the phenomenon.

His Majesty the Sultan also spoke about developments taking place in the regional and international arenas as a result of changing behaviour and alien concepts, which often challenge human rights, and other proclaimed justifications to impose certain visions, programmes and conducts that do not fit with prevalent principles.

In this context, His Majesty the Sultan underscored the sig-

nificance of engaging in upright action to consolidate innate Omani principles and values that stem from the teachings of true religion. He urged families to bring up their children in accordance with sound educational values.

At the conclusion of the meeting, His Majesty the Sultan spoke about various aspects of concern to the nation and citizens. He wished all success in realising prosperity and progress for this dear homeland.



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Is COVID-19 back? There is no need to panic

Shaddad al Musalmi
Muscat

Health experts in Oman have advised the public to take precautions against COVID-19, including getting vaccinated and wearing masks, as many countries remain on alert for the potential new variants that could emerge from the wave of infections sweeping China.

According to an AFP report, travellers from China now face restrictions in more than a dozen countries as concern grows over the surge in COVID-19 cases in that country.

Qatar is the latest country - the first in the region - to demand negative coronavirus test reports for travellers from China before their arrival.

Dr K P Raman, chairman and cardiologist, Al Hayat International Hospital, said, "A new wave of COVID-19 is anticipated. But fortunately, it is believed to be not as serious as the Delta variant, though the risk of spread



may be more."

The chances of fatalities and serious infections cannot be totally ignored either.

"There are going to be some ICU admissions, some deaths. Most of them will be in people with comorbidities, and those whose immunity is compromised," he added.

Dr Raman said in a few countries, vulnerable people are receiving their 4th and 5th vaccine doses. "The best proven precautions to prevent serious infection and spread are masks and vaccines. Once the infection occurs, there are some drugs which when given in a timely manner can prevent the infection turning

serious. Wearing masks and taking vaccine are a small price we pay to protect ourselves and our loved ones from the serious sequelae of COVID-19."

On Monday, Sultan Qaboos University Hospital (SQUH) issued an internal directive making it necessary for all employees and visitors of the hospital to

A new wave of COVID-19 is anticipated. But fortunately, it is believed to be not as serious as the Delta variant, though the risk of spread may be more

DR K P RAMAN

wear face masks with immediate effect.

This decision was taken after the hospital administration noticed an increase in the number of patients with COVID-19 infections in recent days. 'The hospital administration will continue to monitor the situation to determine the next course of action,' the statement said.

The number of COVID-19 cases seems to be rising again, indicating that the virus is not

going to go very soon. Experts say that the citizens and residents of Oman need to focus on staying safe while learning to live with the situation.

Dr Rohil Raghavan, Regional CEO, Burjeel Holdings and ENT Surgeon, said, "We have to learn to live with COVID-19 which may remain as a continuous situation the world over, with new surprises showing up every now and then in different countries."

Despite concerns that COVID-19 is taking its toll again, Dr Raghavan said, there is no need to panic in Oman. "Oman has done so well in vaccination campaigns... most people are fully vaccinated."

"In our hospital, there has been hardly any case reported because people are reluctant to test," he informed.

People still need to be cautious, Dr Raghavan pointed out. "In our hospital, we have never stopped advising our staff and our patients to wear face masks. This is an ongoing situation and

we still need to have precautionary measures such as wearing face masks among others."

According to AFP, China on Sunday reported more than 5,100 new infections and one death linked to COVID-19. With a population of 1.4bn - the figures appear to be out of step with the reality on the ground.

In recent days, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Spain, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have imposed either a negative COVID-19 test requirement or testing upon arrival for travellers from China.

Morocco went further banning all arrivals from China on Saturday, to avoid a new wave of contaminations and all its consequences in its territory.

The flurry of global travel restrictions began as countries anticipated a surge in Chinese visitors after Beijing announced mandatory quarantine for inbound passengers would end on January 8.

Citizen arrested for murder of woman in North Batinah; legal action initiated

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A citizen has been arrested on suspicion of murdering a woman citizen in the wilayat of Liwa in North Batinah governorate.

A statement issued by the Royal Oman police (ROP) said, 'A citizen was arrested on suspicion of killing a woman citizen in the wilayat of Liwa. Legal procedures are being



completed against him.'

Oman witnessed four cases of assault with weapons in the month of December 2022, which led to the death of two women. The first murder was reported in the wilayat of Seeb and the second in Dhahirah governorate.

On December 18, a citizen was arrested for assaulting a woman bank employee with a knife while she was

performing her duty in Dhofar, according to ROP.

On December 17, an Omani woman was arrested in the wilayat of Shinas after she assaulted one of her relatives with a knife and harmed herself, following a family dispute.

On December 12, a citizen was arrested for stabbing to death an Omani woman in Dhahirah.

On December 7, another citizen was arrested on charges of assaulting a woman with a weapon in the wilayat of Seeb.

Ancient settlement unearthed in Mudhaibi

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A team of archaeologists unearthed a 5000-year-old settlement during a recent exploration at the Al Gharyein archeological site in the wilayat of Mudhaibi, North Sharqiyah governorate.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) in a statement said that the exploratory teams unearthed the ancient settlement during the second season of excavation at the archaeological site of Al Ghariyan.

The excavation - headed by Dr Nasser Said al Jahwari, professor in the Department of Ar-



chaeology at the SQU College of Arts and Social Sciences - was a joint mission of the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and the Ministry of Heritage and

Tourism. The other members of the team are Dr Khalid Douglas and Dr Mohammad Hussein.

'The Al Gharyein site boasts of a unique organisation and plan-

ning. It features a tower structure, surrounded by multi-room dwellings, a cemetery with mass burial graves and the remains of other buildings,' stated SQU.

The settlement is distinguished for its large buildings - as large as 600sqm each.

'Besides its exceptional characteristics in terms of construction, planning and concept, the archaeological finds show that the site's inhabitants were engaged in agriculture, animal grazing, copper smelting and had relations with coastal communities; in addition to foreign trade, especially with the present day Sindh in Pakistan.

10 projects shortlisted: Bilarab Award

Muscat - The Office of Bilarab bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design on Tuesday announced the list of ten projects shortlisted for the second edition of the award, which includes designing of the Maritime History Museum in Sur.

A statement issued by the office said, 'The Bilarab Bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design announces the names of ten projects, which have qualified as the finalists in the second edition of the award. The final ten will present their ideas, proposals and technical vision to the jury to win the top three prizes.'

Among the top ten, there are six teams and four individuals. The presentation before the jury will take place in the wilayat of Sur from January 30 to February 1.

Oman Air most on-time airline in MEA in 2022: Cirium review

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Air has been ranked as the leader in the Middle East and Africa (MEA) for its on-time performance in 2022.

The Cirium 2022 On-Time Performance Review - the global gold standard for airline and airport performance - reported the excellent performance of Oman's state-run airline against all odds that the global aviation sector faced during 2022.

An on-time flight is that which arrives within 15 minutes of the scheduled gate arrival. For an airport, it is when a flight departs within 15 minutes of its scheduled departure.

The past year saw a challenging operational environment across the world, particularly in Europe and North America, with many airlines and airports experiencing delays, disruptions and resource challenges, while others continued to emerge from COVID-19 restrictions, espe-



MEA TOP 5

1. Oman Air
2. Royal Jordanian
3. Kuwait Airways
4. Emirates
5. Qatar Airways

cially in the Asia Pacific region. Despite this climate, many airlines and airports worldwide excelled, stated the Cirium report.

For the second consecutive year, Delta Air Lines was honoured with the Cirium Platinum Award for global operational excellence. 'The award considers a number of factors including on-time performance, operational complexity and an airline's ability

to limit the impact of flight disruptions on its passengers.'

Azul Brazilian Airlines was globally the best in on-time performance with the winners in the other regions of the world being Delta Air Lines in North America, Iberia - the flag carrier airline of Spain - for Europe, Azul for Latin America and Thai AirAsia in Asia Pacific.

StarFlyer was the leading low cost carrier and Haneda was the top airport performer globally.

Jeremy Bowen, Cirium CEO, said, "Ramping back up operations so quickly after an enforced slowdown is not easy to do and the top-ranked airlines in Cirium's 2022 On-Time Performance Review deserve their recognition for this well-orchestrated achievement."

"Congratulations to Delta Air Lines for its excellent performance, as well as Oman Air for its success in MEA region, getting its passengers to their destinations on time as the sector revived during 2022."

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MARKET WATCH

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Sensex 61,294.20

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)

Indian	215.19
Pakistan	589.30
Bangladesh	268.59
Philippines	145.25
Sri Lanka	949.38

*Rates as on January 03
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

German inflation slows as energy prices ease

German inflation eased in December for a second straight month, preliminary data showed Tuesday, as government interventions helped to bring down energy prices. Consumer prices in Europe's top economy rose by 8.6 per cent year-on-year, down from 10 per cent in November, federal statistics agency Destatis said.

The decline, which was bigger than analysts had expected, brings the inflation rate in Germany back to single digits for the first time since August.

The slowdown was partly thanks to a one-off subsidy from the German government covering the December gas bill for households and businesses, Destatis said in a statement.

"Due to the December immediate assistance, among other things, the inflation rate was significantly lower than in the previous months," it said.

For the whole of 2022, German consumer price growth reached 7.9 per cent, the highest on record in post-war Germany.

Oman government projects 2023 GDP growth at 5.5%

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's economy is expected to grow by 5.5 per cent in 2023 as compared to estimated 5.0 per cent growth in 2022, mainly due to increase in oil and gas production, according to the estimates released by the Ministry of Finance.

As per the forecasts prepared by a joint team to monitor economic developments and outlook in Oman, the real GDP is projected to grow by 5.0 per cent by the end of 2022, driven by an increase in hydrocarbon activities, the ministry said in its 2023 state budget document.

For 2022, the sultanate's hydrocarbon GDP is expected to grow by 9.5 per cent and non-hydrocarbon GDP is forecasted to grow by 2.6 per cent.

'During 2023, the joint team expects the national economy to grow by 5.5 per cent as a result of an increase in oil and gas production. The hydrocarbon GDP is projected to grow by 10.1 per cent and non-hydrocarbon GDP is expected to grow by 2.9 per cent,' the Ministry of Finance said.

In foreword in the 2023 budget document, H E Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, said, "The world is facing significant economic and geopolitical challenges which adversely affect energy prices and



During 2023, hydrocarbon GDP is projected to grow by 10.1 per cent and non-hydrocarbon GDP is expected to grow by 2.9 per cent

supply chains, leading to high inflation rates and growing global debt risks. Oman is not immune from such challenges which may affect our economy."

Oman's real GDP grew by 4.5 per cent in the first nine months

of 2022, reaching RO26.3bn compared with RO25.1bn in the same period of 2021, according to latest data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). "This increase in GDP at constant prices is mainly

due to an increase in oil activities by 12 per cent and non-oil activities by 1.6 per cent when compared to the first nine months of 2021,' the ministry noted.

The value added of oil activities increased to RO9.4bn during the first nine months of 2022 from RO8.4bn registered in the same period of 2021. The value added of non-oil activities amounted to RO17.7bn during January-September period of 2022 compared with RO17.4bn

achieved during the same period in 2021, the NCSI data showed.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently said that Oman's economic recovery is gaining traction as higher oil prices, fiscal consolidation measures and progress on structural reforms are supporting a post-pandemic recovery.

The IMF expect Oman's real GDP growth at 4.4 per cent for 2023.

Elevated oil prices and increased oil and gas production boosted Oman's economic recovery in 2022. The sultanate sold its crude oil at an average price of US\$94 per barrels during 2022 against an assumed price of US\$50 per barrel in last year's budget.

Oman's 2023 budget is based on an average oil price estimate of US\$55 per barrel and average oil production of 1.175mn barrels per day. The Ministry of Finance said that the oil price was assumed at US\$55 per barrel in 2023 budget as a precaution against oil prices volatility.

'This price was assumed after taking into consideration several factors including the uncertainty facing global oil markets, global inflation, projected recession, and real-estate sector crisis in China. Such factors may adversely affect the global economy and so the oil prices and production,' the ministry added.

CBO issues RO10mn treasury bills

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A tender of the government treasury bills, issue number 169, was issued this week by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

Total value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO10mn, for a maturity period of 182 days, from January 4, 2023 until July 5, 2023.

The average accepted price reached RO97.483 for every RO100 treasury bill, and the minimum accepted price arrived at RO97.470. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 5.0488 per cent and 5.1792 per cent, respectively.

The interest rate on the repo operations with the CBO is 5.00 per cent while the discount rate on the treasury bills discounting facility with the central bank is 5.50 per cent.

Treasury bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the opportunity to invest their surplus funds. The Central Bank of Oman acts as the issue manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (repo). Furthermore, treasury bills promote the local money market by creating a benchmark yield curve for short-term interest rates.

Investments in Nizwa Industrial City surpass RO470mn mark

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Total investments in the Nizwa Industrial City have surpassed RO470mn, according to the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn).

The number of workforce at the Nizwa Industrial City has exceeded 6,000 - of which 2,900 are national cadres, marking an Omanisation rate touching 42 per cent, Madayn said in a press statement.

H E Sheikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, accompanied by members of Shura Council, representatives of the wilayats of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, visited Nizwa Industrial City to get familiarised with the key localised industrial, commercial and service



projects in the industrial city.

Receiving the delegation, Ahmed bin Salim al Hajri, director general of Nizwa Industrial City, gave a brief overview on the investment climate in the industrial city.

H E Hajri was also briefed on the role played by Nizwa In-

dustrial City in social responsibility aspects and the associated challenges. The meeting then discussed the significance of setting clear frameworks to promote the investment opportunities in Nizwa Industrial City and the governorate in general.

The delegation then visited Masar Service Centre at Nizwa Industrial City, which offers an ideal and integrated platform for local and foreign investors to benefit from a wide range of services delivered by several government bodies in addition to Sanad Service Centre.

Oil prices rise on supply fears

London, UK - Oil prices rose on Tuesday over investors' supply jitters as the oil markets are awaiting the next round of sanctions on Russian oil products slated for February 5 amid fears of global recession after IMF warned of a 'tough 2023.'

International benchmark Brent crude traded at US\$86.17 per barrel on Tuesday morning, up 0.30 per cent from the closing price of US\$85.91 a barrel in the previous trading session.

American benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) traded at US\$80.57 per barrel at the same time, a 0.38 per cent gain after the previous session closed at US\$80.26 a barrel.

Tight supply projections were the main driver of the price upticks as on February 5, when the next set of EU sanctions against Russian oil products is scheduled to go into force.

It will impact refined petro-



leum products like diesel.

It comes two months after the G7 decision to cap the price of Russian oil at US\$60 per barrel and the EU ban on Russian seaborne crude exports on December 5. However, lingering fears of global economic recession continue, especially amid unfolding travel restrictions on Chinese people after the country eased its two-year-long strict pandemic measures.

The decision of the world's largest oil importer and the second largest oil consumer country raised concerns for a new wave of infections because the number of cases have been on the rise.

International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva warned on Monday that 2023 would be 'tougher' than last year as the US, EU and China see their economies slow.

Anadolu Agency

Bulgaria inks deal for gas deliveries via Turkey

Sofia, Bulgaria - Bulgaria on Tuesday signed a long-term deal for access to Turkey's liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals and transit network, in a move to secure alternatives after Russia cut off deliveries in April.

The agreement between Bulgaria's state-owned gas operator Bulgargaz and Turkish state gas firm Botas will allow the EU nation to unload LNG at its neighbour's gas terminals and use the Botas network to transport gas.

"Thanks to this agreement we secure the possibility to buy gas from all international producers and unload it in Turkey, where it's most convenient for us logistically," Bulgaria's interim Energy Minister Rosen Hristov said after the deal was signed.

"The agreement is important for increasing the security of deliveries in the Balkan region," Turkish Energy Minister Fatih Donmez said.

The 13-year agreement would enable Bulgaria to transport up to 1.5bn cubic metres (bcm) of gas a year, he added.

For decades, Bulgaria had almost fully relied on Russia to cover its annual needs of about 3bcm of gas a year.

But Moscow suspended deliveries to Bulgaria in April, after Sofia refused to pay in rubles in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Currently Bulgaria imports about 1bcm of natural gas from Azerbaijan, and has also secured spots at the LNG terminal in neighbouring Greece.

AFP

Iraq oil revenues increase to \$115bn in 2022

Baghdad, Iraq - Iraq's oil revenues in 2022 exceeded US\$115bn, according to preliminary figures announced by the oil ministry on Tuesday - a four-year high following a collapse in prices during the coronavirus pandemic.

Oil production accounts for some 90 per cent of Baghdad's income, and the country is the second largest producer within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

"The total revenue from the export of crude oil for the year 2022 amounts to more than US\$115bn," Minister for Oil Hayan Abdel-Ghani said in a statement.

The country exported more than 1.2bn barrels in 2022, averaging 3.3mn barrels per day, ac-



cording to the statement.

These revenues follow a spike in prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and OPEC producers' subsequent reluctance to increase production.

In October the oil cartel decided to cut production quotas to

maintain price levels, with a reduction of "two million barrels per day".

With a near total reliance on oil revenue to fund state spending, Iraq was hit by a collapse in prices at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic.

From US\$78.5bn in 2019, oil

Iraq exported more than 1.2bn barrels of oil in 2022, averaging 3.3mn barrels per day, according to the Minister for Oil

revenues fell to US\$42bn in 2020, according to official statistics. By 2021 they had risen back up to US\$75.6bn.

Following decades of conflict Iraq, faces chronic economic challenges and requires significant investment in infrastructure projects, making oil revenues

and prices per barrel crucial data for Baghdad's preparation of annual budgets.

Despite its oil riches Iraq, home to 42mn inhabitants, faces an energy crisis that sees regular power cuts and damaging electrical surges, known as load shedding.

Neighbouring Iran provides the country with one-third of its gas and electricity but deliveries are frequently interrupted, further aggravating the already-daily instances of load shedding.

Last month the World Bank warned that Iraq, battered by climate change impacts from drought and water scarcity to rising temperatures, must diversify its economy and invest US\$233bn by 2040 to embark "on a green growth path".

AFP

World markets mostly rise at start of new year, but worries persist

Hong Kong, China - Most markets bounced from early losses and the yen hit a seven-month high Tuesday to start the year on a positive note, but ongoing worries about interest rates, China's growth and the Ukraine war continue to dampen the mood.

While 2022 was painful for investors, there is a fear that the next 12 months could be worse, with the head of the International Monetary Fund warning a third of the global economy could slip into recession.

Eyes are on China, where the swift removal of most zero-Covid measures has sparked a massive surge in infections that has filled up hospitals and left crematoriums overloaded.

The widespread outbreak has fanned fresh concerns for the economic outlook as businesses are being forced to shut down, after having already been battered by the strict containment measures put in place for almost three years.

Analysts said infections may have already peaked in major cities including Beijing, where activity is picking back up.

But there are fears that travel over the Lunar New Year holiday at the end of the month could see cases spread to the countryside and further impact the economy.

"With the ongoing Covid tidal wave, investment sliding to a 10-quarter low, and new orders continuing to get battered, a meaningful first-quarter recovery is increasingly unrealistic," Derek Scissors, of CBBI, said.

IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva said with China's economy looking shaky just as the United States and European Union edge towards contraction, the outlook for the world was downbeat for 2023.

She told CBS's "Face the Na-



A trader reacts on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange at the closing bell on Monday in New York (AFP)

tion" that this year will be "tougher than the year we leave behind".

While the United States may avoid it, she warned half the 27-nation European Union will be in recession, as the bloc is "very severely hit" by the Ukraine conflict.

China's economy will likely be at or below global growth for the first time in 40 years, she added.

However, after a negative start to the day, Asia's markets turned brighter as it progressed.

Hong Kong was lifted 1.8 per cent by hopes for the city's economy ahead of an expected reopening of the border with China next week. The Hang Seng Index's rise came after it suffered its worst year since 2011.

There were also gains in Shanghai, Taipei, Manila and Jakarta, though Sydney, Mumbai, Seoul and Singapore re-

mained in the red.

London, Paris and Frankfurt all rose at the open.

Investors are now bracing for another series of central bank rate hikes in the early months of the year as monetary policymakers battle to rein in decades-high inflation. The sharp increase in borrowing costs last year was a key reason for the major pain suffered by equity markets as traders contemplated the end of years of cheap cash.

The Fed and others have suggested they will slow their pace of increases, but they are tipped to take rates higher than previously expected and not start to cut until later in the year or even 2024.

Friday's release of US jobs data will be closely followed for an idea of how the Fed will move next, with a strong reading likely to put pressure on the bank to

keep lifting for some time.

Still, the yen extended its gains to briefly hit 129.52 per dollar - its highest level since June - after the Bank of Japan shifted away from its long-standing ultra-loose monetary policy.

The BoJ said last month it would loosen its grip on yields and allow those on certain government bonds to move in a wider band.

Observers see the unit pushing much higher, after it hit a three-decade low close to 152 per dollar as recently as October. "The yen's current level is significantly undervalued, even after the recent rally," Rajeev De Mello, at GAMA Asset Management, said. "I would expect an end to (the Bank of Japan's) negative rates by April. This further removes obstacles for the yen to strengthen more."

AFP

Turkey's inflation rate slows sharply to 64.3%

Istanbul, Turkey - Turkey's annual inflation pulled back further in December from a two-decade high, official data showed Tuesday, helping President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's chances in elections due by June.

Consumer prices rose by 64.3 per cent in December from the levels at which they stood a year earlier, the state statics agency said, compared to an 84.4-per cent year-on-year increase in November.

Analysts attribute the sharp slowdown to the so-called base effect, which makes year-on-year price increases look smaller when compared to extremely high rates 12 months earlier.

The latest reading is still higher than in any another other emerging market except for Argentina.

But it fulfils Erdogan's campaign promise that inflation will start falling at the start of the year after reaching the highest levels since 1998 last year.

Economy Minister Nureddin Nebati blamed last year's record inflation rates on "challenging conditions all over the world" and promised a brighter future.

"In the coming months, all our citizens will start to feel the cumulative effects of the policies we have been implementing against inflation even more," he tweeted after the data were released.

Turkey's economy has been going through convulsions since Erdogan launched an unusual experiment in September 2021 that tried to fight inflation by bringing down borrowing costs.

The lira began to lose value al-

most immediately, as consumers rushed to buy up gold and dollars to protect their savings.

The price of imports such as oil and gas soared, creating an inflationary spiral that the nominally independent central bank fed further by continuing to lower interest rates.

The annual inflation rate peaked at 85.5 per cent in October 2021.

But polls show that most Turks lost trust in the official data after Erdogan replaced the head of the state statistics agency following a particularly dire inflation report last year. A separate study released by Turkey's ENAG research institute showed the annual inflation slowing to 137.6 per cent in December from 170.7 a month earlier.

AFP

Singapore economy grows more than expected in 2022

Singapore - Singapore's economy grew more than expected last year but much slower than in 2021, official data showed Tuesday, as analysts warned of weaker growth ahead owing to an expected recession in key markets.

While the 3.8 per cent on-year expansion was welcome, it was weighed by a 3.0 per cent contraction in the key manufacturing sector in the final three months.

Growth in the fourth quarter came in at 2.2 per cent, sharply down from 4.2 per cent in July-September, according to advance estimates by the trade ministry.

Exports for computer chips and other products have been hit by softer global demand caused by surging inflation and sharp increases in interest rates.

The city-state's economic performance is often seen as a



useful barometer of the global environment because of its reliance on trade with the rest of the world. Last year's growth beat the 3.5 per cent expected by the government but was half the 7.6 per cent rise enjoyed in 2021.

"While the slight outperformance suggests some resilience in economic activities for now, the overall trend remains on the downside," Yeap Jun Rong, mar-

ket analyst at online trading firm IG, said in a note.

Research house Capital Economics said it expects exports to fall further on expectations the global economy would enter a recession this year.

"Elevated interest rates, declining household savings and high inflation are likely to drag on domestic demand," it added.

AFP

TENDERS ADVERTISEMENT

Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) Announce the following Tender:

Sr.No	Tender No.	Tender Name	Last Date for Obtaining Tender Documents	Bid Submission Date	Grade	Tender Document's Fees (Including VAT) (RO)
1	01/2023	Adding Fault Current Limiter (FCL) in the 132kV System at Muscat Governorate.	18/01/2023	14/02/2023	Local Companies with Experience in Same Field, Have A Valid Commercial Registration & OETC Registration in Category (A)	2,625.000

Participation:	Interested Companies may obtain Tender Document with the necessity Apply on E-tendering
Buying the Tender:	By E-Tendering System.
Fees:	Against non-refundable payment as mentioned above against each set of document. (Payment Through Bank Transfer)
The deadline for clarification:	Before (21) Days from closing date.
Submission:	The submission of hard copy will be only for Bid Bond & other documents by E-Tendering
Terms and conditions:	- No other writing or any reference thereto should be mentioned on the envelope. - The bid should be valid for not less than (90) days from closing date. - The Tenderer should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of 1% of the bid value and should be valid for (90) days from closing date, addressed to Oman Electricity Transmission Company (SAOC). - Any bid not comply with the required guarantee, will not be accepted. - OETC is not bound to accept the lowest or any other offers.
Offer:	The bid bond should be submitted in Tender Box No. (1) at the company's building before 11:00 am on the assigned date for submission of the Tenders.
Company Address:	Muscat - Al Mawaleh Road No: 2153 - Building No. 4230 Block No: 321 - Contact Details: 93515198 tenders@omangrid.com
Email:	tenders@omangrid.com
Website:	www.omangrid.com / Link of E-Tendering System https://www.omangrid.com/en/Pages/Services.aspx



Oman Electricity Transmission Company s.a.o.c.
P.O. Box 1389, Al Khoudh, PC 132, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: +968 2428 3000 | Fax: +968 2230 9046
www.omangrid.com



إعلان طرح مناقصات

تعلن الشركة العُمانية لنقل الكهرباء عن طرح المناقصة التالية :

م	رقم المناقصة	عنوان المناقصة	آخر موعد للحصول على مستندات المناقصة	آخر موعد لتقديم العطاءات	الدرجة	ثمن الوثيقة (شامل ضريبة القيمة المضافة)
١	٢٠٢٣/٠١	إضافة محد تيار العطل في نظام 132 ك.ف بحافظة مسقط	٢٠٢٣/٠١/١٨	٢٠٢٣/٠٢/١٤	الشركات المحلية العاملة في هذا المجال ولديها سجل تجاري ساري المفعول ومسجلة لدى الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء في الفئة (أ)	٢,٦٢٥.٠٠٠

الاشتراك	يمكن للشركات والمؤسسات المتخصصة الحصول على مستندات المناقصة بعد تقديم الطلب عن طريق نظام المناقص الإلكتروني.
طريقة الشراء	من خلال إستخدام نظام المناقص الإلكتروني
الرسوم	مقابل دفع المبلغ المحدد أعلاه للنسخة الواحدة - لا ترد. (الدفع عن طريق التحويل البنكي)
آخر موعد للإستفسارات	قبل (٢١) يوم من تاريخ آخر موعد لتقديم العطاءات
تقديم العروض	يتم تسليم النسخة الأصلية فقط من الضمان البنكي للعطاء في الصندوق . أما العرض فيتم تسليمه من خلال نظام المناقص الإلكتروني.
الشروط و الضمانات	- عدم تحديد اسم صاحب العطاء أو ما يشير إليه على المظروف. - أن تكون العروض سارية المفعول لمدة لا تقل عن (٩٠) يوماً من تاريخ تقديم العطاء. - إرفاق تأمينا في صورة ضمان مصرفي من أحد البنوك العاملة في البلاد قدره (١٪) من قيمة العطاء ساري لمدة (٩٠) يوماً من تاريخ تقديم العطاء . ومعنونا بإسم الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء . - كل عطاء لا يستوفي التأمين المطلوب لن ينظر فيه . - الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء غير مقيدة بقبول أقل العروض أو أي عطاء آخر.
العرض المقدم	يجب وضع الضمان البنكي العطاء فقط في صندوق المناقصات رقم (١) مبنى الشركة قبل الساعة ١١ صباحاً من التاريخ المحدد لتقديم العطاءات
عنوان الشركة	عنوان الشركة: محافظة مسقط - الموالج - رقم السكّة: ٢١٥٣ - مبنى رقم ٤٢٣٠ تفاصيل التواصل: ٩٣٥١٥١٩٨
البريد الإلكتروني	tenders@omangrid.com
الموقع الإلكتروني	www.omangrid.com https://www.omangrid.com/en/Pages/Services.aspx



الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء ش. م. ع. م.
ص. ب. : ١٣٨٩، الخوض الرمز البريدي : ١٣٢، سلطنة عمان
الهاتف : +٩١٨٢٤٢٣٠٠٠ / الفاكس : +٩١٨٢٢٣٠٤٦
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Bank Muscat recognised for inclusive initiatives

In line with its commitment to contribute in empowering persons with disabilities, Bank Muscat, the leading financial institution in the sultanate, is keen to support persons with disabilities through CSR programmes and initiatives in partnership with government institutions and NGOs.

Recently, Bank Muscat participated in an event organised by the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) on the occasion of International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

During the event, MoSD hon-

noured Bank Muscat for its constant support.

The event was held under the patronage of H E Laila Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development, where Hamza Abbas al Ajmi, deputy general manager - Credit, Bank Muscat, received the honour from the minister.

The bank was also honoured for its CSR initiatives to provide support to persons with disabilities on the event the Oman Association of Persons with Disability held under the patronage of H E Sheikh Rashid

Ahmed al Shamsi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Social Development, where Taya Eid Bait Sabeea, deputy general manager, Governorates, Bank Muscat, received the award.

Hamza said, "We are proud to participate in this important event organised by the ministry and of all the tremendous efforts that the Ministry of Social Development and various government and private institutions, NGOs and individuals are keen to put for the development of services and facilities for persons with disabilities.

"The bank pays great attention to activities, events and social responsibility programmes especially those targeted at developing facilities and services for persons with disabilities.

These efforts are in line with the bank's commitment to deliver long-term benefits for the disabled and helping them integrate into mainstream society, as well as encourage all efforts working towards ensuring the welfare of persons with disabilities." He further pointed out that the bank will continue working on developing sustain-

able programmes that provide support to the community.

Taya Eid Bait Sabeea, deputy general manager, Governorates, Bank Muscat, said, "In Bank Muscat, we pay great attention to persons with disabilities and work closely with different institutions across Oman to provide a suitable environment to enhance their role in society.

On this occasion, we would like to extend our appreciation to Oman Association of Persons with Disability for their constant cooperation and part-

nership with the bank and for their contribution to develop various services that can help persons with disabilities."

Bank Muscat has taken many measures for the inclusion of persons with disabilities into mainstream society through its CSR initiatives and programmes.

The bank's efforts in this regard include the operation of a special ATM with a special transaction flow for blind and visually-impaired people.

Also, special access ramps and other arrangements for

easy access have been made available at different branches and ATMs in Oman.

The bank has also trained a number of its branch employees in sign language to facilitate easy communication with the hearing impaired.

Bank Muscat is constantly innovating to improve and enhance inclusivity through its various sustainability programmes and is keen to partner like-minded organisations to ensure the goals of inclusivity and overall renaissance of the country.

MoL floats 'Wage Subsidy' for youth employment in private sector

To guide Omani competencies to the labour market and involve the private sector in employing them, the Ministry of Labour has launched a Wage Subsidy initiative to support the wages of the new Omani employees who have joined the private sector recently.

This initiative targets job seekers who have never worked before and hold university degrees, higher diplomas, post-secondary diplomas, professional diplomas, and general education diplomas, a press release said.

The initiative is considered to be an opportunity for small and medium enterprises to flourish by subsidising the wages of their employees for two years. Furthermore, it creates job opportunities for fresh graduates to successfully enter the labour market.

"Wage Subsidy initiative is part of the employment initiatives package to support the private sector after the negative economic impact of the coron-



Abdulaziz al Harthi



Ammar al Shuaili



Bodour Issa al Harthi



Khalid al Abri

avirus pandemic," said Bodour Issa al Harthi, director of Job Opportunities Department.

"The initiative subsidises the wages of the beneficiaries in the private sector for two years to the tune of RO200, provided that the employer bears the difference," she added.

"The significance of this initiative lies in providing the private sector with renewable energies that have the capacity and capability to keep up with the changes and face challenges which help in sustainability and the success of

private sector companies," said Khalid Hassan al Abri, Supervisor of Employee Relations at Al Maha Petroleum Product one of the beneficiary companies.

"The role of the company is training and qualifying the employees through a strategic development plan to enable them to fulfill the required competencies for the job. This plan is divided to 70% of on-job training, projects, and online programmes, 20% of direction, guidance, and self-learning, and 10% of attending traditional

training programmes," Abri said.

"The Wage Subsidy initiative has created job opportunities, and I suggest raising the ceiling support for private enterprises," said Abdulaziz al Harthi, maintenance engineer, and a participant in the initiative.

"Wage Subsidy initiative has contributed significantly in providing more job opportunities, as its active role was noted in resolving the job seekers crisis. Also, this initiative has encouraged private institutions to at-

tract youth energies and introduce them to the labour market," said Ammar Saleh al Shuaili one of the initiative's beneficiaries.

"My job in the Wage Subsidy initiative has qualified me to get a better job opportunity in one of the private sector institutions," Al Shuaili said.

It's worth mentioning that people enrolled in this initiative can register for government jobs and may compete as well in private sector jobs only under the condition of finding a better job opportunity.



Tariq al Barwani named 2022 Icon of the Year

Tariq Hilal al Barwani has been named as '2022 Icon of the Year', being one of the most inspiring personalities in 2022, by The Arabian Stories which organised its first business awards.

H H Sayyid Kamil bin Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said, Secretary General of Oman's General Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers, presented the award at a gala event bringing leading industry leaders, professionals and academicians under one roof.

"What a beautiful way to end the year by receiving the Icon of the Year Award, for the most in-

spiring people in 2022. I look forward to another exciting, thrilling and winning 2023 year ahead," said Barwani upon receiving the award.

Earlier in 2022, Tariq was also honoured with the prestigious 'Youth ICT Influencer of the year' award which was bestowed by Dr Ali al Shidhani, Undersecretary for Communications and Information Technology at Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology at Oman's spectacular official technology event, COMEX 2022.

OAA to host opening round of 2023 MERC

The Oman Automobile Association (OAA) will host Oman International Rally, the opening round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC), between January 26 -28.

The sultanate has some of the smoothest and most challenging gravel special stages on the planet and the Oman event has been one of the most popular in the regional calendar since it burst on to the international scene way back in 1979 and then became a round of the inaugural MERC in 1984, a press release said.

The 2023 event is being run under the chairmanship of Brigadier (Retd.) Salim Ali Khalifa al Maskiry and will offer 13

special stages over two legs. Chris Hodgson will act as the new Rally Director, working with 'Clerk of the Course' Ahmed al Zadjali and his deputies, Saud al Rawahi and Younis al Balushi.

Administration checks will take place at rally headquarters on January 25, with scrutiny scheduled for the following day at the OAA. Both, the official ceremonial start and opening super special, will then take centre stage on January 26 afternoon.

The OAA will then host the prize giving ceremony and post-event press conference on January 28, after two days of competitive action on the surrounding gravel trails.

Friday's action will be fought out over two passes through the AlKhoud, Jafnayn and Sa'al special stages, split by a midday service stop and regroup. Saturday's timetable includes two passes of the Murayrat, Misfah and Mulinah stages.

"We are delighted to be hosting the opening round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship again in 2023," said OAA managing director Suleiman al Rawahi.

"We invite drivers and teams from around the world to take up the challenge of racing on our country's varied gravel and sandy stages."

Nasser Saleh al Attiyah is the most successful driver in recent

seasons in Oman, the Qatari defending regional champion now having seven wins under his belt, spanning a time period of 21 years between 2003 and 2022.

The current FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem also won the event on seven occasions between 1986 and 1998, while Saeed al Hajri recorded three successive wins (1983-1985).

The late Björn Waldegård (1988), Tony Georgiou (1992), Michel Saleh (1993), Khalid al Qassimi (2007), Abdulaziz al Kuwari (not an MERC round - 2014) and Abdullah al Rawahi (2021) have taken solitary wins in recent MERC history.





Changan CS75 elevates sophistication

Changan CS75 Plus 2023 comes with premium design, comfortable automotive interior, and highly intelligent configuration. The compact crossover, which comes in luxury and sport variants, offers a host of special features. The Luxury variant is equipped with fully automatic parking, a press release said.

A spokesperson for Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment (AGAE) - official distributor of Changan brand in Oman - said, "Ever since its launch in the Oman market, Changan CS75 Plus has been astounding car enthusiasts for its promising quality of innovation, aesthetics, functionality and stability. The model makes driving feel like winning with its stunning design, pre-



mium interior and intelligent features. The CS75 Plus is loaded with smart and innovative features that aim to elevate the confidence and sophistication in

every drive."

The Changan CS75 Plus 2WD features a more sloped roofline and more power. Under the hood, it has a 2ltr turbocharged

4-cylinder engine, mated to an 8-speed automatic transmission with a power of 224hp and torque of 360Nm. With a wheel-base of 2710mm, and it meas-

ures 4700mm in length, 1865mm in width and 1710mm in height.

Standard features in the CS75 Plus include power windows, central locking, cruise control, dual-zone auto A/C, 8 speakers, multifunctional steering wheel, USB+AUX ports, 12-inch screen, Bluetooth, 360 camera, leather ventilated seats, sunroof, fog lamps, parking sensors LED headlamps, panoramic roof, keyless entry and start, and 19-inch wheels. Safety features includes dual front, side and curtain airbags, ABS, and hill assist.

Its Blue Core Powertrain Technology, based on the principles of power, clean and quiet, provides owners a highly efficient performance.

Nissan to use low-CO2 steel



Nissan Motor Co and Kobe Steel announced that Nissan plans to use Kobenable Steel for Nissan models from January 2023 onwards.

Kobenable steel, commercialised by Kobe Steel, significantly reduces CO2 emissions in the blast furnace process. Kobe Steel will also supply Nissan with aluminum sheets made from green-aluminum raw materials. This will be the first time Kobenable Steel will be used in mass-produced vehicles, a press release said.

Nissan aims to achieve carbon neutrality throughout the entire product life cycle by 2050. Since approximately 60% of a vehicle's weight is made up of steel parts and around 10% of its weight is made up of aluminum parts, the use of green steel and green aluminum is a very effective way to reduce CO2 emissions during parts manufacturing - part of its life cycle.

Therefore, the companies' decision to use steel and aluminum

for Nissan vehicles is due not only to the significant CO2 emission reductions but also because the same level of high quality as conventional products can be achieved.

Nissan models will use Kobenable Premier, which reduces 100% of CO2 emissions during manufacturing through the mass-balance method.

The green aluminum raw materials purchased by Kobe Steel to produce aluminum sheets for Nissan are electrolytically smelted using only electricity generated by solar power, thereby reducing CO2 emissions during aluminum ingot production by approximately 50%. Recycled aluminum materials generated at Nissan's manufacturing sites will also be used to further reduce CO2 emissions during production.

Both companies will continue their efforts to reduce CO2 emissions with the aim of realising a carbon-neutral society.

Al Mouj Muscat based operator wins TripAdvisor award

Another Al Mouj Muscat based operator has won a TripAdvisor Travelers' Choice Award adding to the premier lifestyle destination's growing list of restaurant and leisure experience providers to be rated in the world's top 10 per cent, based on customer feedback.



Lebanese restaurant Zahr El Laymoun has earned the accolade for the first time with the 2022 win taking Al Mouj's tally of TripAdvisor awards up to 3 this year, demonstrating its commitment to providing world-class service and customer experiences all year round, a press release said.

Situated at 'The Walk' and boasting incredible views over Al Mouj Marina, Zahr El Laymoun's customers enjoy a combination of authentic middle eastern cooking and friendly hospitality with comfortable and homely interior design that includes a pleasant garden-themed terrace.

The restaurant which is open all day, seven days a week, for breakfast, lunch, dinner or just drinks and snacks, has been based at Al Mouj since 2015 and its menu is inspired by traditional dishes that have been enjoyed over generations. The small independent chain has outlets in Qatar and Dubai, but has chosen Al Mouj as its only location in the sultanate.

Nasser bin Masoud al Sheibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat, says, "I would like to congratulate the entire team behind Zahr El Laymoun for this superb achievement. Consistently delivering high standards of customer service underpins all that we stand for at Al Mouj Muscat and to receive yet another TripAdvisor award from the people who matter most - the customers - is particularly rewarding.

"When we set out to create Al Mouj Muscat, it was to provide a premium leisure destination where world-class standards go hand in hand with choice so that people can enjoy a wide variety of restaurants and excursions and book them with the confidence that they can expect the very best experience."

"From chains to family owned independent SMEs, we support all our operators giving them visibility and generating footfall in addition to guidance and advice so they may succeed and grow. Ours is an environment that thrives on positivity and where great moments are experienced and enjoyed every day and Travellers' Choice awards provide the perfect external endorsement."

Al Mouj Muscat was established in 2006 as Oman's first integrated tourism complex and today it attracts around 3.9 million people a year and is home to 8,000 people of 85 nationalities.

Alongside its 85 shops and restaurants, visitors can choose from a variety of sporting, entertainment and leisure experiences including two luxury hotels with three more soon to complete. There is a championship golf course, a Gold Anchor marina, 2km of sandy beach, parks and landscaped boulevards.

Badr Diabetes Club launched for diabetics

Badr Al Samaa Group of Hospitals understands the need of better diabetes management to help the people of Oman manage it well and lead a healthier life.

Diabetes is a risk factor for many critical diseases. Uncontrolled diabetes becomes a reason of additional health complications. Diabetes affects everybody's life and productivity due to exhaustion and fatigue caused by it. This was the motivation behind launching Badr Diabetes Club, a press release said.

The launch programme was attended by Dr Qamra al Sariri, director general Quality Assurance Centre, Ministry of Health, Firasath Hassan, executive director of Badr Al Samaa Group of Hospitals, senior management, doctors and all clinical and non-clinical staff of Badr Al Samaa.

Dr Sariri said such initiatives are the need of the hour and expressed happiness that Badr Al Samaa has taken the lead in community initiatives for raising awareness on chronic disease



like diabetes and its effective management. Such initiatives will go a long way in managing the disease well and improve the quality of life of such patients, she added.

The enrolled privilege member of the club can avail 50% discount on consultations for six

months from the date of registration. Regular diabetes education material and health tips will be shared in the WhatsApp group of Diabetes Club. Members are also entitled to attend monthly diabetic club meets, besides availing of diet counseling, and maintaining a blood sugar record

book.

Hassan added, "Being the largest healthcare provider of the Sultanate of Oman, it is our prime responsibility to undertake such initiatives which will benefit the community on a larger scale by way of disseminating health awareness information and pro-

viding relevant integrated services under one programme."

Jacob Oommen, chief operating officer, said diabetology services are rendered by each of the 13 centres of Badr Al Samaa and similar programmes are available across many centres which are also planning to follow suit.

Foton Auman truck offers a refined experience

A medium-duty truck with a significant on-road presence, Foton Auman incorporates the latest design and technology, providing a distinct and refined driving experience.

A spokesperson for GGS said, "A medium-duty truck that looks and feels like a heavy-duty truck, the Auman is ideal for any job. Powered by the latest generation Cummins ISDe 245 30 engine, it provides 245 hp at 2500 rpm and 950Nm of torque. Turbocharged and intercooled, this engine provides the Auman with a premium powertrain that is not normally found on medium-duty trucks. It has eight speed manual transmission."

Making it easier to own Foton Auman Medium Duty Truck,



Gulf Great Sands (GGS), the exclusive importer of Foton vehicles in Oman, has announced a low EMI rate of OMR 425 for six

years. The offer is inclusive of the five per cent value added tax (VAT), a press release said.

The Auman truck is also

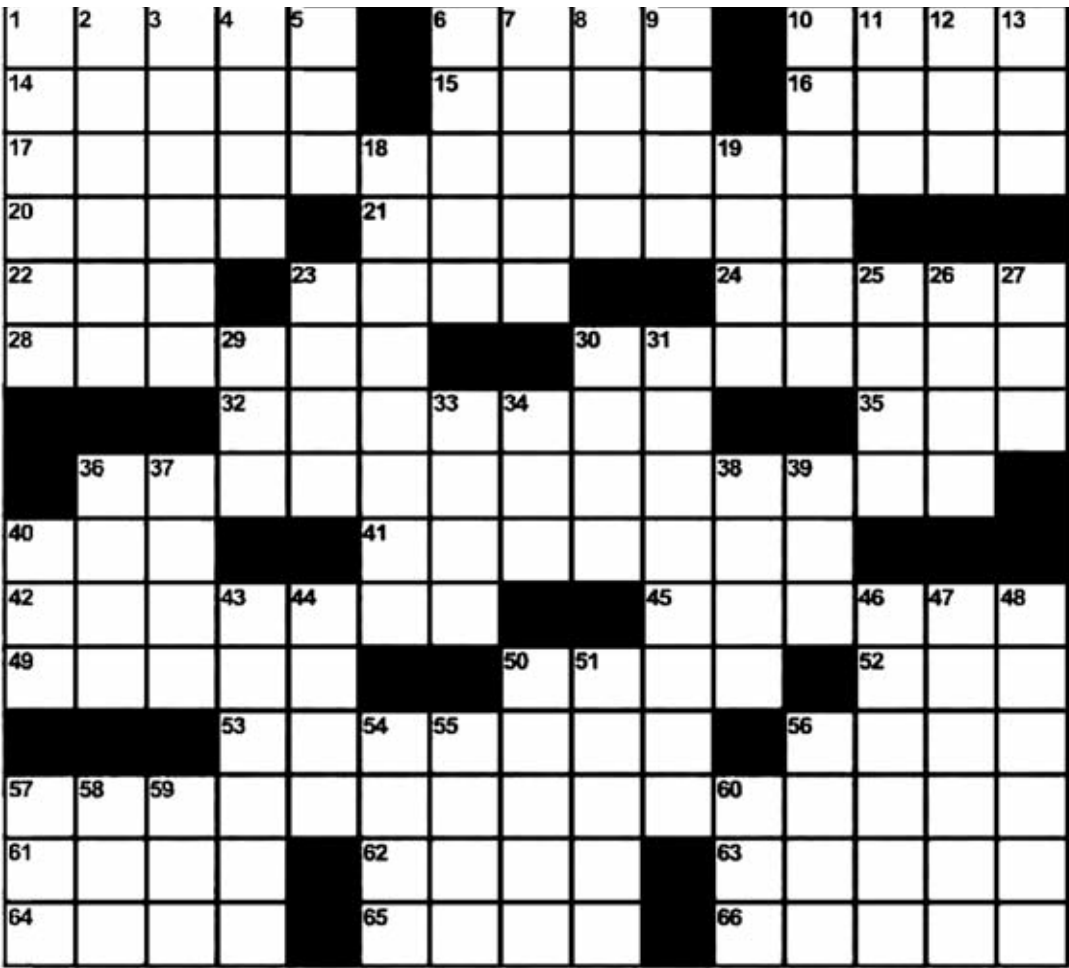
known for its legendary performance, reliability and durability and its striking exterior design is a combination of bold, purpose-

ful, and dynamic hard lines.

Foton Auman Medium Duty Truck boasts of a 6.7ltr engine with 245hp. Its Cummins engine features high burst pressure and strong power, with the maximum power output at 210ps and the power per litre in excess of 34kW/L. This 1,000,000km overhaul-free engine is manufactured strictly in accordance with the Cummins global quality system and manufacturing standard and passed the 2,000,000km stringent road reliability and durability test. The vehicle took the lead to pass the stringent German DEKRA test.

The Auman is much more than the good looking truck with a Cummins engine, and comes with world-class features.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

 - 1) Electrical protectors
 - 6) Flexible mineral
 - 10) Ready to pick
 - 14) Asinine
 - 15) Heavy burden
 - 16) Jealousy
 - 17) What diplomats have to maintain
 - 20) Showy ornament
 - 21) Sonora shawls
 - 22) NYC winter hours
 - 23) Quiet "Hey there!"
 - 24) "And there you are!"
 - 28) Native American home of old (Var.)
 - 30) Imitated the Cheshire Cat
 - 32) Radius, for one
 - 35) Low digit
 - 36) Juries' responsibilities
 - 40) Cause of inflation?
 - 41) A professor may give it
 - 42) Sultry summer stretches
 - 45) Least cooked
 - 49) What a hungry baby may do?
 - 50) "Buddenbrooks" au-
- thor
 - 52) Born, in some bios
 - 53) Order
 - 56) Arab League member
 - 57) Drawback of excessive drinking
 - 61) Shakespeare's water-way
 - 62) Basilica area
 - 63) "Saturday Night Fever" music
 - 64) Sandwich spread, informally
 - 65) Heavenly twinkler
 - 66) Not this or that?

DOWN

 - 1) Be antsy
 - 2) Anxiety
 - 3) Greeting to an officer
 - 4) Novelist Bagnold
 - 5) "Just a _" ("Hold on")
 - 6) Dust particles
 - 7) Unreactive
 - 8) Havana's home
 - 9) "Fast!" on a memo
 - 42) Justification
 - 11) Room offerer
 - 12) Plastic pipe material
 - 13) CBS logo
 - 18) School gathering
 - 19) Big jeans maker
- 23) Gilpin of "Frasier"
 - 25) Knowing, as a secret
 - 26) Microscope parts
 - 27) "Lemon" attachment
 - 29) Chum
 - 30) Itsy-bitsy biter
 - 31) Word with "punt" or "kick"
 - 33) Flower fanciers
 - 34) Mythical monster
 - 36) Christian name
 - 37) "Cogito,_ sum"
 - 38) It was once Persia
 - 39) "_ the ramparts ..."
 - 40) Do a grade-school lesson
 - 43) "Blueberry Hill" singer
 - Fats
 - 44) Apple spray
 - 46) Catch, as in a net
 - 47) Medium gathering?
 - 48) Body muscle
 - 50) ABBA's "_ Mia"
 - 51) Essential oil from flowers
 - 54) Penpoints
 - 55) Song performed by two
 - 56) Bypass
 - 57) Aswan, for one
- 58) Mrs. Peron
 - 59) Myrna of old Holly-
 - wood
 - 60) Tokyo of old

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Before you let someone's nasty words or inconsiderate actions make you fly off the handle today, opt for another reaction. Try ignoring them. Walk away and worry about the real problems you may or may not be having right now. The jerks who try to muck up your day (although, thankfully, there should be only one such jerk) aren't your problems to solve. Their lives are sad and unrewarding, and that is their punishment. Keep your head high and keep smiling.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Big news is coming to your group soon, and while all the others may react emotionally, you don't need to fly off the handle. This is something that you've been suspecting for quite a while, so the news flash won't be much of a revelation to you. Help everyone else grapple with the news by showing them that it's really not that big of a deal anyway. Your guidance is critical for helping everyone come to terms with what is going to be.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

New ideas don't always come at convenient times, so you can't keep waiting around for inspiration to strike. Instead, you have to keep yourself busy until inspiration lands in your lap and then try to roll with it whenever and however you can. Go on with your typical daily activities, and right when you least expect it you'll be given an opportunity to try something adventurous. Don't worry about being unchallenged. It's not a problem that you're likely to have for very long!

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

An idea you used to think was radical won't seem so radical today. In fact, it will make a lot of sense to you! You're not the same person you used to be, and you should celebrate the ways you've evolved. Looking back at old photos, reading old journal entries, or just checking in with long lost friends will help you gain perspective on how far you've come. Yay for you! Why not celebrate your wonderfulness by treating yourself to a little gift you've had your eye on?

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Some important deadlines are looming, but don't try to meet them early by finishing up everything today. The extra effort you would have to put forth in order to do so simply isn't worth it. Why should you bust your back when all your energy won't be rewarded or even noticed?

As much as you would like to get ahead, just go on doing whatever you can do now and handle other things as they come.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Perfection simply isn't possible for anyone. Keep telling yourself this when you feel like you're not doing a perfect job, and remind yourself that all that's required of you is that you do your best. No more. You can't hit a home run every time at bat, so why are you holding yourself to an impossible standard? If you're down right now, that doesn't mean you have to stay down. Your successes aren't based on luck. They're based on your abilities.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

On this busy day it might feel like an insurmountable challenge to focus on creative endeavors, but it would be in your best career interests to do just that. Divide your tasks into creative and noncreative, and tackle the creative ones first. Ideas are going to be percolating earlier in the day than usual, so make sure you eat a good breakfast! Save the numbers, facts, and figures for the later part of the day when your artistic side will be wanting to take a nap anyway.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Someone who is lovable (but also a little frustrating) could make things a bit rocky for you, messing up all your plans for the day. Their inflexibility is going to wreak havoc with your schedule and totally upset your daily routine. The good news is that it won't take long for you to come up with a backup plan that helps you work around the obstacles they have inadvertently created. Celebrate the fact that you can always find a way to get yourself back on track.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You've built up quite a bit of goodwill with some powerful people lately, but you have to be careful that you don't overspend your share of that valuable capital. Save it up for a future date when you'll need their help more. You'll recognize that day when it comes. In the meantime, rely on yourself to get to the next level. Just because people have offered to do you a favor doesn't mean that you have to let them. Wait until you have no more options before resorting to that.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

The idea of newness is going to be very exciting for you today, and your exploration of the unknown will give you all the novelty you crave. Seek out unfamiliar topics and feed your brain new input. Your curiosity about mathematics or scientific subjects is on the rise, and if you have the chance to visit a museum while you're in this phase, you should definitely do it! Thinking the same way about the same things over and over again is bound to get boring, so go learn something new.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Maintaining harmony in your home should be your number one priority right now. There has been a great deal of upheaval in your life lately, and you need to focus once more on making your home a refuge from the noise of the world, not an extension of it. Get together with all of the people you live with and pick their brains. Find out what they think is going on and how they think things could get better. Talking together is the best way to improve things.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You need to be patient if you want closure on an ongoing conflict. It probably isn't coming any time soon, in part because the other person or people involved are nowhere near admitting to the extent of the role they played. So instead of wondering what you can do to affect the actions of other people (which is nothing, by the way), focus on your inner and your outer selves. Have a "me" day soon and do only things that you want to do.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Tsvetana Pironkova is involved in which sport?

- A. Cycling
- B. Soccer
- C. Tennis
- D. Gymnastics

02. Through its CEO, Pete Dcter, Pixar has won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature for several films which he directed. Which was NOT one?

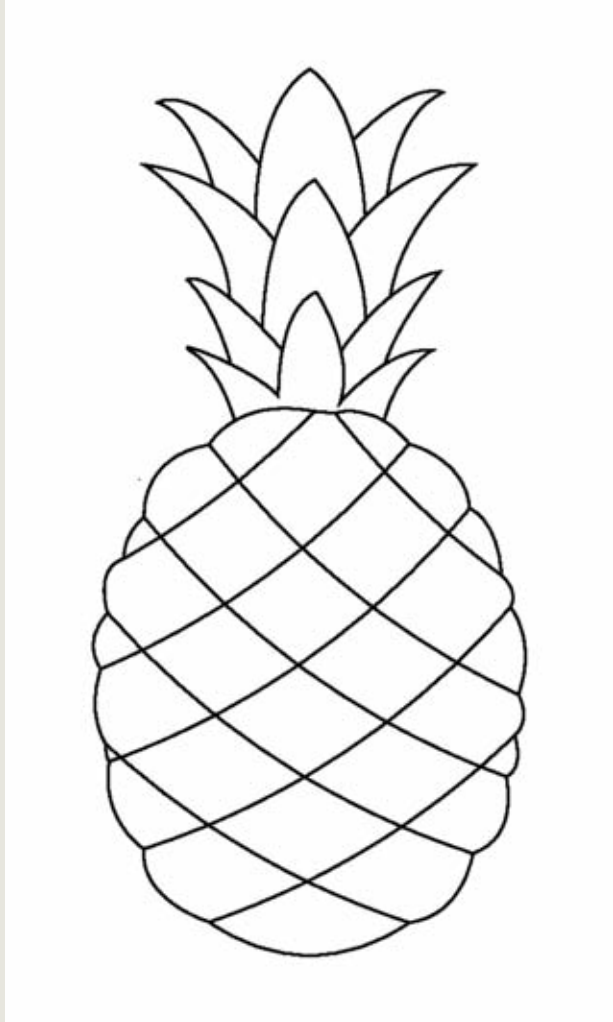
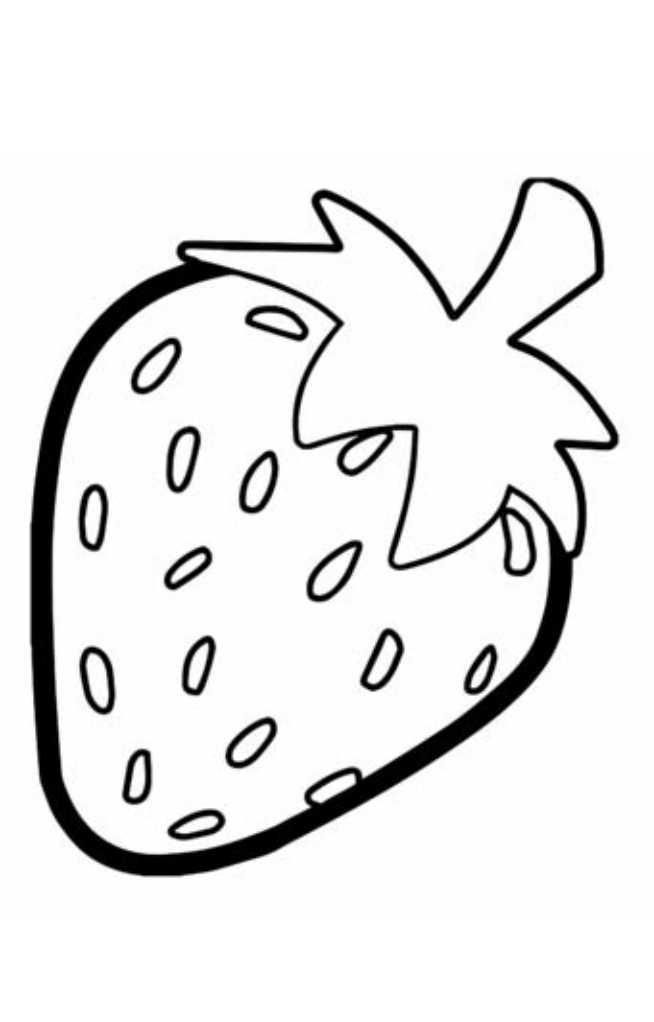
- A. Inside Out (2015)
- B. Up (2009)
- C. Monsters Inc (2001)
- D. Soul (2020)

03. Which of these is a percussion instrument?

- A. Sanshin
- B. Biwa
- C. Tsuzumi
- D. Shakuhachi

Answers: 1. C 2. C 3. C

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

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

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

Solution 20-25 words: Very good, 15-20 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

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

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

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

Israel's extreme-right minister visits Al-Aqsa mosque compound

Jerusalem - Israel's extreme-right firebrand Itamar Ben-Gvir visited Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound on Tuesday for the first time since becoming a minister, his spokesman said, enraging Palestinians who see the move as a provocation.

"Our government will not surrender to the threats of Hamas," Ben-Gvir said in a statement published by his spokesman, after the Palestinian fighter group warned such a move was a 'red line'.

Ben-Gvir's visit comes days after he took office as national security minister, giving his decision to enter the highly sensitive site considerable weight.

Al-Aqsa mosque is the third-holiest place in Islam and the most sacred site to Jews, who refer to the compound as the Temple Mount.

Under a historic status quo, non-Muslims can visit the site at specific times but are not allowed to pray there.

But in recent years a growing number of Jews, mostly Israeli nationalists, have covertly prayed on the compound, a development decried by Palestinians.

"The Temple Mount is the most important place for the people of Israel, and we maintain the freedom of movement for Muslims and Christians, but Jews will also go up to the mount, and those who make threats must be



People walk outside the Dome of the Rock shrine at the Aqsa mosque compound in the old city of Jerusalem on Tuesday (AFP)

Temple Mount is the most important place for people of Israel... those who make threats must be dealt with

ITAMAR BEN-GVIR

dealt with - with an iron hand," said Ben-Gvir.

Lying within Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, the compound is administered by Jordan's Waqf Islamic affairs council, with Israeli forces operating there and controlling access.

'Provocative step'

Ben-Gvir has lobbied to overhaul management of the site to allow Jewish prayer there, a move opposed by mainstream rabbinical authorities.

Waqf guards told AFP that

Ben-Gvir was accompanied by units of the Israeli security forces, while a drone hovered above the holy site.

After he left the site on Tuesday morning, visitors arrived at the plaza and the situation remained quiet.

Jordan slammed the Israeli politician for 'breaking into the blessed Al-Aqsa mosque and violating its sanctity'.

Foreign ministry spokesman Sinan Majali condemned it as a

'provocative step' in a statement.

While Ben-Gvir has visited the compound numerous times since entering parliament in April 2021, his presence as a top minister is highly significant.

A controversial visit in 2000 by then opposition leader Ariel Sharon was one of the main triggers for the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, which lasted until 2005.

The Palestinian foreign min-

istry condemned Ben-Gvir's visit as an 'unprecedented provocation and a serious threat to the arena of conflict'.

Basem Naim, a senior Hamas official, last week warned such a step would be 'a big red line and it will lead to an explosion'.

On Tuesday, Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem deemed it a 'crime' and vowed the site 'will remain Palestinian, Arab, Islamic'.

Hamas rules the Gaza Strip and in May 2021 an 11-day war broke out in the territory between Palestinian militants and Israel, after violence at Al-Aqsa mosque.

Hundreds of Palestinians and dozens of Israeli police officers were wounded in the preceding clashes across east Jerusalem, initially sparked by restrictions on Palestinians gathering and possible evictions of residents.

During this period Ben-Gvir rallied his supporters at Israeli settler homes in east Jerusalem, which has been occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War.

For years seen as a fringe figure, the Jewish Power leader entered mainstream politics with the backing of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Israeli opposition chief Yair Lapid held Netanyahu responsible for Ben-Gvir's controversial move.

AFP

2 Iranian teens face death over protests

Paris, France - Two Iranian teenagers face the death penalty after being sentenced to be hanged over involvement in protests that have rocked the Islamic republic for months, a rights group said on Monday.

Two men aged 23 have already been executed over the protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini but campaigners fear dozens more risk being hanged as Iran uses capital punishment as an intimidation tactic in a bid to quell the protests.

Mehdi Mohammadifard, an 18-year-old protester, was sentenced to death on charges of setting alight a traffic police kiosk in the western town of Nowshahr in Mazandaran province, the Oslo-based Iran Human Rights (IHR) group said.

The death sentence was issued by a Revolutionary Court in the provincial capital of Sari after convicting him of the capital charges of 'corruption on earth' and 'enmity against God', it added.

The double conviction means that he has been given two death sentences.

Meanwhile, the judiciary's Mizan Online news website said that the death sentence of another protester, Mohammad Boroghani, had been upheld in December by the supreme court.

AFP

New Burkina bloodshed: Volunteer militia blamed

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso -

Twenty-eight bodies were found in northwest Burkina Faso at the weekend, the government said, as rights campaigners blamed a volunteer militia created to support the army's battle against militants. Attacks targeting the security forces and civilians have increased in recent months, especially in northern and eastern regions bordering militant-torn Mali and Niger.

"The government was informed of an incident at Nouna... during the night of December 30-31," a government statement said late on Monday.

Preliminary reports 'indicate 28 people killed,' it said, adding that an investigation had been opened in order to shed 'full light' on what had happened, and urging calm.

But a rights group called the Collective of Communities against Impunity and Stigmatisation (CISC) pointed the finger at the Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland (VDP) - a civilian auxiliary force that supports the military in its seven-year-old fight against militants.

'Armed civilians claiming to be' VDP have been 'freely carrying out organised looting and abuses targeting civilian populations on the basis of appearance and stigmatisation', the CISC said.

The public prosecutor in Nouna, Arnel Sama, said in a statement that 'most of the victims, all of them males, were shot dead'.

The landlocked West African country is one of the poorest and most volatile nations in the world.

Since 2015, it has been grappling with an insurgency led by militants affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group that has killed tens of thousands and displaced

around two million people.

Volunteer force

The VDP, set up in December 2019, comprises civilian volunteers who are given two weeks' military training and then work alongside the army, typically carrying out surveillance, information-gathering or escort duties.

Commentators have long worried that the poorly-trained volunteers are easy targets for the militants - and may also dangerously inflame ethnic friction without proper controls.

The CISC said the weekend events in Nouna had begun with a reported 'terrorist at-

Armed civilians claiming to be VDP have been freely carrying out organised looting and abuses

CISC

tack' on a local VDP headquarters. Armed men then carried out 'deadly attacks in reprisal,' it said. Victims said the assailants were VDP who were members of a traditional hunting community called the Dozo, according to the CISC.

CISC Secretary Daouda Diallo called on the authorities to pay 'special attention' to the situation.

"Armed terrorist groups exploit these kinds of transgression to attract recruits among the public," Diallo warned.

Three incidents of abduction and extrajudicial killings allegedly involving Dozo or VDP had occurred in the runup to the events at the weekend, CISC said.

AFP

Israel forces kill Palestinian child in Bethlehem

Ramallah, Palestinian Territories - Israeli forces killed a child in the West Bank city of Bethlehem on Tuesday, the Palestinian health ministry reported, as Israel said police officers fired on people throwing Molotov cocktails.

The health ministry announced 'the death of the child Adam Essam Shaker Ayyad, 15, with a bullet in the chest fired by the occupation soldiers during the aggression on Bethlehem at dawn today'.

Israel's military said rocks and Molotov cocktails were thrown at border police officers during an operation in Bethlehem's Dheisheh refugee camp.

"The forces fired toward Molotov cocktails (sic) hurlers who risked their lives, hits were



Palestinian youths hang a poster bearing a portrait of 15-year-old Adam Ayyad during his funeral in the occupied West Bank on Tuesday (AFP)

identified," the army said in a statement. The official Palestinian news agency, Wafa, reported clashes erupted when

Israeli forces entered Dheisheh, in the southern occupied West Bank, to search houses.

Ayyad is the third Palestinian

killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank since the start of the year.

On Monday two Palestinian men were shot dead in the northern city of Jenin, when clashes broke out as the army demolished the homes of two Palestinians accused of killing an Israeli soldier in September.

More than 150 Palestinians and 26 Israelis were killed last year across Israel and the West Bank, including Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, according to an AFP tally.

In December, the United Nations said 2022 was the deadliest year in the West Bank since its records began in 2005.

The inauguration last week of the most right-wing govern-

ment in Israel's history, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, has sparked fears of a military escalation in the Palestinian territory occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War.

Two of Netanyahu's extreme-right coalition partners have taken charge of critical powers regarding the West Bank.

Bezalel Smotrich holds the portfolio for Israeli settlement policy in the territory, while Itamar Ben-Gvir serves as national security minister with powers over the border police force which operate there.

Both have a history of inflammatory remarks about Palestinians.

AFP

Gazans risk death at sea dreaming of life in Europe

Rafah, Palestinian Territories - Younis al-Shaer left Gaza dreaming of a better life in Europe, only to return to the Palestinian enclave in a coffin.

The 21-year-old was one of scores of Palestinians risking the perilous journey across the Mediterranean.

He drowned alongside seven other Gazans, whose bodies were returned home in December, adding to a toll of nearly 2,000 people recorded as dead or missing last year in the Mediterranean by the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR).

The death hit his mother Samira al-Shaer like an 'earthquake', she told AFP at the family home in Rafah, southern Gaza.

"I knew the dangers of emigrating, but at some point I gave up because of his insistence on leaving. Every day I waited for news of his death," she said.

Kissing a photo of her late son, she said it was a 'lack of work and the poverty that pushed Younis to leave'.

As many as two-thirds of the Gaza Strip's 2.3mn residents live in poverty, according to figures



Monira (right), the aunt of Palestinian Yunis al-Shaer, one of eight young Palestinians who drowned two months prior off the coast of Tunisia, speaks at her house in Rafah the southern Gaza Strip on December 20, 2022 (AFP)

from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

Shaer studied accountancy for two years before deciding to leave the Palestinian enclave, along with a group of relatives.

Gaza has been under an Israeli blockade since the fighter group Hamas took power in 2007, meaning residents cannot leave by air or sea.

Shaer took the land crossing

to Egypt last February, before travelling onwards to Libya which is a hub for unauthorised Mediterranean crossings.

He ultimately hoped to reach Belgium, and along the arduous route would call his mother.

"He said to me: 'Don't worry, God willing, we will arrive,'" she said, adding that other relatives had previously made the journey successfully.

'Cruel and humiliating'

Yet the plan soon began to unravel, his brother Mohammed al-Shaer told AFP. Upon reaching Libya, the group had their money and belongings stolen.

They had to sleep in places 'unfit even for animals', said his brother, 34.

The group were detained by one of Libya's many people traf-

ficking gangs, which often kidnap migrants for ransom. His brother said the gang forced his family to pay US\$1,500. Separately, the group initially paid to cross the Mediterranean but were tricked and there was 'no boat, no shelter, no food', Shaer said.

"The trip was cruel and humiliating... all this was only torture and humiliation," he added.

They eventually boarded a rubber dinghy in October, but it encountered trouble and the boat never reached the Italian shore. Younis al-Shaer's body and those of seven other Gazans were later recovered from the Tunisian coast, west of Libya.

From Gaza, migrants now tread a dangerous path through Egypt and Libya before trying their luck at sea, along with fellow migrants fleeing poverty and violence in North Africa, Syria, sub-Saharan Africa and even further afield.

The number of people reaching Europe by the Mediterranean Sea has been on the rise over the past three years, UNHCR data show, reaching more than 146,000 in 2022.

AFP

China slams COVID curbs on travellers from its territory

Beijing, China - China called the mounting international restrictions on travellers from its territory 'unacceptable' on Tuesday after over a dozen countries placed fresh COVID curbs on visitors from the world's most populous nation.

The United States, Canada, Japan and France are among the countries insisting all travellers from China provide negative COVID tests before arrival, as concerns grow over a surge in cases.

China's steep rise in infections comes after Beijing abruptly lifted years of headline restrictions last month, with hospitals and crematoriums quickly overwhelmed. But Beijing has pushed ahead with a long-awaited re-opening, last week announcing an end to mandatory quarantines on arrival in a move that prompted Chinese people to plan trips abroad.

"Some countries have taken entry restrictions targeting only Chinese travellers," foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a regular briefing. "This lacks scientific basis and some practices are unacceptable," she added, warning China could 'take countermeasures based on the principle of reciprocity'.

Asked about China's reaction, France's Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne defended the new rules.

"I think we're performing our duty in asking for tests," Borne told francinfo radio.

"We will continue to do it."

The rules imposed affect all travellers coming from China - not just Chinese nationals - while Beijing continues to restrict inbound visitors and not issue visas for tourists or international students.

Countries including the US have also cited Beijing's lack of transparency around infection data and the risk of new variants as a reason to restrict travellers. China has only recorded 22



A health worker guides travellers arriving from China in front of a COVID-19 testing centre at Incheon International Airport, west of Seoul on Tuesday (AFP)

China's steep rise in infections comes after Beijing abruptly lifted years of hardline restrictions last month, with hospitals and crematoriums quickly overwhelmed. But Beijing has pushed ahead with a long-awaited reopening

COVID deaths since December and has dramatically narrowed the criteria for classifying such deaths - meaning that Beijing's own statistics about the unprecedented wave are now widely seen as not reflecting reality.

Shanghai overwhelmed

As health workers nationwide battle a surge in cases, a senior doctor at one of Shanghai's top

hospitals said 70 per cent of the megacity's population may now have been infected with COVID-19, state media reported on Tuesday. Chen Erzhen, vice president at Ruijin Hospital and a member of Shanghai's COVID expert advisory panel, estimated that the majority of the city's 25mn people may have been infected.

"Now the spread of the epidemic in Shanghai is very wide, and it may have reached 70 per

cent of the population, which is 20 to 30 times more than (in April and May)," he told Dajiangdong Studio, owned by the Communist Party mouthpiece People's Daily. Shanghai suffered a gruelling two-month lockdown from April, during which over 600,000 residents were infected and many were hauled to mass quarantine centres. But now the Omicron variant is spreading rampantly across the city.

In other major cities, including Beijing, Tianjin, Chongqing and Guangzhou, Chinese health officials have suggested that the wave has already peaked.

In neighbouring Zhejiang province, disease control authorities said on Tuesday that there had been one million new COVID infections in recent days and that

the province was entering a peak plateau. Chen added that his Shanghai hospital was seeing 1,600 emergency admissions daily - double the number prior to restrictions being lifted - with 80 per cent of them COVID patients. "More than 100 ambulances arrive at the hospital every day," he was quoted as saying, adding that around half of emergency admissions were vulnerable people aged over 65.

At Tongren Hospital in downtown Shanghai, AFP reporters saw patients receiving emergency medical attention outside the entrance of the overcrowded emergency ward on Tuesday.

The corridors overflowed with dozens of elderly patients lying on beds crammed together, hooked up to IV drips.

AFP



A black-and-white image of the lunar surface and Earth taken by South Korean lunar orbiter Danuri after reaching the Moon's orbit (AFP)

South Korea's lunar orbiter sends photos of Earth, Moon

Seoul, South Korea - South Korea's first-ever lunar orbiter Danuri has sent black-and-white photos of the Moon's surface and Earth, the national space centre said on Tuesday.

Danuri - a portmanteau of the Korean words for 'Moon' and 'enjoy' - was launched on a SpaceX rocket from the United States in August 2022 and entered lunar orbit last month.

Its images - taken between December 24 and January 1 - show the lunar surface and Earth, and were shot from less than 120 km (75 miles) over the Moon, the Korea Aerospace Research Institute (KARI) said in a statement.

The images and videos will be 'used to select potential sites for a Moon landing in 2032', it

added.

Danuri is circling the Moon every two hours, the centre said.

The orbiter will begin its scientific mission next month, which includes mapping and analysing lunar terrain, and measuring magnetic strength and gamma rays.

It will also test experimental 'space internet' technology by transmitting photos and videos to Earth.

President Yoon Suk-yeol has hailed Danuri's achievements as a 'historical moment' in the country's space programme.

South Korea has laid out ambitious plans for outer space, including landing spacecraft on the Moon by 2032 and Mars by 2045.

AFP



Members of the Mexican Army secure an area outside the prison of Ciudad Juarez number 3 in Chihuahua state, Mexico, on Monday (AFP)

Seven people killed as Mexican police seek escaped prisoners

Mexico City, Mexico - Seven people were killed on Monday in northern Mexico's Ciudad Juarez during a police operation to recapture prisoners who escaped after an attack at their facility, state authorities announced.

Gunmen attacked the border city's state prison on Sunday at dawn, leaving nearly 20 people dead and allowing the prisoners, which include a gang leader, to flee. Monday's deaths - two agents from state prosecutor's office and five alleged criminals - took the total fatalities related to the attack to 26, according to a statement from the Chihuahua Public Security Department.

Defense Minister Luis Cresencio Sandoval had earlier told reporters that ten guards, seven

prisoners and two attackers had died in Sunday's assault on the prison, which has been attributed to drug traffickers. Fourteen inmates and a guard were injured and five attackers were captured.

The 25 escapees included Ernesto Alfredo Pinon, known as 'El Neto', the leader of a gang allied with the Juarez drug cartel, Security Minister Rosa Icela Rodriguez said. Pinon was sentenced to more than 200 years in prison in 2010 for kidnapping and murder, according to the Chihuahua state prosecutor's office.

The attackers, traveling in armoured vehicles, launched the assault when relatives of the inmates were lined up for New Year's visits.

AFP

Seoul says talks underway over joint nuclear exercises

Seoul, South Korea - Seoul and Washington are discussing joint planning and exercises involving US nuclear assets to counter growing threats from the North, South Korea's presidential office said on Tuesday, after US President Joe Biden said there would be no such joint drills.

The statement was released after Biden said the United States was not discussing joint nuclear exercises with South Korea, seemingly contradicting comments by Seoul's President Yoon Suk-yeol earlier this week.

The two security allies are 'in talks over information-sharing, joint planning and the joint implementation plans that follow with regard to the operation of US nuclear assets to respond to North Korea's nuclear weapons', Yoon's office said in a statement.

In an interview with the Chosun Ilbo newspaper published on Monday, Yoon said the United States' existing 'nuclear umbrella' and 'extended deterrence' were no longer enough to reassure South Kore-

ans. "The nuclear weapons belong to the United States, but the planning, information sharing, exercises and training must be done jointly by South Korea and the United States," Yoon said, adding that the US was 'quite positive' about the idea.

Hours after that interview was published, Biden gave an emphatic 'no' in response to a question on whether the two sides were considering joint nuclear exercises.

Yoon's office acknowledged Biden's response but said the

US president had been 'left with no options but to answer 'No' when directly asked... without any context'.

"Joint nuclear exercise is a term only used by nuclear powers," said Kim Eun-hye, a spokeswoman for the South Korean president's office.

The back and forth comes after the North's leader Kim Jong Un called for an 'exponential' increase in his country's nuclear arsenal and new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) to counter what it

termed US and South Korean hostility.

In 2022, the North conducted sanctions-defying weapons tests nearly every month, including firing its most advanced ICBM ever.

Under the hawkish Yoon, South Korea has beefed up joint military drills with the United States, which had been scaled back during the pandemic or paused for a bout of ill-fated diplomacy with the North under his predecessor.

AFP

Shunned by youth, Morocco cosmetic oil craft faces uncertain future

Essaouira, Morocco - Morocco's argan oil is highly prized by the cosmetics industry, yet it is now mostly produced by elderly workers, raising questions about how long the artisanal practice can continue.

A dozen women, sitting on the floor of a workshop inland from Essaouira, a port town on Morocco's Atlantic coast, work to deftly shell argan nuts, crush them and extract the oil.

It is a time-honoured and labour-intensive craft, but one increasingly shunned by young people in the North African kingdom. The women, mostly aged over 60, manually pulp the small yellow fruits at Cooperative Marjana, while others use hammers to crush the robust shells and re-

move the nuts.

The fruits are then sorted, roasted, ground and pressed for their oil, which is used in cooking but has also long been famed for its moisturising and anti-ageing properties for skin and hair.

"It's difficult work and it requires experience and, most of all, patience," said Samira Chari, who at 42 is Marjana's youngest artisanal worker. Cooperative founder Amel El Hantatti says the job's physical nature is one reason 'young people aren't taking up this craft anymore', despite a lack of local employment.

The area's otherwise arid landscape is home to vast argan orchards. Tourists stopping to see the production process and buy argan products are warmly



Women squeeze oil out of a paste made from crushed Argan nuts, near Morocco's western Atlantic coastal city of Essaouira (AFP)

welcomed by Marjana's all-female staff.

Argan is so important to the region between the towns of Essaouira and Agadir that in 1998 UNESCO declared a biosphere reserve in the area and later added the tree's cultivation to its Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

Argan oil is the main source of revenue in this part of southern Morocco, where few other crops survive the low rainfall and searing summer heat.

It is also widely used in Moroccan cuisine and has been certified with an Appellation of Origin since 2010.

Hantatti founded the cooperative in 2005 and says it now employs 80 women, some working in production and others in

sales. But today, she says, 'I really fear that the artisanal production of argan oil might disappear'.

'A spiritual quality'

The cooperative's younger workers prefer to work in the gift shop, selling argan soap, shampoo and moisturiser. One of them, Assia Chaker, 25, said: "I tried to work a few days with the craftswomen but I couldn't carry on, it's a hard process and really tiring."

"I like having contact with people and practising other languages with tourists who come into the shop every day, instead of spending the whole day crushing and pulping argan nuts."

"Anyway, one day the job will be done by machines," she added.

But Hantatti said the process is hard to mechanise, insisting that 'oil extracted by machines will never have the same flavour as what the women produce.'

"It contains all the positive vibes of these artisans, their laughter, the stories they share as they're working. There's a spiritual quality that makes it special and unique."

The cooperative produces up to 1,000 litres (about 265 gallons) of oil a year and works with tour companies bringing groups of visitors as they pass through the popular coastal region. Morocco produces around 5,640 tonnes of argan oil annually, according to official figures, around 40 per cent of it for export.

AFP

INDIA

India doesn't believe in war, but if forced will fight, says Rajnath Singh

Siang, India - Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Tuesday said that the country does not believe in war but will fight if war is forced upon.

"We do not believe in war, but if it is forced upon us, we will fight. We are ensuring that the nation is protected from all threats. Our Armed Forces are ready and it is heartening to see that the BRO (Border Roads Organisation) is walking shoulder-to-shoulder with them," said the defence minister in Siang. Singh emphasised that the aim is to build a strong and self-reliant 'new India' to effectively deal with future challenges which may arise due to the constantly-evolving global scenario.

"The world is witnessing a number of conflicts today. India has always been against war. It is our policy. Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi drew the world's attention to that resolve when he said 'this is not the era of war'," said Singh.

The defence minister further highlighted the crucial role being played by the BRO in bolstering the country's security through infrastructure development in border areas.

"Recently, our forces effectively countered the adversary in the northern sector and dealt with the situation with bravery and promptness. This was made possible due to adequate infrastructural development in the region. This motivates us



Defence Minister Rajnath Singh dedicates BRO's infrastructure projects to the nation during an event organised at Siyom Bridge on Along-Yinkiong Road, in Siang on Tuesday (ANI)

tively countered the adversary in the northern sector and dealt with the situation with bravery and promptness. This was made possible due to adequate infrastructural development in the region. This motivates us

even more for the progress of far-flung areas," he said.

The event at Along-Yinkiong Road witnessed the physical inauguration of the strategically-important Siyom Bridge, while the other projects were dedi-

cated to the nation virtually. The Siyom Bridge is a state-of-the-art 100-metre long, class 70 steel arch superstructure over Siyom River in Arunachal Pradesh.

On the occasion, the defence

minister also released a compendium on new technologies. It incorporates the latest technologies being adopted by the BRO in the construction of roads, bridges, airfields and tunnel infrastructure to negate the

effects of remote and hostile terrain with the adverse weather condition, which unduly affects the quality of civil engineering works and meeting the completion timelines.

Arunachal Pradesh Chief

We do not believe in war, but if it is forced upon us, we will fight. We are ensuring that the nation is protected from all threats

RAJNATH SINGH

Minister Pema Khandu, MP Arunachal East Tapir Gao, GOC-in-C Eastern Command Lieutenant General RP Kalita and GOC Spear Corps Lieutenant General RC Tiwari were among those who attended the event. Singh in his address, described the projects as a testament to the concerted efforts of the Government and the BRO towards the development of border areas in order to enhance the operational preparedness of the Armed Forces and ensure socio-economic development of the far-flung regions.

He asserted that it is the top priority of the government, led by Narendra Modi, to connect the border areas and ensure the development of its residents.

ANI

Kanjhawala case: Rs 10 lakhs for victim

New Delhi, India - Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Tuesday spoke to the mother of the 20-year-old woman, who was killed after being dragged by a car for several kilometres in the national capital on Sunday.

The Chief Minister said that the compensation of Rs 10 lakhs will be given to the family of the deceased woman and assured that the woman will get justice. "Talked to the victim's mother. Will get justice for the daughter. Will field the biggest lawyer. His mother remains ill. Will get them fully treated.

"Will give a compensation of Rs 10 lakh rupees to the victim's family. The government is with the victim's family. If there is any need in future that also we will fulfil," Kejriwal said in a tweet.

Meanwhile, the post mortem has ruled out any injury suggestive of 'sexual assault', the police informed on Tuesday.

The post mortem was conducted by a three-member



The dead body of the woman, who died after being dragged by a car, being shifted from mortuary, in New Delhi on Tuesday (ANI)

medical board at Maulana Azad Medical College, New Delhi on Monday.

Special CP Law and Order, Delhi, SP Hooda told ANI that the report states the provisional cause of death as 'shock and haemorrhage due to ante-mortem injury to the head, spine, left femur, and both lower limbs'.

All the injuries are produced

by the impact of blunt force which is possible with vehicular accidents and dragging. Also, the report indicates that there is no injury suggestive of sexual assault, he said.

The final report will be received in due course. Further investigation into the case is underway.

The woman was killed in the early hours of New Year after

her scooter was hit by a car and she was reportedly dragged for 13km under the vehicle on the city's roads.

Earlier on Monday, Deputy Commissioner of Police (Outer District), Harendra K Singh, informed that five people had been arrested in the Kanjhawala case and a case under 304 A (death due to negligence) of the IPC was registered against them. They were produced before a court in Delhi's Rohini which sent them to three days of police custody for interrogation.

The suspected car was also traced down and the five occupants were apprehended from their houses.

The Delhi Police found a CCTV footage in which the deceased woman Anjali and her friend, identified by police as Nidhi, were seen coming out of a hotel at around 1.30am on Sunday.

ANI

China unilaterally tried to change Line of Actual Control: Jaishankar

Vienna, Austria - External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar on Monday lambasted China for trying to unilaterally change the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

In an interview with the Austrian ZIB2 podcast, a daily news magazine of ORF television, Jaishankar said, "We had an agreement not to unilaterally change the LAC, which they have tried to unilaterally do. So there is, I think, an issue, a perception that we have which derives directly from our experiences." The Galwan Valley and Pangong Lake in the west of the LAC, have hosted flashpoints in recent years. In the east Tawang was the site of the latest India-China scuffle.

"I think there's a larger concern based on our experiences. The concern is that we had agreements with China not to amass forces in our border areas, and they have not ob-



India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar (ANI)

served those agreements, which is why we have the currently tense situation that we do," he said.

Recently, India and China held the 17th Round of Corps Commander Level Meeting at the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point on the Chinese side on December 20 and agreed to maintain security and stability on the ground in the Western Sector.

Speaking about China trying to change the status quo, he

said that China may blame India for not following the agreements, however, the satellite pictures could clearly show who was at the fault.

"Now, where else the status quo may change or not change? I would hesitate as a foreign minister to predict publicly. I may have my own views and assessments, but I certainly can share my experience. And my experience is that written agreements were not observed and that we have seen levels of military pressure, which, in our view, has no justification.

"China would say the opposite. They would say that India had not obeyed different agreements. But obviously, no, I think it's difficult for China to say that. For this reason, the record is very clear, because today there's a lot of transparency. You have satellite pictures."

ANI

Actor Jeremy Renner critical after snow plow accident

Los Angeles, US - Actor Jeremy Renner, known for playing Hawkeye in several Marvel blockbusters, suffered a 'traumatic injury' from a snow plow he was operating near his home in Nevada, a local sheriff's office and US media said on Monday.

Renner was in 'critical but stable condition' after a truck-sized vehicle he was using to plow snow after a winter storm ran over his leg, US media said. "Renner was the only involved party in the incident," said a statement by the Washoe County Sheriff's Office, noting that emergency personnel evacuated the movie star by air to a local hospital.

Renner was clearing a road with a tracked snow vehicle near his home in a rural area of

the Sierra Nevada Mountains between Reno and Lake Tahoe 'so his family could get out after a massive New Year's eve storm', the TMZ entertainment website said.

He lost 'a serious amount of blood' due to the accident, it said, and a neighbour, a physician, applied a tourniquet until paramedics and an evacuation helicopter arrived.

Renner received injuries to 'other parts of his body' as well as his leg, TMZ added, citing an unnamed source close to his family. "We can confirm Jeremy is in critical but stable condition with injuries suffered after experiencing a weather-related accident while plowing snow earlier today," Renner's representative said.

AFP

British couple among 4 killed in Australian chopper crash

Sydney, Australia - A British couple were among four killed in a mid-air collision that left two mangled helicopters on a sandbank near an Australian tourist hotspot, investigators said on Tuesday.

One helicopter was taking off for a 'tourist joy flight' along Queensland's scenic Gold Coast when its rotor blades smashed into the cockpit of another helicopter coming in to land, air safety commissioner Angus Mitchell said.

"In the process of that collision the main rotor blades and gearbox of the helicopter taking off have separated from the aircraft, causing it to tragically crash down on to a sandbar," he told reporters.

Both helicopters were operating out of Sea World, Mitchell said, a popular theme park and aquarium.

There were seven people on



Airport workers, on Tuesday, prepare to remove a crashed helicopter that collided with another helicopter in Gold Coast on Monday, killing four (AFP)

board the helicopter that was taking off - the pilot and six other passengers.

Three adult passengers were killed, police said on Tuesday,

alongside pilot Ashley Jenkinson.

The other three passengers were in critical condition.

Queensland Police Inspector Mike Campbell said two British

nationals, believed to be a husband and wife, were among the dead.

Jenkinson was a skilled pilot who had flown rescue missions

during Australia's recent flooding disaster, friend Andrew Taylor told national broadcaster ABC.

All six people on the second helicopter survived - which 'remarkably' landed upright nearby despite having its cockpit obliterated, investigators said.

"Whilst it has been very tragic that four people have lost their lives and many people are in mourning, we could've had a far worse situation here," said Mitchell, from the Australian Transport Safety Bureau.

"What we do need to know now is what was occurring inside those two cockpits at the time."

Police said local boat owners rushed to the 'confronting' scene to help crash survivors.

"They did their very best with CPR until the emergency services got there," Campbell said. A preliminary report was expected in between six to eight weeks.

AFP



India players celebrate after their victory against Sri Lanka in the first Twenty20 at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on Tuesday (AFP)

THRILLING WIN

Mavi stars on debut as India edge Sri Lanka in the first T20

Mumbai, India - Debutant fast bowler Shivam Mavi led an inspired bowling with his four wickets as India edged out Sri Lanka by two runs in a thrilling opening Twenty20 international on Tuesday.

Mavi returned figures of 4-22 to help the hosts bowl out Sri Lanka for 160 in a victory target of 163 and lead the three-match

series 1-0 in Mumbai.

The 24-year-old Mavi was ably supported by fellow pace bowlers Umran Malik and Harshal Patel as they picked up two wickets each.

Axar Patel, a left-arm spinner, held his nerve in a tense last over when Sri Lanka needed 12 for a win and Chamika Karunaratne gave India a scare with his unbeaten 23. Deepak Hooda (41) and Axar (31) set up victory with an unbeaten 68-run sixth-wicket stand that steered India to 162-5 after being tested by the Sri Lankan bowlers.

Ishan Kishan came out attacking as he hit Kasun Rajitha for a six and two fours in a 17-run opening over after the tourists in-

Deepak Hooda (41) and Axar (31) set up victory with an unbeaten 68-run sixth-wicket stand that steered India to 162-5 after being tested by the Sri Lankan bowlers.

vised India to bat.

India raced to 26 in the first two overs but soon lost momentum after losing their top and middle-order before Hooda, who hit four sixes in his 23-ball knock, and the left-handed Axar took charge. Debutant Shubman Gill began with a boundary but soon fell lbw for seven to mystery spinner Maheesh Theekshana.

Sri Lanka hit back with disciplined bowling and Karunaratne

sent back Suryakumar Yadav after the batsman mistimed one of his audacious scoop shots to be caught at short fine leg.

India lost two more wickets and slipped to 77-4 when wrist spinner Wanindu Hasaranga got the left-handed Kishan out for 37.

Left-arm quick Dilshan Madushanka added more misery to the op-position batting as he got skipper Hardik Pandya caught behind for 29.

In reply, Mavi struck in his first over of international cricket as he bowled Pathum Nissanka for one. He then sent back Dhananjaya de Silva for eight in his next to put India on top.

Sri Lanka kept losing wickets with tearaway quick Umran getting Charith Asalanka out for 12 and Harshal struck twice to leave Sri Lanka on 68-5.

Harshal cut short Kusal Mendis' knock on 28 and then sent back the dangerous Bhanuka Rajapaksa for 10.

Skipper Dasun Shanaka and Hasaranga attempted to put the chase back on track in a 40-run partnership but Mavi broke the stand with the wicket of Hasaranga for 21.



Pakistan's Imam-ul-Haq plays a shot during his unbeaten knock of 74 on the second day of the second Test against New Zealand (AFP)

Opener Haq anchors Pakistan after New Zealand pile on 449

Karachi, Pakistan - Opener Imam-ul-Haq anchored Pakistan with a pugnacious half-century as the home team reached 154-3 at the close Tuesday after New Zealand piled up a handy 449 in their first innings of the second Test in Karachi.

At the close of day two, Haq was unbeaten on 74 and Saud Shakeel 13 as the home team need another 96 runs to avoid the follow-on.

Pakistan started chaotically, losing opener Abdullah Shafique (19), Shan Masood (20) and skipper Babar Azam (24) before the Haq-Shakeel stand added 55 runs for the unbroken fourth wicket.

In contrast, New Zealand's tail wagged furiously, with Matt Henry (68 not out) and Ajaz Patel (35) both scoring Test-bests as they added an invaluable 104 runs for the last wicket.

The two-match series is tied after the first Test, also in Karachi, ended in a draw.

The National Stadium pitch offered little to the bowlers, but Pakistan did themselves no favours by having skipper Azam, the team's best bats-

man, run out.

Haq drove Michael Bracewell towards mid-wicket and saw Azam stranded at his end attempting a third run. But Haq took charge with his seventh half-century - even as Shakeel needed 42 balls to get off the mark at the other end.

Earlier, Shafique was the first Pakistan wicket to fall when he pulled pacer Henry's short delivery straight to the hands of Ajaz Patel and Masood gave a catch off Patel.

Henry and Patel had combined earlier to lift New Zealand from 345-9.

Pakistan batting coach Mohammad Yousuf rued conceding the extra runs.

"No doubt that 100-run partnership was not beneficial for us," said Yousuf, a former batting great.

"It should not have happened, but there comes a time when the last wicket becomes tough."

Henry smashed eight boundaries and two sixes in his knock, improving his previous high against Australia at Christchurch in 2016 by six runs.

AFP

Bumrah in India's ODI squad for Sri Lanka series



Jasprit Bumrah

New Delhi, India - Fast bowler Jasprit Bumrah has been included in India's squad for its three one-day internationals against Sri Lanka after recovering from a back injury, the country's cricket board said on Tuesday.

Bumrah, 29, has been out of action since September and missed the Twenty20 World Cup, where India lost to England in the semi-finals.

"The pacer has undergone rehabilitation and has been de-

The pacer has undergone rehabilitation and has been declared fit by the National Cricket Academy

BCCI

clared fit by the National Cricket Academy (NCA). He will be joining the Team India ODI squad

soon," the BCCI said in a statement.

Bumrah, called the Yorker King for his ability to bowl the toe-crushing delivery, will join India's pace attack alongside Mohammed Shami, Mohammed Siraj, Umran Malik and Arshdeep Singh.

India started their Sri Lanka series on Tuesday with the first of three T20 internationals while the ODI matches will follow from January 10.

Australian cricket board seals mega broadcast rights deal

Sydney, Australia - Cricket Australia sealed a record Aus\$1.5 billion (US\$1.02 billion) extension of its domestic TV rights deal Tuesday, calling it an important commercial outcome for the sport.

Under the agreement, its current partnership with the pay-tv Foxtel Group and free-to-air Seven West Media will continue for a further seven years.

It gives the media groups rights to broadcast home Tests, one-day and Twenty20 internationals, and the domestic Big Bash League, which will be reduced from its current schedule of 61 matches to 43.

The new deal starts in mid-2024 when the current six-year agreement runs out, and represents a Aus\$19 million per year increase which Cricket Australia said would drive investments at all levels of the game.

"We are delighted to be continuing our broadcast partnership with the Foxtel Group and Seven under an improved deal," said Cricket Australia chief Nick Hockley.

AFP

Saudi's Akeel is breaking barriers at Dakar rally

Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia - As Dania Akeel drives her lightweight vehicle through the Saudi desert in the Dakar Rally she is aware she has to steer a careful course across her home sands.

Akeel is one of two Saudi women competing in the 2023 race and one of only 31 women among 790 competitors.

She represents a visible change in the ultra-conservative kingdom where women have only been allowed to drive since 2018, but, sponsored by the Saudi Ministry of Sport, the country's motor sports federation and a leading Saudi car dealership, she is vulnerable to accusations she is part of a 'sportswashing' campaign.

"I'll go and do my best and at the end of the day your drive is between you and yourself," Akeel told AFP.

"One wants to do well of course, but to do so you just have to focus on the drive.

"Motorsport is not segregated by gender, so I think that the best way to empower women is to drive your best and to be competitive," she added.

Akeel turned professional last season and finished eighth overall in the T3 lightweight prototype category in her first Dakar. After Monday's second stage, Akeel, and co-driver Sergio Lafuente, were 14th out of 46 remaining drivers in the class.

She started driving in the desert in buggies owned by cousins and acquired a driving li-



Saudi Arabia's rally driver Dania Akeel (L) with Germany's Jutta Kleinschmidt, the only woman driver to win the Dakar Rally

cence after moving to England as a student at 17.

Akeel avoids criticising either the restrictions on Saudi women or the recent easing.

Before the ban on women drivers was lifted, "I didn't really have any problem" because her family "took me to places and so I didn't feel limited."

"Then when they opened the tap and we were able to drive, I saw it's actually a wonderful feeling and it does have an impact for sure."

Saudi human rights campaigner Lina al Hathloul, who is

based in Europe and whose sister Loujain was jailed by the Saudi government, is sceptical.

Akeel, who studied modern history and politics at Royal Holloway College outside London and then gained a master's in business studies in the United States, is acutely aware that visibility pays.

"I don't imagine a situation where I will enter a race like this and nobody will have an opinion, that will never be the case.

"And, actually, it's what the sponsors are paying for," she said.

FINAL FAREWELL

More than 230,000 people attend Pele’s wake as Brazil pays last respects to the football legend

Santos, Brazil - President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva led the tributes Tuesday as Brazil said its final farewell to football legend Pele, widely regarded as the greatest player of all time.

A flood of fans, politicians and football dignitaries have flocked to pay their respects to the player known as “The King” in the south-eastern city of Santos, home to the club where he spent most of his storied career.

Santos FC said more than 230,000 people had attended his 24-hour wake in the Vila Belmiro stadium, where a steady stream of mourners continued straight through the night.

Lula, who took office Sunday in a ceremony that started with a minute’s silence for Pele, flew in by helicopter for the wake, greeting Pele’s widow, Marcia Cibeles Aoki, who was in tears.

Visibly moved, the president and First Lady Rosangela “Janja” da Silva paused before Pele’s coffin and embraced Aoki and other family members.

“Goodbye to the King. Rest in peace, Pele,” the president later wrote on Twitter.

Pele, the only player in history to win three World Cups, scored a world record 1,281 goals during his more than two-decade career with Santos (1956-74), the Brazilian national team and the New York Cosmos (1975-77).

He died Thursday at age 82



The coffin of the late Brazilian football legend Pele is transported outside the Urbano Caldeira stadium to a firetruck before the funeral procession in Santos, Brazil, on Tuesday (AFP)

after a battle with cancer.

His wake ended with a brief Catholic service, after which 10 state police guards in dress uniform placed the lid on his black casket.

Draped in the flags of Santos and Brazil, the coffin was then hoisted to the top of a bright red fire truck for a massive funeral

procession through the streets of Santos, including past the house of Pele’s mother, 100-year-old Celeste Arantes.

The funeral cortege will end at the port city’s Memorial Cemetery, where a Catholic funeral service will be held before Pele is interred in a 10-storey mausoleum that holds the Guinness

World Record as the tallest cemetery on Earth.

‘Pele was everything’

Born Edson Arantes do Nascimento, Pele exploded onto the scene at age 15, when he made his professional debut with Santos.

He went on to win the World

Cup three times with Brazil, in 1958, 1962 and 1970.

Tributes have poured in from around the world since his death, with a Who’s Who of current and former football greats hailing his genius for the “beautiful game.”

FIFA president Gianni Infantino, who attended the wake

Monday, called Pele “a global icon of football” and said the sport’s governing body would ask all member countries to name a stadium in the player’s honor.

Life-long Santos fan Katia Cruz, 58, who lives a block from the stadium, said she had stood in line for four hours to get into the Vila Belmiro at 1:30 am, at-

tending the wake without her husband because he was “insoluble.”

“Pele was everything. He was the King. He deserves this tribute,” she said.

Last parade

Other tributes have come in from around Brazil, which held three days of national mourning.

At the headquarters of the Brazilian Football Confederation in Rio, a giant poster with Pele’s image bears the word “eternal.”

Pele had been in fragile health, suffering from kidney problems

A flood of fans, politicians and football dignitaries have flocked to pay their respects to the player known as “The King”

and then colon cancer.

But he remained active on social media, cheering on Brazil from his hospital bed in Sao Paulo during the World Cup in Qatar and consoling the pre-tournament favorites when they were eliminated in the quarter-finals, three weeks before his death.

AFP



Lionel Messi

Messi leaves hometown to return to PSG

Buenos Aires, Argentina - Argentina captain Lionel Messi finally left for Paris in a private jet late on Monday after an extended period celebrating last month’s World Cup victory in his home town of Rosario.

Messi left with his wife Antonela Rocuzzo and sons Mateo, Thiago and Ciro at 10:00 pm (0100 GMT) according to local newspaper La Capital de Rosario.

The seven-time Ballon d’Or winner arrived in Rosario, around 310 kilometers north of Buenos Aires, two days after his two goals helped Argentina beat France in the World Cup final in Qatar on December 18.

The private jet is due to arrive in Paris at around 1400 GMT on Tuesday.

Last week, PSG coach Christophe Galtier had said he expected Messi, who spent Christmas and New Year in his

family home, to return on “January 2 or 3.”

The 35-year-old thus missed the Ligue 1 leaders’ first two post-World Cup matches.

He should, however, be available for PSG’s French Cup clash with Chateauroux on Friday, where he would link up once again with French teammate Kylian Mbappe, who finished on the losing side despite scoring a hat-trick in that World Cup final, which Argentina won on penalties following a 3-3 draw.

Many fans saw Messi off at the international airport in Rosario, where there was a large security presence keeping them away from the forward and his family.

December’s victory was Argentina’s third World Cup success and first since late icon Diego Maradona led them to glory in 1986.

AFP

Big blow as Liverpool stunned by Brentford

London, United Kingdom - Jurgen Klopp said Liverpool were unable to cope with Brentford’s “chaos” theory in a shock 3-1 defeat on Monday that damaged their bid for a top four finish in the Premier League.

Klopp’s side endured a nightmare start to 2023 and they had only themselves to blame for the horror show in west London.

Ibrahima Konate’s first half own goal set the tone for an evening scarred by mistakes at the back from Liverpool.

Yoane Wissa doubled Brentford’s lead and although Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain got one back, Bryan Mbeumo wrapped up Brentford’s first victory against Liverpool since 1938.



Brentford’s Bryan Mbeumo shoots past Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker during their Premier League match in London on Monday (AFP)

In his first appearance since playing in France’s World Cup final defeat against Argentina in December, Konate took a large

share of the blame for Liverpool’s woeful defensive performance.

But the centre-back was far from alone in deserving criticism

for a Liverpool display that left them in sixth place, four points behind fourth placed Manchester United who play their game in hand against Bournemouth on Tuesday.

Rocked by Liverpool’s first defeat in five league games, Reds boss Klopp conceded Brentford’s clever set-piece tactics were too much for his players to handle.

“Brentford create chaos with set-pieces. When I say they stretch the rules, they do, in offensive set-pieces,” Klopp said.

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s smart, but they do. If you could single out all the situations you would find five fouls but because it’s so chaotic no one sees it in

the end.”

Although seventh placed Brentford are on a six-game unbeaten run in the league, including an impressive win at champions Manchester City just before the World Cup, it was still surprising to see Liverpool torn apart so easily.

“You know before the game how strong they are from corners. The game got decided by the second goal which was our fault,” Klopp said.

“We are not awake, they cross the ball and score the second that decided the game. The third goal should not have been allowed but we should have played better.”

AFP

Djokovic romps in first singles clash in Australia since deportation

Adelaide, Australia - Novak Djokovic swept to victory in his first singles match on Australian soil since being controversially-deported a year ago, crushing Constant Lestienne at the Adelaide International Tuesday to kick-start his bid for another Grand Slam title.

The Serbian superstar was given a warm welcome when he played a losing doubles clash on Monday and received similar treatment on a packed centre court.

He beat the Frenchman comfortably 6-3, 6-2 in 74 minutes, breaking once in the first set and twice in the second.

“For the first match I can’t complain, I played very well,” Djokovic said.

“Thank you all for coming out today. Thank you for giving me the welcome that I could only wish for.

“Even the circumstances last year, it wasn’t easy for anybody. But I’m just happy to be here fo-



Serbia’s Novak Djokovic celebrates after winning his first-round match against France’s Constant Lestienne in Adelaide on Tuesday (AFP)

cusing on tennis, and enjoying my time with you guys.”

It was his first singles clash in the country after being kicked out before the 2022 Australian Open for not being vaccinated for Covid-19. Djokovic was subsequently barred from reentering for three years.

The ban was lifted in November, allowing him a chance to

win an unprecedented 10th Australian Open crown at Melbourne Park later this month.

Daniil Medvedev, who lost to Djokovic in the 2021 Australian Open final, also tasted victory, saving an incredible nine set points on his way to a 7-6 (8/6), 2-1 win over Italian Lorenzo Sonego who retired hurt.

Jannik Sinner, Denis Shapovalov and Victoria Azarenka were among other winners.

Fourth seed Andrey Rublev was cruising, up a set and 3-1 against Roberto Bautista Agut when the Spaniard began to turn the tables, emerging with a 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 victory.

There was disappointment for Andy Murray 17 years after his only previous Adelaide appearance. The three-time Grand Slam winner failed to fire in a 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 defeat by American Sebastian, who earned a second victory over the veteran.

In an upset on the women’s side, Estonian former world number two Anett Kontaveit was stunned by Chinese qualifier Zheng Qin wen 6-1, 4-6, 7-6 (9/7).

But former two-time Australian Open champion Azarenka survived a tough battle with Ukraine’s Anhelina Kalinina 7-6 (11/9), 7-6 (7/5).

AFP

Berrettini eases past Ruud

Brisbane, Australia - Matteo Berrettini put Italy into the city final of the inaugural United Cup with a brilliant attacking win over world number three Casper Ruud in Brisbane on Tuesday, while Maria Sakkari helped send Greece through.

Berrettini broke Ruud once in each set for a clinical 6-4, 6-4 triumph that gave Italy an unassailable 3-0 lead over Norway.

Italy will play either Poland or Switzerland in the Brisbane final, with the winners of that tie to be decided later Tuesday.

The winner of each city final in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth will play the semi-finals in Sydney, along with the best-performing team from the beaten finalists.

AFP

STAR STRUCK

Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr look to 'galactico' era after signing Portuguese star Ronaldo

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Few expected Cristiano Ronaldo to rock up in Riyadh but Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr came up with the cash when it counted to pull off the biggest coup in Gulf football history.

Despite a stack of domestic titles the Riyadh outfit has seen little success on the wider stage, enjoying their best days in Gulf and Asian competition in the 1990s.

Bulgarian striker Hristo Stoichkov, like Ronaldo a former Ballon d'Or winner, scored the only goal in their finest triumph when Al Nassr, known as "The International", lifted the 1998 Asian Cup Winners Cup.

Al Nassr will now hope Ronaldo, a surprise capture for an estimated 200 million euros until June 2025, can fire them to the Asian Champions League victories enjoyed by rivals Al Hilal and Al Ittihad.

The club is even eyeing other high-profile coups, including Real Madrid's Croatian playmaker Luka Modric and France midfielder N'Golo Kante, said an official who asked not to be named.

"We will celebrate Ronaldo tomorrow and continue to work... towards high-level signings," he said, adding that Al Nassr is looking to put together the "new galacticos".

Stoichkov, who played only two matches, was the last superstar to pull on the shirt of Al Nassr, who were formed as an amateur team in 1955 and have racked up nine Saudi league titles.



Cristiano Ronaldo waves upon his arrival at a private airport in Riyadh ahead of being presented as an Al Nassr player (AFP)

The club is even eyeing other high-profile coups, including Luka Modric and N'Golo Kante

Ronaldo, 37, is on a different level again, bagging five Ballons d'Or as he collected five European Champions League titles and a host of domestic hon-

ours, along with a considerable personal fortune and millions of adoring fans.

While the resource-rich Gulf region has attracted its share of ageing stars, including George Weah, Pep Guardiola and Xavi, the Portuguese - and his enormous salary - is taking the region's football into uncharted waters.

From Real to Riyadh

Al Nassr play at Mrsool Park in the Saudi capital, which was in-

augurated in 2015 and has a 25,000 capacity - a far cry from Ronaldo's previous stomping grounds including Real Madrid's 81,000-seat Santiago Bernabeu.

Club president Musalli Al Muammar, the ex-head of the Saudi Pro League with a marketing and media background, took over in April 2021, succeeding a series of high-ranking Saudi royals.

Ronaldo joins a team marshalled by French coach Rudi

Garcia that includes Colombian goalkeeper David Ospina, Brazilian midfielder Luiz Gustavo and Cameroonian forward Vincent Aoubakar.

Al Nassr's most distinguished player to date was Majid Abdullah, the legendary striker who scored 72 goals and helped the Saudi national team win the Asian Cup in 1984 and 1988.

But their heyday came in the 1990s, winning the Asian Cup Winners' Cup and the Asian

Super Cup in 1998 to gain a spot in the inaugural Club World Cup in 2000 and earn their nickname "The Internationals".

Al Nassr, with their signature blue-and-yellow kit, have also clinched six King Cups along with three victories each in the Saudi Crown Prince Cup and the Saudi Federation Cup.

But the honours have dried up in recent years since their last Saudi league title in 2019. AFP

From F1 to CR7, Saudi's shopping spree

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Al Nassr's surprise capture of football superstar Cristiano Ronaldo is the latest in a string of high-profile sports acquisitions by oil-rich Saudi Arabia.

Here are some of the moves that have turned Saudi Arabia into a major player in sports:

WINTER SPORTS

Saudi Arabia, a mostly desert country where summer temperatures touch 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit), raised eyebrows in October when it was chosen to host the 2029 Asian Winter Games. The event, which has already earned the wrath of environmental campaigners, will be held at NEOM, an under-construction \$500 billion megacity that is planning a year-round winter sports complex. Five years later, the capital Riyadh will put on the 2034 Asian Games.

FORMULA ONE

The glitzy world of F1 zoomed in to Jeddah, the Red Sea city that is a gateway for pilgrims headed to Mecca, in 2021 with a night race flanking the coastline. It is one of four grands prix to be held in the wealthy Gulf this year.

FOOTBALL

In October 2021, well before the swoop for Ronaldo, a Saudi-funded consortium completed its takeover of English Premier League club Newcastle United following a protracted wrangle with regulators. Newcastle have enjoyed a rise in fortunes and currently lie third in the table. Saudi Arabia, will host the 2027 Asian Cup and hopes to hold the women's edition in 2026. It has also held talks with Egypt and Greece about a joint World Cup bid.

GOLF

Saudi money has created a schism in the golf world with the heavily funded LIV Tour, which has lured some top players with record-breaking prize money and eye-watering signing-on fees.

BOXING

British heavyweight Anthony Joshua has fought twice in Saudi Arabia, earning a big payday each time. Joshua won his revenge match against America's Andy Ruiz in King Abdullah Sports City in December 2019, before returning in August last year when he was outclassed by Ukrainian maestro Oleksandr Usyk.

Al Nassr move marks CR7's decline

London, United Kingdom - Unwanted by Europe's elite clubs, Cristiano Ronaldo's steep decline has been laid bare by a move to Saudi Arabian side Al Nassr that signals the end of his reign as one of football's most feared strikers.

Ronaldo was officially unveiled by Al Nassr on Tuesday after agreeing a contract that runs until 2025 and is reportedly worth more than 200 million euros.

But the riches and fanfare that await the 37-year-old in Saudi Arabia are at odds with his reduced status as a fallen star trading on past heroics.

For Ronaldo to be forced to play out what will surely be the final chapter of his glittering career in the football backwater of Saudi Arabia is a damning indictment of his lacklustre form over the last 18 months.

Ronaldo, a five-time Ballon d'Or winner, heads to the Gulf after a painful year that saw him relegated to the Portugal bench and cut adrift by Manchester United. His second spell with United imploded in November with his departure by mutual consent, shortly after he criticised



Cristiano Ronaldo takes a free kick during the Qatar World Cup (AFP)

boss Erik ten Hag and the club's hierarchy in an explosive television interview.

As his relationship with United soured, Ronaldo was linked to a string of Champions League contenders including Chelsea, Bayern Munich and Napoli.

A return to his first club Sporting Lisbon was also rumoured, while there was talk of a move to the MLS to join Inter Miami, part-owned by former United team mate David Beckham.

But none of those deals came to fruition and when United decided his diminishing contribution, coupled with his public displays of dissent, made him a pricey luxury they no longer needed, it was instructive to note the absence of a rush to sign the ageing icon.

Coming at the same time as his acrimonious United exit, Ronaldo's failed quest to finally win the World Cup underlined his descent to the ranks of football's

mere mortals.

Tears in Qatar

In a move that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago, Ronaldo was left out of the starting line-up for Portugal's last 16 thrashing of Switzerland.

And when Portugal suffered a shock 1-0 defeat against Morocco in the quarter-finals, Ronaldo started on the bench, made little impact after his eventual introduction and was last seen trudging down the tunnel in tears after the final whistle.

There was a sting in the World Cup tale for Ronaldo as it was his old sparring partner Lionel Messi who got his hands on the trophy for the first time instead.

The sight of Messi lifting the World Cup after Argentina's victory over France in Qatar will have pained Ronaldo given their long-standing rivalry.

But few would question Ronaldo's right to be regarded as one of the greats after winning five Champions League crowns and a combined seven domestic league titles with United, Juventus and Real Madrid.

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Lalita 'Nan' Putchim, marine biologist and specialist in coral biology, surveys an outbreak of yellow-band disease on coral formations off the coast of Samae San island, in Thailand

It feels as if our own home has been destroyed

CHOOPAN SUDJAI

band disease. The disease's impact cannot be reversed, unlike the effects of coral bleaching.

"When the coral is infected with this disease, it just dies," Lalita said. The loss of corals could have a devastating impact on the ecosystem - the reef is 'like a forest', sustaining massive amounts of life, and its death could eventually impact humans, too, she added.

Thai scientists are hoping their investigation into this outbreak will help find a way to stop or cure yellow-band disease.

On one research trip near Samaesan island, in Chonburi district, Lalita and her team donned diving gear on a boat before heading underwater. They photographed infected corals, taking measurements

and photographs while harvesting samples to study later.

Thai marine authorities are using social media to track reports of infected reefs, and have also asked the public to report any sightings of affected corals.

Thai researchers have also been aided by local volunteers, as well as business owner Thanapon Chaivanichakul, who collected underwater photographic evidence.

"I was shocked when I first saw it," Thanapon said, adding that the disease is also a threat to the livelihoods of many in the area.

Choopan Sudjai, the owner of a sightseeing boat, relies on the income from tourists who come to see the area's natural beauty - especially the coral reefs.

"Now that the coral has been infected and will be destroyed, what will we do in five years?" said the 55-year-old. "It feels as if our own home has been destroyed."

AFP

UNDERWATER THREAT

Coral killer

Yellow-band disease ravages Thailand's coral reefs

Underneath the calm turquoise waters off eastern Thailand, a rapidly spreading disease is killing corals over vast stretches of the sea floor, and scientists fear it may be getting worse because of climate change.

Yellow-band disease - named for the colour it turns corals before destroying them -

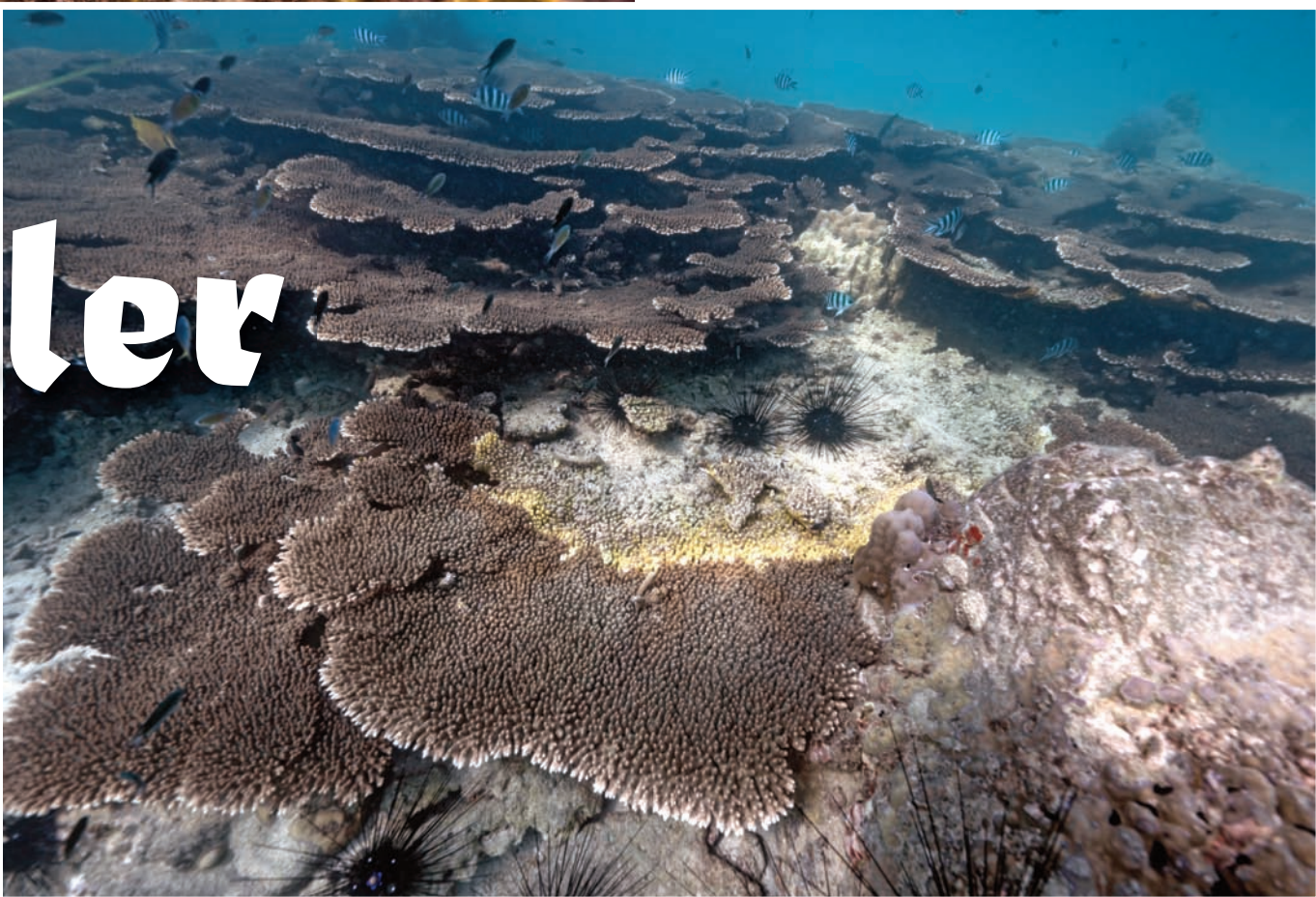
was first spotted decades ago and has caused widespread damage to reefs in the Caribbean. There is no known cure.

It was detected for the first time off Thailand's eastern coast just last year, near the popular tourist city of Pattaya, and has already spread over roughly 240 hectares of the sea. "I haven't seen anything like

this before," said marine scientist Lalita Putchim, of Thailand's Department of Marine and Coastal Resources.

"Everywhere we went we saw it, and we expect to see more of it as we go."

Scientists believe, overfishing, pollution, and rising water temperatures because of climate change may be making the reefs more vulnerable to yellow-



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VIVIENNE WESTWOOD

THE DOYENNE OF BRITISH DESIGN WHO MELDED MUSIC AND FASHION TOGETHER TO HELP DEFINE 'PUNK' AND BROUGHT REBELLIOUS TRENDS TO THE CATWALK, HAD TURNED PROVOCATION INTO AN ART FORM

Octogenarian British designer Vivienne Westwood, who died last Thursday, succeeded in keeping her fashion house financially independent, even as others sought stock market listings or security within major luxury groups.

She weathered the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, and other storms, thanks to the support of celebrities such as actor Emma Watson, singer Dua Lipa and British Queen Consort Camilla.

The punk icon's fashion house had just two board members - Westwood herself and long-time director-general Carlo D'Amario - until Jeffrey Banks joined them just two weeks ago on December 16.

In 2018, the company went into the red and was restructured. But it managed to stay afloat.

"Vivienne did have ups and downs because of COVID-19, as well as inflation, especially in Europe," said Andrew Burnstine, associate professor in marketing at Lynn University in Florida. "One of the reasons she was able to weather the recent storm was because of the incredible celebrity client base she had," Burnstine told AFP.

"Having a loyal and solid client base, licences, franchises, and yearly collections are the best way to continuing your brand name and identity," he added.

"Vivienne was very good at making calls, meeting with clients and, most importantly, marketing her brand and name on social media and the media."

Buy less, choose well

The latest financial results for Westwood's fashion house published on the UK government's Company House website - covering the 2020 financial year - showed a pre-tax profit



Vivienne Westwood (4th R) stands with models during the finale of her show at the Autumn / Winter 2016 London Fashion Week in London

PUNK
ICON



One of the reasons she was able to weather the recent storm was because of the incredible celebrity client base she had

ANDREW BURNSTINE

of 3.9mn pounds (US\$4.7mn) on sales worth 42mn pounds. The label had around 500 employees.

The trade press made much of a past run-in Westwood had with the UK tax authorities. She was accused of underestimating the value of her label by means of payments to a Luxembourg-based subsidiary and was forced, about a decade ago, to pay around 500,000 pounds in extra tax.

Westwood was an environmental and anti-capitalist activist, and coined the phrase "Buy less. Choose well. Make it last."

She was, however, accused of hypocrisy for continuing to produce several collections every year, including men's and women's ready-to-wear, accessories, perfumes and wedding dresses.

The Westwood label nonetheless prides itself on using organic or recycled synthetic materials, has stopped using plastic packaging, and regularly

publishes its carbon emissions. While the majority of the label's sales are in the UK, where it owns six boutiques, the brand also has one outlet each in France and Italy, and two in the United States. It is also making inroads in Asia, notably in China, Japan, Thailand, and Singapore.

It has production sites in the UK, China, Italy and Kenya, with a 'Made in Kenya' line that aims to develop a sustainable supply chain in Africa.

Subverting conventions

Since 2016, the company's artistic direction has been steered by Westwood's husband and long-time business partner Andreas Kronthaler, who has made a significant contribution to the style of the brand since the couple met in 1989.

That style cocks a snook at bourgeois and aristocratic conventions by subverting traditional British clothing habits. The cuts are sophisticated but asymmetrical.

Westwood uses traditional flowery or tartan prints, along with tweed and romantic tulle fabrics. But the prints and colours clash.

Tucked-up skirts and crumpled crinolines make for a mad princess or wonky ballerina look - always provocative, always tongue in cheek.

SM apparel combines with the corsets of romantic heroines. Taffeta dresses are worn as mini skirts with fishnet tights - a look Westwood herself sported when she collected an award at the Florence Biennale in 2021, at the tender age of 80.

Once a punk, always a punk!

AFP

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