

Charm of books continues to woo readers

Our Correspondent
Muscat

William Shakespeare, Arthur Conan Doyle, Jane Austen and Paulo Coelho are but some of the many writers whose Arabic translations have proved favourites among book lovers at the 26th edition of Muscat International Book Fair which opened at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre on Thursday.

Running till March 5, the book fair is expected to draw thousands of bibliophiles. Inaugurated by H H Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, 715 publishing houses representing 27 countries are participating in this edition of the book fair.

Hikmet Kabbani, a book vendor from Turkey, said, "Books are here to stay contrary to the popular belief that Internet entertainment has taken over. In Turkey, you find people on trains with books, not mobile phones. Our publishing house is based in Turkey, but we print classics in Syria. Most of the translations are by Syrian literary experts, professors or academicians. The translations are precise and rarely change the narrative."

He added that in Oman, readers prefer classics, mainly thrillers and romance. "Sherlock Holmes is still very popular in Oman."



(Supplied photo)

Vinith P, sales manager of Good Readers from UAE, said, "We have been taking part in the Sharjah Book Festival for years and I can say confidently that people still love to read books. We have a collection of books from all over the world, some of which are translated into Arabic."

Manning the stall of Samaa Publishing from Egypt, Mohammad Ali said, "We have books specifically from Egypt. Writers and poets from Egypt are very

cians who purchase these books." The stall has also stocked a collection of classics.

In anticipation of a demand for biographies, several stalls are dedicated to this genre, where visitors were seen leafing through books on Nelson Mandela, Madonna and Barack Obama among others. Contemporary writers from Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari to the icon of Indian pop fiction Chetan Bhagat also line the shelves of stalls.

Books are here to stay contrary to the popular belief that Internet entertainment has taken over. In Turkey, you find people on trains with books, not mobile phones

HIKMET KABBANI

popular in Oman and the entire Gulf region. We are happy to be back at the fair after a couple of years. The crowd today - the first day - is very impressive."

Besides fiction, there are books on science, technology and management, which are being picked up by students, colleges and libraries.

Saba Sayed from Kuwait's Darakhan Publishing House said, "Among our wide selection, there are titles for colleges and universities. We are seeing a good response from academi-

Research papers are another sought-after genre at the fair. Papers on law, environment and creative arts are also on display. Zaid bin Hamood el Esai, representative of the technical bureau of the Supreme Court, said, "We publish two books annually on the court cases in Oman - civil and criminal cases. We write on the various judgments and principles of law. We have been publishing books since 2003 and the response has been great, both among civilians and students of law."

WEATHER WATCH		
	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	32	19
Doha	26	17
Kuwait City	25	14
Manama	22	16
Muscat	25	12
Riyadh	25	12

PRAYER TIMINGS	
Fajr	5.16am
Sunrise	6.31am
Duhr	12.25pm
Asr	3.45pm
Maghrib	6.14pm
Isha	7.24pm

TRA grants licence to 5 SMEs to provide postal services

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) has granted licences to five SMEs to provide postal services to facilitate services to citizens and residents.

The five local companies were granted licences after they met the required regulatory conditions, TRA stated.

The services that the com-

panies will offer include receiving, clearing, sorting and distribution of courier and postal letters.

'The licences aim to enhance further scope of investment and employment, besides promoting services and offering additional options to beneficiaries in terms of prices and quality,' TRA stated.

Currently, 29 companies operate in the field of postal services.

Contract signed for Low Earth Orbit project with Polish firm

Muscat - Under the auspices of Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, Omani company ETCO has signed an initial agreement with Poland's TUATARA for the sultanate's space mission involving the Low Earth Orbit project.

As part of this historic mission scheduled in 2022, plans are in place to launch the first Omani CubeSat satellite aboard a Virgin Orbit rocket that will conduct scientific research and capture space imagery. The results will be digitally analysed, using computer vision, machine learning and artificial intelligence by TU-ATARA - an AI and data analytics company - in strategic partnership with ETCO. The mission will be followed by a deep space launch, which will take place in the near future.

Under the agreement, the project will initially deliver a nanosatellite that will enable groundbreaking scientific research and capture high-resolution images during the low Earth orbit. The collected data and images, both from the low Earth orbit and deep space missions,



(Supplied photo)

will potentially allow for the detection of hidden patterns, identify trends and predict changes caused, for example, by the climate or by natural disasters. Such research would be cost-effective by increasing the sustainability of oil & gas exploration - minimising the time needed when choosing new well locations, reducing the risk of unmonitored leakage, and predicting the environmental impact of natural resource exploration.

"Digital images acquired in the Low Earth Orbit mission can be further utilised by many other industries and used to detect seis-

mic lines, document persistent offshore oil seepage, map rock formations, elevation and major structures, identify barren and productive basin areas or perform non-invasive mapping in preserved areas," said Krzysztof Goworek, vice-president and chief innovation officer at TU-ATARA.

"We are proud that we can be a part of Oman's space programme and develop solutions that will translate outer space data into digital insights and provide scientific data which will boost not only the growth of the science, technology, engineering

and mathematics industry but also help Omani businesses in achieving more efficient and more sustainable growth."

This partnership follows a Memorandum of Understanding signed during the International Astronautical Congress held in October 2021 in Dubai, establishing the co-operation of the parties to design, manufacture and launch the first Omani satellite, manufactured by Polish nanosatellite manufacturer and operator SatRevolution, on board Virgin Orbit's LauncherOne in the first ever launch from the United Kingdom's Spaceport Cornwall in 2022.

Both the Low Earth Orbit project and deep space programmes will contribute to the near-term goals of the sultanate. This mission will also provide investment and research opportunities involving university academic exchange programmes, thus unlocking new horizons for the next generation of world space explorers and innovators, whilst investing in national talent that will build a promising future for the Omani people.

MHT seeks digital push for tourism recovery

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT), celebrated Arab Tourism Day - observed on February 25 annually - on Friday. The celebration this year was themed 'Towards Sustainable Digital Tourism'.

In light of the challenges faced by the tourism industry worldwide, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, continuous efforts are being made for the recovery of the sector through the use of advanced and technological solutions to face competition from global markets, the ministry stated. The total number of inbound visitors to Oman in 2021 was 652,000



(Supplied photo)

visitors, with the number of the GCC visitors - 293,125 - being the highest.

The total revenue of hotels - rated 3- to 5-star - was RO102mn. The number of guests in these hotels was over 1.2mn in 2021, according to the latest data

issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

MHT's interest in digital transformation arises from its efforts to keep pace with modern technologies in the development of the tourism sector, its services, facilities and products. 'The

tourism industry and travel trends are constantly evolving owing to technological innovations,' the ministry stated.

The ministry has provided an integrated system that allows investors to complete and clear their transactions electronically through its official tourism portal. 'The site is periodically updated so that it is comprehensive and caters to all requirements and inquiries. Care is also taken to keep the site updated with adequate data and information.'

The 'Discover Oman' website is an important addition to promoting and introducing the unique and diverse tourism potential of the sultanate. It informs about offers and promotional campaigns held in cooperation with partners in the sector.

صندوق مزون الأول
The First Mazoon Fund

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Invitation for Annual General Meeting

The First Mazoon Fund takes the pleasure in inviting all the unitholders to attend the Annual General Meeting which will be held on Monday March 14, 2022, at the company's Head Office located at Ominvest Business Center - Madinat Al Irfan - Building No. 95-seventh floor, at 3 pm via the electronic platform to hold general meeting which can be accessed through the website of Muscat Clearing & Depository Company (www.mcd.gov.om). If the quorum to convene the annual General Meeting is not complete the second general meeting will be held on Monday March 21, 2022, at the company's Head Office located at Ominvest Business Center - Madinat Al Irfan - Building No. 95-seventh floor, at 3 pm via the electronic platform to hold general meeting which can be accessed through the website of Muscat Clearing & Depository Company (www.mcd.gov.om).to decide on the following:

Agenda of Annual General Meeting (AGM):

- 1) Review and approval of the Fund Management's Report for the year ended 31st December 2021.
- 2) Review and approval of the Auditors Report and the audited Balance Sheet and Profit and Loss Statement for the year ended 31st December 2021.
- 3) Unit holders' consideration and approval for directors sitting fees for the financial year ended 31 December 2021 and fix the sitting fees for the year 2022.
- 4) Unit holders' consideration and approval for director's remuneration OMR 20,000 for the financial year ended 31 December 2021.
- 5) Unit holders' consideration and approval regarding incentives for investment management team for OMR 10,000, for the financial year ended 31 December 2021 and to be paid in Q1, 2022.
- 6) Unit holders' consideration and approval for cash dividend of 15% (0.150 Baisa Per unit).
- 7) Unit holders' consideration for the related party transactions during the year ended 31 December 2021.
- 8) To elect the Board member - Nominations forms should be submitted 5 days prior to the AGM date to the Company and any Nomination forms submitted after Tuesday, 8th of March 2022 shall not be accepted.
- 9) To appoint auditors for the financial year 2022 and fix their fees.

According to the Fund Article of Association, and the controls for holding General Meetings using modern technology issued by Capital Market Authority, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

- a. A legal person, exclusively, has the right to delegate a natural person to attend the general meeting and vote on its behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in MCD.
- b. Voting on any of the agenda items begins no more than 3 days before the date of the general meeting until the voting process ends on the day of the General Meetings. If the shareholder's shares are increased or decreased, the voting process will be cancelled, and the shareholder will have to vote again on the day of the general meeting.

For any inquiries please contact on telephone No 24949061

Chairman **Auditors** **Legal Advisor**

Obesity an increasing burden on society

Muscat - Physical inactivity and unhealthy food intake are the main causes of rise in obesity in the sultanate, especially among women.

The Ministry of Health, represented by the National Diabetes and Endocrine Centre of the Directorate General of The Royal Hospital and the Non-Communicable Diseases Control Department of the Directorate General of Primary Health Care, organised on Wednesday a workshop to discuss the regional recom-

mendations for the treatment and management of adult obesity in the Gulf and Lebanon in collaboration with World Obesity Federation.

The virtual event was held under the auspices of H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health.

The workshop aimed to review the recently launched regional recommendations for the treatment and management of obesity in adults in the Arab Gulf region and Lebanon, which was



launched in October 2020, and discuss its implementation in Oman, according to a press release issued by the ministry.

Participants discussed all aspects of providing services for managing obesity in Oman, in-

The rate of obesity, especially among women, and its burden on society are increasing in the sultanate due to the rise of risk factors

H E DR AHMED BIN MOHAMMED AL SA'EEDI



cluding the current opportunities and challenges. The workshop was also an opportunity for all participants to establish realistic steps to improve the treatment and management of obesity in adults in Oman.

tions to reduce this burden.

In his speech, H E Dr Sa'eedi pointed to the increasing rates of obesity in Oman, especially among women, and the increasing burden on society due to the rise of risk factors, especially physical inactivity and unhealthy food intake.

He also pointed to the important role that the health sector plays in ensuring the development of a clear and integrated pathway which will help remove society's stigma of obesity and

encourage patients to seek much-needed help.

In 2017, the National Non-communicable Disease Survey reported that 66 per cent of the population in Oman is overweight and obese. The prevalence of obesity in the sultanate has increased to 23.2 per cent among males and 39.3 per cent among females. Statistics also indicated the increasing incidence of obesity and overweight among children and those in younger age groups.

Mobile malware attacks decline in Oman: Kaspersky

Our Correspondent
Muscat

While analysing the threat landscape in the region, Kaspersky saw a steady decline in attacks on mobile devices in Oman.

The overall mobile malware attacks in Oman have decreased by almost a third, as cybercriminals consolidated their efforts to focus on more complicated, dangerous and profitable threats instead, according to the findings featured in Kaspersky's Mobile Threats in 2021 report.

Overall, in 2021, Oman users faced 27 per cent less mobile malware attacks than in 2020, similarly to other countries in the Middle East: Egypt saw a staggering 52 per cent decrease, followed by Qatar (47 per cent), Kuwait (46 per cent), UAE (29 per cent) and Bahrain (13 per cent).

The only two countries where the dynamic was different was Saudi Arabia with a 19 per cent increase and Turkey, where the share increased by an anomalous 67 per cent.

This dynamic is a reflection of the global trend, as cybercriminals tend to invest less and less in the mainstream threats that are successfully neutralised by modern security solutions. Instead, they choose to invest more into new mobile malware, featuring new ways to steal users' banking and gaming credentials, as well as other strands of personal data, stated the cybersecurity company.

'For instance, in 2021 Kaspersky detected more than 95,000 new mobile banking Trojans in the world, but the number of attacks using such malware remained similar. Additionally, the share of Trojans - malicious programmes capable of executing remote commands - doubled, reaching 8.8 per cent in 2021.'

In addition to the strategic changes on the mobile threat landscape, experts also attribute the overall decline of mobile malware in 2021 to the wave of attacks seen at the beginning of lockdown in 2020 as users were forced to work from home.



Lobster fishing season to begin on March 1

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has announced that the lobster fishing season for 2022 will start on March 1 in Dhofar, Al Wusta and South Sharqiyah. The lobster fishing season is important for many fishermen in these governorates.

"The ministry calls all fishermen, companies and individuals to register their lobster catch during the fishing season. No individual or organisation is allowed to trade in or export lobster after the end of the season unless registered with the ministry," an MAFWR official said.

"The lobster fishing season in the sultanate is from March 1 to May 31. Lobster is an important marine resource due to its high value and increasing demand in local and international markets. We have conducted several lectures and programmes for artisanal fishermen to educate them on the laws and regulations and ways to preserve this natural resource."

According to the official, the ministry ensures fishermen follow the lobster season and obey the fishing ban during the crustaceans' fertilisation and breeding period from May to February each year.

MAFWR, represented by the Agricultural, Fisheries and Water



Resources Directorates in the governorates of Dhofar, Al Wusta and South Sharqiyah, have completed preparations for the season in terms of administrative guidance, awareness and control aspects, as the season will be accompanied by an intensification of supervisory work in cooperation with artisanal fishermen, the official added.

"The ministry urges individuals and companies to abide by the Living Aquatic Resources Law. The ministry also calls on artisanal fishermen to adhere to the permitted fishing methods during the season and not to catch lobster laden with eggs," the official said.

Statistics of MAFWR show that the sultanate's lobster catch in the 2020 season yielded 950 tonnes worth RO4.1mn. Domestic consumption accounted for 597 tonnes, and the remaining 353 tonnes were exported.

A‘Sharqiya Investments Holding Co. (SAOG)				
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Tel: +968 24566160 / Fax: +968 24566162 / Email: admin@asharqiya.com				
Chairman’s Report				
Dear Shareholders, It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Annual General Meeting of your company. On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to present before you the Annual Report for the year 2021 along with the audited consolidated financial statements of A‘Sharqiya Investment Holding Co. (SAOG) and its subsidiary, Qalhath Real Estate Investments & Services LLC (QREIS). Investment Environment 2021 The World Economy is estimated to have grown by 5.9% in 2021 after declining 4.9% in 2020. The 1H 2021 witnessed continued lockdowns while the 2H witnessed relax in restrictions driven by vaccination drive across the World. The Developed World witnessed strong economic recovery during the year, while there was disparity in recovery across regions driven by the respective central banks' ability to accommodate loose monetary policy stance. Oman achieved a GDP growth of 2.5% in 2021 and Brent crude averaged USD 71 per barrel, the highest in the last three years. Rising vaccination rates, reopening economies, and the lifting of mass lockdowns resulted in oil demand outpacing supply last year, pushing oil prices from as low as \$50 a barrel at the start of 2021 to an annual high of \$86 at the end of October. OPEC+ and its policy to restrict supply until demand starts to recover from the 2020 pandemic hit were the key reasons for muted supply response to the growing global oil demand in 2021. The financial markets supported by the low interest rate environment and ample liquidity continued to perform well in 2021 with the developed markets outpacing other markets. Regional markets also was benefited from increasing Oil Prices with the S & P GCC Index increasing more than 35.0% in 2021. The continued lockdowns has had significant negative impact on the operations of certain key holdings due to the lockdowns in the markets where they operate. With the gradual easing of restrictions expected in 2022 in these markets, we expect a positive impact in their operations. The investment strategy of your company is to generate long-term shareholders wealth by identifying investment opportunities that generate attractive sustainable long-term returns. Such a strategy entails a vision that looks beyond the short-term volatilities in the market. The Company also allocates a portion of its capital to investment opportunities that look attractive in the medium-term. Selection of these opportunities is dictated by market conditions and other macroeconomic factors impacting the investment environment. This opportunistic allocation is a strategy to minimize the negative impact of volatilities in the market on our key holdings. The portfolio holdings are continuously reviewed to ensure the operational performance and progress of key milestones by the portfolio companies are on track with our long-term goals for the portfolio. Performance for the year In line with the investment environment, your company is constantly monitoring and continues to take significant efforts to stay focused on adding value to its investee companies with a long term perspective and to take advantage of attractive new investment opportunities. For the full year ended December 31, 2021, your company generated an Operating Income of RO 1,150,150 as compared to RO 1,165,015 during the previous year 2020 reflecting a decrease of 1.3%. The profit after tax arising from the company's operations during this period was RO 530,660 as compared to RO 528,784 during the previous year 2020, reflecting an increase of 0.4%. The increase in the fair value of the company's investment portfolio under the FVOCI was RO 1,382,729 for the year 2021 as compared to an increase of RO 758,312 for the year 2020. The total comprehensive income for the year 2021 is RO 1,913,389 as compared to an income of RO 1,302,911 in 2020. The total assets of the company is RO 18,658,938 at the end of the year as compared to RO 16,811,671 at the end of 2020. The company's Shareholder Funds increased by 14.2% to RO 14,778,235 at the end of 2021 compared to RO 12,937,540 at the end of 2020. The book value of the company's equity share was 164 Baizas on December 31, 2021, compared to 144 Baizas per share as on December 31, 2020. Outlook for 2022 The global GDP is estimated to have grown by 5.9% in 2021 and is projected to grow 4.4% in 2022 as per the IMF's World Economic Outlook (WEO) Update in January 2022. The IMF forecasts Oman's GDP to have grown 2.5% in 2021 and further increase by 2.9% in 2022. The Sultanate's budget for 2022 estimates total revenues at OMR 10.6 billion, an increase of 27% compared to 2021 budget. Oil and gas revenues comprise 68% of revenues at an oil price assumption of USD 50 per barrel above the assumption of USD 45 per barrel in 2021. The overall public spending is estimated at RO 12.1 billion leading to a fiscal deficit target of RO 1.5 billion- development expenditure is estimated at RO 900 million, the same level budgeted for 2021. The 2022 budget deficit is expected to be covered by external and domestic borrowing c.75%, while the balance c.25% will be covered by drawing on the reserves. The Sultanate of Oman's budget for 2022 aims at fiscal sustainability, lower public debt, economic diversification and encourage investment and also push private sector to lead and revitalize economic sectors. The Sultanate's general budget 2022 aims to spend 40% of the total current spending on basic services, which will be distributed as follows: 17% on education, 7% on social security and welfare, 11% on health and 5% on housing. The FY 2021 Oman budget represents the second year of the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2025). It takes into account Oman Vision 2040 priorities and fiscal framework and objectives to achieve fiscal sustainability, and reduce the ratio of the size of public debt to GDP. The Oman Investment Authority (OIA) plans to work on 110 local projects in 10 sectors next year, namely the energy sector, tourism, logistics, communications and information technology, food, fisheries, public services, mining and other sectors, with a total planned investment expenditure of OMR 2.9 billion. The 2022 Budget framework aims at achieving a set of objectives and priorities, notably fiscal sustainability, a diversified economy, stimulate economic activity in partnership with the private sector. These initiatives are expected to bode well for the economy in the long-term and for the companies operating in the private sector. The outlook for our investee companies is positive given the increased vaccination and return to normalcy in economic and social activities. The Company will continue to add value to its investee companies in the local market with a long-term view, the Company is also focusing on opportunities in other markets in its constant effort to achieve effective diversification of the portfolio. Corporate Governance I am pleased to confirm that the company is fully committed to the Capital Market Authority's Code of Corporate Governance for Public Listed Companies. The Board of Directors has established a fully empowered Audit Committee which is effectively performing its role in accordance with the aforementioned Code. A report on Corporate Governance and a Management Discussion and Analysis forms part of the Annual Report. The Corporate Governance Report has been audited by the statutory auditor whose report also include in the Annual Report. Acknowledgment On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to express our sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq for his able leadership of the country during such an unprecedented crisis. We also express our sincere thanks and admiration for the timely and effective measures adopted to address the impact of the pandemic through loan/ interest deferments particularly for SME's and a number of relief initiatives to relax statutory and regulatory compliance for businesses. I also thank the shareholders for their continued support and for the confidence reposed on the company. My appreciation also goes to the company's management and staff for their contributions and commitment to the company. Mohammed Ali Mohammed Al Fannah Chairman February 23, 2022				
Separate and consolidated statement of financial position as at 31 December 2021				
	Parent Company		Group	
	Year ended 31 December 2021 RO	Year ended 31 December 2020 RO	Year ended 31 December 2021 RO	Year ended 31 December 2020 RO
ASSETS				
Non-current assets:				
Furniture and equipment	6,564	9,680	6,673	9,877
Capital work in progress	-	-	282,569	46,730
Lease receivables	-	-	5,036,251	5,594,315
Financial assets at fair value through other comprehensive income	9,364,698	9,238,100	9,364,698	9,238,100
Financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	119,019	58,439	119,019	58,439
Investment in a Subsidiary	250,000	250,000	-	-
Deferred tax assets	54,467	54,467	54,467	54,467
Total non-current assets	9,794,748	9,610,686	14,863,677	15,001,928
Current assets:				
Current portion of lease receivables	-	-	558,064	467,747
Prepayments and other receivables	29,016	23,825	101,526	485,911
Cash and bank balances	1,644,140	407,980	3,135,671	856,085
Total current assets	1,673,156	431,805	3,795,261	1,809,743
Total assets	11,467,904	10,042,491	18,658,938	16,811,671
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES				
Equity:				
Share capital	9,000,000	9,000,000	9,000,000	9,000,000
Legal reserve	1,421,127	1,403,679	1,504,461	1,487,013
Fair value reserve	895,393	(307,846)	895,393	(307,846)
(Accumulated losses)/retained earnings	(648,349)	(912,179)	3,378,381	2,758,373
Total equity	10,668,171	9,183,654	14,778,235	12,937,540
LIABILITIES				
Non-current liabilities:				
Finance lease payable	-	-	3,551,098	3,566,170
Staff terminal benefits	112,867	101,982	140,701	127,291
Total non-current liabilities	112,867	101,982	3,691,799	3,693,461
Current liabilities:				
Current portion of finance lease payable	-	-	15,073	14,285
Other payables	44,411	42,890	105,006	82,590
Income tax payable	5,971	16,507	68,825	83,795
Amount due to a Subsidiary	636,484	697,458	-	-
Total current liabilities	686,866	756,855	188,904	180,670
Total liabilities	799,733	858,837	3,880,703	3,874,131
Total equity and liabilities	11,467,904	10,042,491	18,658,938	16,811,671
Net assets per share	0.119	0.102	0.164	0.144
Separate and consolidated statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income for the year ended 31 December 2021				
	Parent Company		Group	
	Year ended 31 December 2021 RO	Year ended 31 December 2020 RO	Year ended 31 December 2021 RO	Year ended 31 December 2020 RO
Income:				
Dividend income	457,831	446,215	457,831	446,215
Finance income on lease receivable	-	-	583,417	644,885
Realised gain on disposal of financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	6,203	12,640	6,203	12,640
Other income	75,487	64,770	102,699	61,275
	539,521	523,625	1,150,150	1,165,015
Expenses:				
Staff costs	(222,554)	(221,602)	(223,314)	(222,632)
Finance cost on lease payable	-	-	(186,552)	(187,797)
Other finance costs	(845)	(2,454)	(845)	(2,454)
General and administrative expenses	(119,676)	(137,806)	(123,872)	(141,695)
Depreciation expense	(3,808)	(4,128)	(3,896)	(4,216)
Unrealized loss on financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	(13,420)	-	(13,420)	-
Profit before tax	179,218	157,635	598,251	606,221
Tax expense	(4,736)	(10,149)	(67,591)	(77,437)
Profit for the year	174,482	147,486	530,660	528,784
Other comprehensive income for the year				
Items that will not be reclassified subsequently to profit or loss				
Remeasurement gain on financial assets at FVOCI	1,382,729	758,312	1,382,729	758,312
Deferred tax on FVOCI investments	-	15,815	-	15,815
Other comprehensive income for the year	1,382,729	774,127	1,382,729	774,127
Total comprehensive income for the year	1,557,211	921,613	1,913,389	1,302,911
Basic and diluted earnings per share	0.002	0.002	0.006	0.006
Note: The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who requests them in Arabic or English as requested, within 7 days of receipt of the request.				

Fitch revises ahlibank's outlook to 'stable'; affirms 'B+' rating

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Fitch Ratings has revised ahlibank's outlook to 'stable' from 'negative' and affirmed the bank's long-term issuer default rating at 'B+'. Fitch has also affirmed the bank's viability rating at 'b+'.

The rating actions follow a similar action on Oman's sovereign rating on December 20, 2021. Fitch has also revised its outlook on the Omani operating-environment score to stable from negative.

'The outlook revision reflects our view that pressures on the operating environment from the pandemic and lower oil prices have eased sufficiently, and that the bank's financial metrics have been resilient in the past quarters, despite these pressures,' Fitch said.

Fitch has withdrawn ahlibank's support rating and support rating floor as they are no longer relevant to the agency's coverage following the publication of its updated Bank Rating Criteria on November 12, 2021. In line with the updated criteria, we have assigned ahlibank a government support rating of



(Muscat Daily)

'b'. ahlibank's issuer default ratings are driven by the viability rating. 'The viability rating of ahlibank reflects its more limited franchise than peers', with a smaller albeit growing branch network, weaker capitalisation and funding profile than peers', and high concentrations on both sides of its balance sheet, exposing the bank to event risk,' the ratings agency said.

ahlibank's loan quality has been stable to date, despite being under pressure from the operating environment in recent years, albeit reduced in 2021. Stage 3 loans under IFRS 9 rose slightly to 3.2 per cent of gross loans at end-2021, from 2.9 per cent at end-2020, the lowest among Fitch-rated banks.

Stage 2 loans represented 19 per cent of end-2021 gross loans,

unchanged from end-2020's. 'This is high by global comparison but is in line with domestic peers', reflecting conservative classification policies at Omani banks. Our assessment of asset quality also incorporates ahlibank's high loan growth and sector concentrations, including to the more volatile construction and real estate sector,' the ratings agency added.

'We also factor in ahlibank's specific coverage of impaired loans at 59 per cent at end-2021, which is at the lower end of the peers' range, reflecting the bank's reliance on collateral, while the coverage of impaired loans by total reserves was a reasonable 98 per cent,' Fitch said.

According to Fitch, ahlibank's profitability is structurally weaker than peers', due to the bank's higher reliance on term deposits resulting in a higher cost of funding (3.2 per cent) and thus a lower net interest margin (2.4 per cent) in 2021.

In 2021 ahlibank's operating profit/risk-weighted assets increased to 1.3 per cent against 1.1 per cent reported in 2020. That was driven by decreased cost of risk, on the back of a stabilising economic environment and busi-

ness growth, a 10 per cent year-on-year increase in net interest income on similar loan growth, and a recovery in net fees and commissions to pre-pandemic levels seen in 2019.

In 2021 loans and securities impairment charges were 31 per cent of pre-impairment operating profit, down from 35 per cent in 2020, but still higher than pre-pandemic levels.

'Following greater buffers to minimum requirements we have upgraded ahlibank's capitalisation and leverage score to 'b+' from 'b', said Fitch.

'The bank's total capital ratio of 17.31 per cent at end-2021 (end-2020: 15.7 per cent) provides greater headroom above current regulatory minimum requirements, boosted by the issue of additional Tier 1 instruments,' the agency explained.

Nonetheless, Fitch believes the Omani authorities' propensity to support ahlibank and the banking sector is high because of high contagion risk in the sector, the role the banking sector plays in financing the economy and the authorities' drive to preserve financial stability as the country implements its economic development plans.



(ONA)

Omani-Saudi Business Council holds meeting

Muscat - The Omani-Saudi Business Council held its first meeting of the year at Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) on Wednesday.

During the meeting, the Omani side unveiled the visions of sectoral committees.

Ali Hamad al Kalbani, head of the Omani side at the Business Council, underscored the need to foster communication among private sector entities in both countries.

The two sides are considering ways of improving the invest-

ment climate and devising proper policies and frameworks in a manner that encourages investors to set up joint ventures.

The meeting looked into a wide range of economic opportunities that could spur business and investment ties and augment the levels of commercial exchange.

The meeting revised the current mechanisms of investment attraction and studied views of the sectoral committees of the Business Council. ONA

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Hotel development in prime GCC tourism destinations remains steady: Report

Dubai, UAE - Despite the pandemic headwinds that the global hospitality industry has had to contend with over the past two years, new hotel development in prime tourism destinations in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and the UAE, remains substantial even by global standards.

According to new research commissioned by Arabian Travel Market (ATM) and conducted at the end of 2021 by hotel market intelligence and global benchmarking company STR, Makkah and Doha are both expanding their hotel room inventory by 76 per cent, followed by Riyadh, Medina and Muscat with 66 per cent, 60 per cent and 59 per cent growth, respectively.

In Dubai, rooms growth stands at 26 per cent, which is still extraordinary, considering its existing base and following years of continuous hotel development - it is still more than double the global average.

In a press release, Danielle Curtis, exhibition director ME - Arabian Travel Market (ATM), which takes place at the Dubai World Trade Centre on May 9-12, said, "With the global average sitting at 12 per cent we are witnessing multiple GCC destinations growing at six times those rates."

"These figures coupled with the ongoing relaxation in travel restrictions, will undoubtedly



(Muscat Daily)

encourage travel professionals throughout the Middle East and further afield. As such we are expecting a substantial increase in the number of participants at our live event this year, especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and the UAE," she added.

According to the report, there are almost 2.5mn hotel rooms currently under contract around the world, 3.2 per cent or 80,000 rooms of that supply is taking place in Saudi Arabia alone.

Furthermore, although Expo 2020 in Dubai, is now drawing to a close (March 31), the mega

event has been the catalyst for accelerated hotel room growth in the UAE with almost 50,000 rooms still due to open across the Emirates.

Following closely behind is Doha with final preparations for the FIFA World Cup 2022 now being put in place. Doha is on track to deliver 23,000 hotel rooms pre- and post-World Cup 2022, adding to the country's burgeoning hotel property portfolio.

"Whilst the actual numbers may not seem particularly significant in comparison to the global hotel room pipeline, the

growth above existing supply is staggering and underlines government strategy to diversify their economies away from hydrocarbon receipts and their confidence in the growth of tourism throughout the region," said Curtis.

Now in its 29th year and working in collaboration with the Dubai World Trade Centre and Dubai's Department of Economy and Tourism, ATM show highlights in 2022 will include, among others, destination summits focused on the key source markets of Saudi Arabia, Russia and India.

new

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MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSX closes the week down by 1.36%

The benchmark index of the Muscat Securities Market (MSX) ended the week down by 1.36 per cent. All indices closed red for the week. The financial index ended lower by 1.22 per cent. Services and Industrial indices ended down by 0.77 per cent and 1.08 per cent, respectively. The MSX Shariah index closed down by 1.58 per cent.

Local news

►Oman Investment and Finance Company (OIFC) announced that Majan, as per its letter received on February 23,2022, has awarded the extension of Tender No 78/2016 concerning meter reading, bill printing and delivery for water and electricity services and disconnection and connection for electricity services in Majan areas. The extension of the contract will be from July 1, 2022 until December 31, 2022 with the same rates without change. OIFC expects a reasonable return on this extension.

►National Gas company announced that in line with their overall strategy, they have been in discussions with their joint venture partner, Unigaz International in their JV entity, Unigaz to buy out their share in the joint venture. They have agreed on a mutually acceptable transfer price and on February 22 they have received a confirmation that they are pro-

ceeding with the transfer documents. Further to their disclosure on divestment from joint venture company, it is intimated to the shareholders that Unigaz has agreed to buy out their entire 51 per cent share in the joint venture at a transfer price of RO407,000.

►Al Mouj Muscat, has entered into a new partnership with United Finance giving residents the option of preferred financing rates. The new agreement gives residents the benefit of having a premium and personalised service through a fast and convenient process for securing finance. The preferred rates United Finance have introduced to Al Mouj Muscat require only a 20 per cent down payment for up to three years credit which applies to owners as well as tenants at Al Mouj Muscat who meet the eligibility criteria.

►International ratings agency Fitch Ratings has revised the Outlook on HSBC Bank Oman's long-term issuer default rating to 'stable' from 'negative' and affirmed the issuer default rating at 'BB' and viability rating at 'bb-'. The rating actions follow similar action on the Sultanate of Oman's sovereign rating on December 20, 2021. Fitch has also revised its outlook on the Omani operating environment score to stable from negative.

'The latter reflects our view



that pressures on the operating environment from the pandemic and lower oil prices have eased sufficiently, and that despite these pressures, the bank's financial metrics have been resilient in the past quarters,' Fitch said.

►Shell Oman Marketing Company has launched its first electric vehicle (EV) charging hub in Oman, located at Al Bandar Service Station in Seeb. It has supplemented the existing fuel station with a fast electric charging point, catering to the EV owners in the capital. The new Shell Recharge service will enable customers to charge their EVs speedily and to enjoy seamless drives within and around the city. Already featuring an environmentally sustain-

able design with built-in solar panels on the Shell Select store, the service station is now also equipped with a 50kW electric charging point.

►Oman recorded net outflows of US\$5.0mn in the month of January 2022. Oman's highest positive inflow year-on-year came in the month of June 2021 when net inflows during the month were recorded at US\$75mn.

►Oman Investment Authority (OIA) disclosed that RO80mn was generated in 2021 through the Salaries and Incentives Rationalization Programme of the OIA and its affiliate entities. The OIA added that another RO120mn is expected to be contributed during 2022-2023. This was unveiled during a

media forum held at Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel on Wednesday on the 'Code of Governance for OIA Entities'. The Rationalization Programme helped shrink the items on allowances and incentives at OIA-owned companies from 80 to 12 items.

►In line with its mandate to attract foreign investment, build strategic partnerships and support technology inflows, OIA launched a new project to produce mushroom-based protein using dates as a main element, in collaboration with international partners, most predominantly, the US company MycoTechnology. The partnership comes on the heels of OIA's investment in MycoTechnology, a US company founded

in 2013. MycoTechnology is a leading US food biotechnology firm focused on the production of alternative protein and sugar reduction ingredients

►In line with the official inauguration of Port of Duqm, Asyad Ports-Duqm is set to commence the operation and management of the general cargo terminal that includes three commercial berths in Port of Duqm, following Asyad Group's strategy to enhance the competitiveness of Omani ports and maximise their investment and economic returns, as underpinned by Oman Logistics Strategy (SOLS 2040). Asyad Terminals - Duqm, established through a partnership between Asyad Ports and Port of Duqm, will manage and operate three berths in Port of Duqm, which can accommodate the largest container ships and very large crude carriers to serve customers and trade partners.

GCC markets

Energy investments in the MENA region are expected to continue to grow on the strength of higher oil and gas prices throughout 2022, according to a new report. 'The uptick in regional energy investments, which registered a US\$13bn increase in Apicorp's latest five-year outlook issued in the second quarter of 2021, will continue over the mid-term,' the Arab Petroleum Invest-

ments Corporation (Apicorp) said in a report outlining the key trends that are expected to shape the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) energy markets landscape this year.

Oil prices jumped on Thursday, with Brent rising above US\$105 a barrel for the first time since 2014, after Russia's attack on Ukraine exacerbated concerns about disruptions to global energy supply. Russia launched an all-out invasion of Ukraine by land, air and sea in the biggest attack by one state against another in Europe since World War Two. Russia is the third-largest oil producer and second-largest oil exporter. Russia is also the largest provider of natural gas to Europe, providing about 35 per cent of its supply.

Recommendation

Markets around the world reacted seismically on Thursday as Russian forces invaded Ukraine, tipping a long diplomatic standoff into a military conflict. We advise investors to watch the developments on the political front and maintain positions in stocks with good fundamentals and outlook.

Regional stock markets were affected by the increasing geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe and the rise in oil prices. At the same time, expectations of rising interest rates in the US are fuelling risk aversion.

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IMF, World Bank chiefs warn of global impacts from Russia-Ukraine war

Washington, US - The leaders of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) signalled on Thursday they were ready to help Ukraine, while warning that Russia's invasion will have repercussions for the global economic recovery.

IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva said she was 'deeply concerned' about the fighting's impact on the people of Ukraine, and cautioned in a tweet that the conflict 'adds significant economic risk for the region and the world'.

The IMF continues to assess the economic impact, but will 'stand ready to support our members as needed', she said.

The Washington-based crisis lender is in the process of deploying US\$2.2bn in assistance to Ukraine under a loan programme set to end in June.

Georgieva has said the fund could provide aid to other countries impacted by any spillover effects of the conflict, if needed.

World Bank president David Malpass said in a statement the Washington-based development lender 'is horrified by the shocking violence and loss of life', and warned that 'the devastating developments in Ukraine will have far-reaching economic and social impacts'.

"We stand ready to provide immediate support to Ukraine and are preparing options for such support, including fast-disbursing financing," Malpass said, adding that the World Bank and IMF were coordinating to monitor the impacts of the Russian



A file photo of IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva (left) and World Bank president David Malpass

aggression.

The snowballing conflict already has sent oil prices soaring to their highest level since 2014, adding to worrying global inflation pressures.

In January, the IMF cut its world GDP forecast for 2022 to 4.4 per cent, half a point lower than its previous estimate in October, due to 'impediments' caused by the latest coronavirus outbreak.

US President Joe Biden on Thursday announced severe new sanctions on Moscow, including freezing assets of major banks and cutting off high tech exports to the country, in coordination with Europe.

However, analysts note that Moscow has prepared for years

to withstand such sanctions, building up a war chest of cash and gold, and has very low debt.

"It's not a coincidence. I think it's very much part of what we call fortress Russia strategy," said Elina Ribakova of the Institute of International Finance, a global banking association.

"It was a very deliberate shift in macroeconomic policy to accommodate geopolitical ambitions," she told AFP. "They have a piggy bank that can protect them."

The conflict could also change the Federal Reserve's calculus when it comes to fighting inflation in the United States, a central bank official said on Thursday.

The Fed next month is expected to hike rates for the first time since COVID-19 broke out, but it might have to move more aggressively if the Ukraine crisis disrupts commodities and raises prices.

Loretta Mester, president of the Cleveland Federal Reserve Bank, said the US central bank will monitor the conflict's impact on the world's largest economy.

"The implications of the unfolding situation in Ukraine for the medium-run economic outlook in the US will also be a consideration in determining the appropriate pace at which to remove accommodation," she said in a speech.

AFP

Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG

Post Box 38, Mina Al Fahal, Postal Code 116, Sultanate of Oman

NOTICE FOR THE ANNUAL ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING 2022

The Board of Directors of Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG (the "Company") are pleased to invite all the shareholders of the Company to attend the Annual Ordinary General Meeting of the Company ("AGM") scheduled to be held at **3 pm on Tuesday, 15 March 2022** at Mandalaon Hall, Crowne Plaza Hotel, Gurum, Muscat and through the electronic platform hosting the AGM. The platform can be accessed through Muscat Clearance and Depository Company's website (www.mcd.gov.om). In the event of not meeting the legal quorum, the AGM will be held at 3 pm on Tuesday, 22 March 2022, at Crowne Plaza Hotel, Gurum, Muscat and through the electronic platform hosting the AGM, to discuss the following agenda:

Agenda for Annual General Meeting

1. To consider and approve the Board of Directors' Report regarding the Company's activities and financial position during the financial year ended 31 December 2021.

2. To consider and approve the Board of Directors' Report regarding Corporate Governance for the financial year ended 31 December 2021.

3. To consider and approve the Auditors' Report regarding the audited financial statements for the financial year ended 31 December 2021.

4. To consider and approve the Report of the Board performance evaluation criteria for financial year ended 31 December 2021.

5. To consider and approve the proposed cash dividend to shareholders as of the date of the AGM, equivalent to 36 Baisa per share for the financial year ended 31 December 2021.

6. To approve the sitting fees of the Board of Directors and sub-committees payable to the Board of Directors for the previous financial year and to determine the sitting fees for the next financial year.

7. To consider and approve the proposal of distributing the total sum of RO 41,000 as remuneration for the Board of Directors of the Company for the financial year ended 31 December 2021.

8. To inform the shareholders about Related Parties Transactions entered by the Company during the financial year ended 31 December 2021.

9. To inform the shareholders about the expenditure in support of social services during the financial year ended 31 December 2021.

10. To consider and approve the proposal of allocating RO 75,000 to support social services for the financial year ending 31 December 2022.

11. To elect two board members in the Board of Directors of the Company to fill vacant seats. Any person who wishes to be nominated to the Board of Directors of the Company is required to fill in a Director's Nomination Form and deliver it to the Company at least five (5) business days prior to the date of the AGM of the Company (by the end of working hours on Tuesday, 8 March 2022). The Company shall not accept any applications received after such date. Candidates must meet the required conditions for the Board of Directors' membership.

12. To appoint the Auditors for the Company for the year ending 31 December 2022 and fix their remuneration.

In accordance with the Company's Articles of Association and CMA's regulations on holding AGMs using the electronic platform, we would like to bring to your kind attention the following:

a) Any juristic person is entitled to authorize any natural person to attend the AGM and vote on their behalf through the electronic platform, provided that the natural person has an investor number in Muscat Clearing and Depository Company.

b) Voting on any of the agenda items mentioned in the notice commences three (3) days before the date of the commencement of the AGM and until the end of the voting process on the day of the AGM. In the event that the shareholder's balance changes, the voting shall be considered void, and he/she shall vote again on the day of the AGM.

To prevent delay in starting the Meeting, shareholders are requested to arrive about half an hour before the scheduled meeting time.

For subsequent information, kindly contact **Azzan Hamed Al Yahmadi** on telephone number: **24570100**

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British Council announces winners of UK Alumni Awards

British Council has announced the recipients of the Study UK Alumni Awards 2021-22 in Oman.

In total, three UK alumni out of 39 participants were recognised for their outstanding achievements as business professionals, entrepreneurs, and community leaders, and for their contribution to strengthening ties between the UK and Oman, a press release said.

Following in-depth interviews with a judging panel, recipients were selected for the three award categories - Science and Sustainability Award, Social Action Award, and Business and Innovation Award.

The prestigious international award celebrates UK higher education and the achievements of UK alumni all over the world. Now in its eighth year, the award received more than 1,500 applications from international UK alumni in more than 100 countries, representing more than 140 UK higher education institutions across the UK.

The Science and Sustainability Award was presented to Dr



Lamya Al Haj, who holds a PhD in Structural & Molecular Biology from University College London. Dr Lamya is an executive coach, a researcher on biodiesel alternatives to oil, an associate professor at the Sultan Qaboos University, and a TEDx motivational speaker. She is known to be one of the leading women in

the STEM across the Gulf.

The Social Action award was presented to Muatasam al Aulaqi, who graduated from the University of Manchester with a degree in Chemical Engineering. Muatasam is co-founder of No-muHub, a social enterprise that aims to evolve the way people explore the world by introducing

the concept of 'travel with a purpose' which lies in giving back to the communities through educational projects. The idea has successfully attracted more than 2,000 travellers and built more than 100 classrooms across Zanzibar, Sri Lanka, Kenya, and Morocco which gave educational access to primary schools kids

who did not have access to school due to capacity limitation.

The Business and Innovation award was presented to Qais al Tobi, who holds a MSc in Entrepreneurship and Innovation from the University of Essex. Qais has over eight years of experience in innovation, emerging technology, and leading transformational national initiatives and programmes that impact directly to youth development, empowerment, and entrepreneurship. He is the founder of a regional e-learning platform called Edlal which has over 260,000 users world-wide and has received His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Award for Excellence in eGovernment as Best SME E-Service.

Helen Mehta, Country Director at the British Council in Oman, said, "The Study UK Alumni Awards provide a platform for recognising and celebrating the success of Omani alumni of UK Universities. Their achievements are wide-ranging and inspirational and are directly contributing to the realisation of Vision 2040 goals and aspirations."



Ahlibank's e-channels pep up corporate transactions

Ahlibank's digital banking channels are setting the pace for corporate transactions, with an inherent 'anytime, anywhere' option to enhance the everyday banking experience of clients seeking to promote the new global normalcy, while enjoying the benefits of safe and secure business dealings.

Its bouquet of corporate e-channel platforms are designed and developed specially to optimise banking experiences of clients who are hard-pressed for time and are weary of physical visits to their branches for corporate transactions, a press release said.

Through its e-channels - ahliNET, ahliB2B and ahliRDC - Ahlibank has well demonstrated its intent to offer innovative products and services. It has diligently curated its services and facilities to cater to specific requirements of its corporate clients, thereby affirming its impressive growth trajectory in the local corporate banking sector.

Hilal Saleh al Ghannami, head of corporate e-channels, Ahlibank, said, "Aligning with the government's digitalisation drive, we have introduced innovative options to facilitate ease and convenience of banking for all our corporate customers. Our operational excellence is hinged on our customer-centric approach to banking and our tech-savvy clients are privy to our products and services that are at par with global standards."

According to Ghannami, this growth has amply projected the bank's concerted efforts to en-

hance its footprints in the country and become the bank of choice for both individual and corporate clients.

Explaining further, he said, "Our digital platforms are our growth drivers, they are the parameters that establish our customer-centric approach to banking. Our digital platforms have encapsulated our mission and vision to enrich the banking experience of our diverse corporate clientele. We have followed a policy of constantly upgrading our digital business environment and have incorporated advanced technologies to establish our credentials as the bank that cares."

Since the establishment of Ahlibank's corporate e-channels unit, the bank has been keen to offer provide a range of services to conduct everyday financial transactions through three different platforms. This translates into ease and comfort, as clients can manage all their financial transactions without having to visit their branch.

From cash managements and statements, fund transfers and bulk payments, to WPS and government salaries, PASI and bill payment and cheque book requests, AhliNET is channelled to meet all corporate requirements. AhliB2B also offers the same services, in addition to personalised dashboards and ERP Integration which enhance seamless banking for larger corporates. Also, AhliRDC is specifically for bulk cheque deposit, seamless integration, remote deposit of cheques, reduced transportation costs and risks, etc.

Bank Muscat and AXA Gulf offer unique plans

Bank Muscat has announced the availability of class-leading retirement and children's education plans through its strategic tie-up with AXA Gulf, one of the leading insurance providers in the region, recently acquired by GIG (Gulf Insurance Group).

Through this alliance, the bank offers highly customisable 'baccassurance' products that cater to customer needs in a fast-changing world, a press release said.

Speaking on the occasion, Abdullah Tamman al Maashani, general manager - Products, Bank Muscat, said, "The bank is delighted to partner with AXA Gulf Insurance, one of the region's leading insurers, to offer



Abdullah Tamman

unique and bespoke savings and retirement plans that help our customers meet their financial milestones and offer them peace of mind regarding their family's future. They can rest assured that their future life goals can be



Mehdi Salim al Harthy

accomplished through these plans and that their loved ones will be covered should anything unexpected happen to the family's breadwinner. We encourage all of our clients to learn more about these one-of-a-kind, highly

customisable plans that can help them reach their financial objectives in the future."

Mehdi Salim al Harthy, general manager and head of Partnerships for AXA Gulf in Oman, said, "We are pleased to further strengthen our long-standing partnership with Bank Muscat. Our customers can rest assured that their savings and retirement plans are managed by a dedicated team of wealth-management specialists and that they are receiving the best life protection services available in Oman. We are committed to being a trusted partner to our valued customers and their families by offering highly innovative products that provide complete

peace of mind."

AXA's savings plan is a unit-linked insurance plan, which combines savings and life protection under a single integrated policy. The plan is primarily intended to help customers set aside a part of their present savings to meet a future financial milestone - like saving up for retirement or to fund their children's higher education. Customers have access to financial advisors who can design highly customised solutions depending on each customer's unique profile and financial needs. At the same time, the AXA Savings plan also provides excellent protection against unforeseen events.

Ooredoo sends winner to Manchester

Four lucky football fans have scored big with an all-expenses paid trip to the Manchester Derby in Ooredoo's football-themed raffle draw.

It's the latest round in an exciting series, which gives customers a chance to attend the season's major matches around Europe. All Home Internet, Hala prepaid and Shahry postpaid customers can be in to win a once-in-a-lifetime trip, which includes match tickets, air travel and accommodation for them and a friend, simply by upgrading, subscribing to plans or recharging, a press release said.

The upcoming 'La Liga's El Clasico' raffle draw has already been launched as a new attraction for customers.

All Home Internet customers have to do to enter the draw is activate a new connection or up-



grade their existing plan. Hala customers simply need to activate a new SIM or recharge. Plus, more recharges mean more

chances of winning.

Meanwhile, Shahry customers, both new subscribers or those upgrading their plans, will

automatically be entered into the draw. Winners are being announced on Ooredoo's social media channels.

Maisarah offers premium customer experience

Maisarah Islamic Banking Services - Bank Dhofar's Islamic banking window - continues to offer premium customer experience, customised products, and innovative financial solutions for corporate and retail customers through its branch network across the sultanate.

Nasser Said al Bahantah, DGM and Chief Retail Banking officer at Maisarah, said, "Whether it is an individual customer or a business owner, Maisarah understands their aspiration, the nature of their financial requirements and business operations. Our existing 10 branches continues to serve customers nationwide, and we are planning to open new branches this year to reach out to a larger customer base in different parts of Oman."

Maisarah's expansive range of Shari'a-compliant financing products, world-class services and creative financial solutions are based on Islamic principles of Diminishing Musharakah, Mudarabah, Murabahah, Ijarah, Wakalah, Takaful and Qard Hassan.

"We tailor our products and services to meet our customers' needs, and we have a dedicated team of highly qualified and professional relationship managers



Nasser Said al Bahantah

who are specialised in Islamic finance and bring in a substantial experience in diverse industries and commerce across the local, regional and international markets," he said.

For retail customers, Maisarah offers a diverse bundle of personal banking solutions such as High Yield Saving Account, Mudarabah Saving Account, Current Account and Ameen Investment Account. Meanwhile, there are various finance options that include Auto Finance, Home Finance, Property Finance, Goods Finance, Personal Finance, Education Finance, Travel Finance and Commercial Finance. Additionally, Maisarah's Fixed Deposit and Ameen Term Deposit services are tailored to meet the specific needs of those who look for a suitable saving in-

vestment scheme. Furthermore, BancaTakaful products are offered for critical illness and personal accidents, powered by Al Madina Takaful.

Maisarah branches also offer a seamless banking experience to corporate customers through a customised Business Account for large corporates and SMEs, which is designed with consideration to customers' business needs, nature of operations and financial requirements. That includes an expansive offering of working capital finance, import finance, export finance, long-term finance, contract finance, documentary credit requirements and project finance, treasury services, foreign exchange, investment and capital markets, management and execution of complex transactions, corporate internet banking, payroll bulk processing, and PDC Warehousing.

It also encompasses a numerous options of Term Finance (Diminishing Musharakah), Term Finance (Ijarah), Working Capital Finance (Mudarabah), Working Capital Finance (Mudarah), Working Capital Finance (Wakalah), Transaction Finance and Inventory Finance, as well as Trade Finance services.

Oppo set to strengthen presence in Oman

OPPO has announced its latest family of flagship smartphones - the Find X5 series - marking another decisive step into the high-end market for the leading smartphone brand.

The new addition to the Find X series is the first smartphone series to be powered by

OPPO's MariSilicon X imaging NPU and other industry-leading features. With its futuristic design, seamless ceramic back panel, and premium International Warranty Service, every aspect of the Find X5 series has been tailored to deliver the best possible user experience.

"At Oppo Inno Day 2021, we announced our brand proposition of 'Inspiration Ahead', defining our commitment to constantly redraw the boundaries of the smartphone experience to make life better for everyone, regardless of the challenges and uncertainties

faced," said William Liu, vice president and president of Global Marketing at Oppo. "With the Find X5 series, we have raised the bar for flagship smartphones in terms of style and performance, while never stopping in our exploration of new possibilities."



Al Injaz Private School celebrates Teacher's Day

February 24 was a joy-filled day for all the teachers at Al Injaz Private School (AIPS) - the students of AIPS expressed their gratitude for all their teachers in a special way to mark Teacher's Day.

Students noted that, along

with acting as guides in teaching and ensuring their education, the teachers had worked hard towards making school feel normal again, even amidst a pandemic. They planned events to fill the day with memories of activities they will never forget, a

press release said.

The day started with teachers bearing the responsibility of conducting the morning school assembly. Senior students from Grades 10 to 12 then took charge of the various duties teachers do in a day to give their

teachers a little break on this special day.

The day ended with some fun activities that included a speed eating contest and a mixed bag of sporting and academic activities like shooting a goal, cross-word challenge, etc.

OOC general assembly to elect new board of directors



The General Assembly of Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) will hold a meeting on Monday at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Al Arfan to elect the new OOC board of directors for the electoral cycle (2020 + 1 - 2024).

The election will be held in the presence of members of the existing Board of Directors, the General Assembly, candidates for membership of the board for the next electoral cycle, a representative of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, as well as the representative of the International Olympic Committee and the Olympic Council of Asia, in addition to the election and appeal committees.

The General Assembly is expected to recommend Khalid bin Mohammed al Zubair for OOC presidency, and H H Sayyid Azzan bin Qais al Saeed, for vice president. The members of the

Oman Olympic Committee that will also be recommended include Taha bin Sulaiman al Kashiri as a member of an executive council for international sports Federations listed in the Olympic Games, and Dr Abdullah bin Khamis bin Ali Ambosaidi as a representative of sports federations with international sports listed in the Olympic Games. Other recommendations include Qais bin Saud bin Hamad al Zakani as a sport figure, Dr Mansour bin Sultan al Taouki as representatives of athletes, after he was earlier elected by the Oman Athletics Committee at its first meeting this year.

The members of OOC Board of Directors (2020+1 - 2024) will also recommended candidates from sports federations of international sports federations listed in the Olympic Games. This includes Saif bin Said bin

Rashid al Rashidi, president of Oman Cycling Federation and Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Saeed Bamakhl, chairman of Oman Table Tennis Federation, Eng Khalfan bin Saleh bin Mohammed al Naabi, president of Oman Basketball Federation, and Dr Marwan bin Juma bin Ali al Juma, president of Oman Hockey Federation, Eng Ibrahim bin Abdullah bin Abdul Rahim al Maqbali, president of Oman Volleyball Federation, and Mohsen Bin Hamad bin Ali al Masrouri, vice president of Oman Football Federation.

A representative from Women Sport will also be elected for the Board.

The meeting will also approve the last minutes of General Assembly held on December 27 and reviewing the report of the Board of Directors on its work for the past year.

Microsoft VP dazzles Museum of the Future's audience

Museum of the Future, hosted on Saturday, Alex Kipman, vice president of Artificial Intelligence and Mixed Reality at Microsoft, who has described the Metaverse - a persistent, online, 3D universe that combines multiple different virtual spaces as a future iteration of the internet which will seamlessly blend the virtual and real world.

Kipman spoke during the third session of the 'Future Talks' series at Dubai's Museum of the Future, during his address on 'Mixed Reality and the Meta-

verse', addressing the vast potential of virtual worlds that are now at our fingertips.

"For all the hype around the Metaverse, I want to define my definition of the Metaverse," said Kipman. "It is the idea of correspondence between the real and virtual world. It is the idea of technology existing in the real world. It is a bridge between the virtual and the real world. This is done through the language of people, places and things. It can displace space and time."

The Metaverse is no longer

science fiction but 'science-fact', he said, aided by new emerging and futuristic technology such as the Microsoft HoloLens, developed by Kipman. He walked the audience through an immersive video of what it feels like to see through the eye of the HoloLens, to rousing applause from the audience.

The HoloLens - Microsoft's take on augmented reality, which they call 'mixed reality', - is a pair of mixed reality smartglasses that uses multiple sensors, advanced optics, thermal sensors,

and holographic processing that melds seamlessly with its environment. These holograms can be used to display information, blend with the real world, or even simulate a virtual world.

"These are one of the key technologies that have allowed us to progress to displace space and time," he said, pointing out that the HoloLens is already being used in the real world, such as in operating theatres, enabling surgeons to view three-dimensional holographic images of a patient's anatomy.

Savills strengthens global team

Savills has bolstered its global residential development consultancy team with two senior hires and a restructuring of the global residential developments department.

The new team members will be primarily responsible for growing the firm's presence in the branded and luxury residential segments, a press release said.

Rico Picenoni joins the team as a director. Based in Savills Dubai, Rico has over 17 years experience in the hospitality and residential sectors, with a background in branded residential strategy. Prior to joining Savills, Rico was head of residential development at Accor for the Middle East and Africa.

Jennifer Wadsworth joins the Savills London office as a director. Her focus will be on building the branded residential transac-



Rico Picenoni

tions business, working closely alongside Savills local partners and capital markets teams.

Speaking on the appointments Riyan Itani, head of global residential development consultancy, said, "The global residential development consultancy team is going from strength to strength and is a market leader in branded and luxury residential consultancy."

"Jennifer and Rico will be instrumental in developing and diversifying our service lines with a focus on brand selection and negotiation, branded residential operations as well as transactional business through the sourcing of financial partners and outright sales for branded residential development opportunities," he added.

Rico Picenoni, director, global residential development consultancy said, "Joining the global powerhouse that is Savills is exciting as the branded residential segment is witnessing more and more developers and brands exploring this unique space, especially in the Middle East. Working together with industry pioneers across our global network will allow us to unlock value for our clients and reinforce our position as the market leader in branded residences."

SriLankan Airlines adorns aircraft with 'Raid Amazonas 2022' insignia

SriLankan Airlines adorns one of its aircraft with customised livery to reaffirm its status as the official airline of the much-awaited 'Raid Amazonas 2022', a press release said.

Raid Amazonas 2022 is an annual sporting event that features a large number of French female athletes competing their way to victory through multiple sports events and activities against the backdrop of an iconic tourist destination.

Every year, the event highlights an attractive tourist destination through inherent features such as its ecological beauty, citizens' way of life and culture, which are prominently showcased to the world through global media that follow the athletes in their trail.

The 20th edition of the event will take place in the areas surrounding the iconic Sigiriya rock fortress, rich in ecological beauty, cultural heritage, and attributes



of authentic village life in Sri Lanka.

The first leg will take place from March 13 to 23, and the second leg is scheduled from March 27 to April 6. Over 550 participants are expected to join the event, including athletes and officials.

The SriLankan aircraft with the special livery features iconic

Sigiriya, the vibrant and unique backdrop of this year's event.

This aircraft will be deployed to bring in athletes and officials from Paris to Sri Lanka for the event and would also continue to fly to many of the airline's other destinations in its scheduled operations, thus portraying Sri Lanka's stature as a sports and adventure destination.

THE FINANCIAL CORPORATION Co. SAOG AND ITS SUBSIDIARIES

Board of Directors' Report

Dear Shareholders,

We present the audited financial results of The Financial Corporation Co. SAOG (FINCORP) (The Group) for the year ended December 31, 2021.

FINANCIAL RESULTS

The Group earned a total operating income of RO 357,534 which, combined with realised and unrealised gain amounting to RO 752,869 and dividend income of RO 127,890, resulted in Total Income of RO 1,238,293 compared to RO 349,941 during the same period last year. Net Profit for the year stood at RO 787,045 compared to a Net Loss of RO (225,364) during the previous year. A summary of the financial results is tabulated below.

DETAILS	31 Dec 2021 RO.	31 Dec 2020 RO.	Change %
Operating Income	357,534	280,832	27%
Investment Income	752,869	(101,050)	845%
Dividend Income	127,890	170,159	(24%)
Total Income	1,238,293	349,941	354%
General & Admin Expenses	(497,149)	(569,014)	(13%)
Share of profit/(loss) from Associates	339,940	(112,480)	403%
Other Income/ reversal	28,570	5,609	517%
Profit /(Loss) before tax	1,109,654	(325,944)	450%
Taxation	(322,609)	100,580	(420%)
Net Profit /(Loss) for the period	787,045	(225,364)	450%
Profit /(Loss) per share	0.011	(0.003)	450%

MARKET OUTLOOK

High vaccination rates and decline in COVID-19 cases is likely to set the stage for economic rebound in early 2022. However, swift economic recovery and pent-up consumer demand is likely to trigger inflation leading to interest rate hikes. The tug of war witnessed during the pandemic between growth and value stocks is likely to intensify. With leading central banks taking steps to tighten monetary policies, looming inflation and rising interest rates will poise value stocks to outperform growth during 2022. Going forward, investor sentiment in GCC is forecast to remain strong amid high oil prices and GDP recovery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I take this opportunity to express our gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq for his wise leadership and progressive vision that continues to lead the country along the path of growth and prosperity.

We also extend our appreciation to all officials and staff of the Muscat Securities Market, Capital Market Authority and Muscat Clearing and Depository Company for their valuable co-operation and support.

Finally, we appreciate the dedication of our staff and their efforts during these difficult times, shareholders for their faith and our esteemed clients for the confidence, trust and support extended to FINCORP.

Mohamed Darwish Al Khoori
Chairman of the Board

Complete accounts for the group/parent company will be sent to any investor/user of this financial statements upon request within 7 days from the date of receiving the request

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شركة المركز المالي ش.م.ع. The Financial Corporation Co. SAOG
ادارة الاصول | واسطة | تمويل الشركات والاستشارات | بحوث
Asset Management | Brokerage | Corporate Finance and Advisory | Research

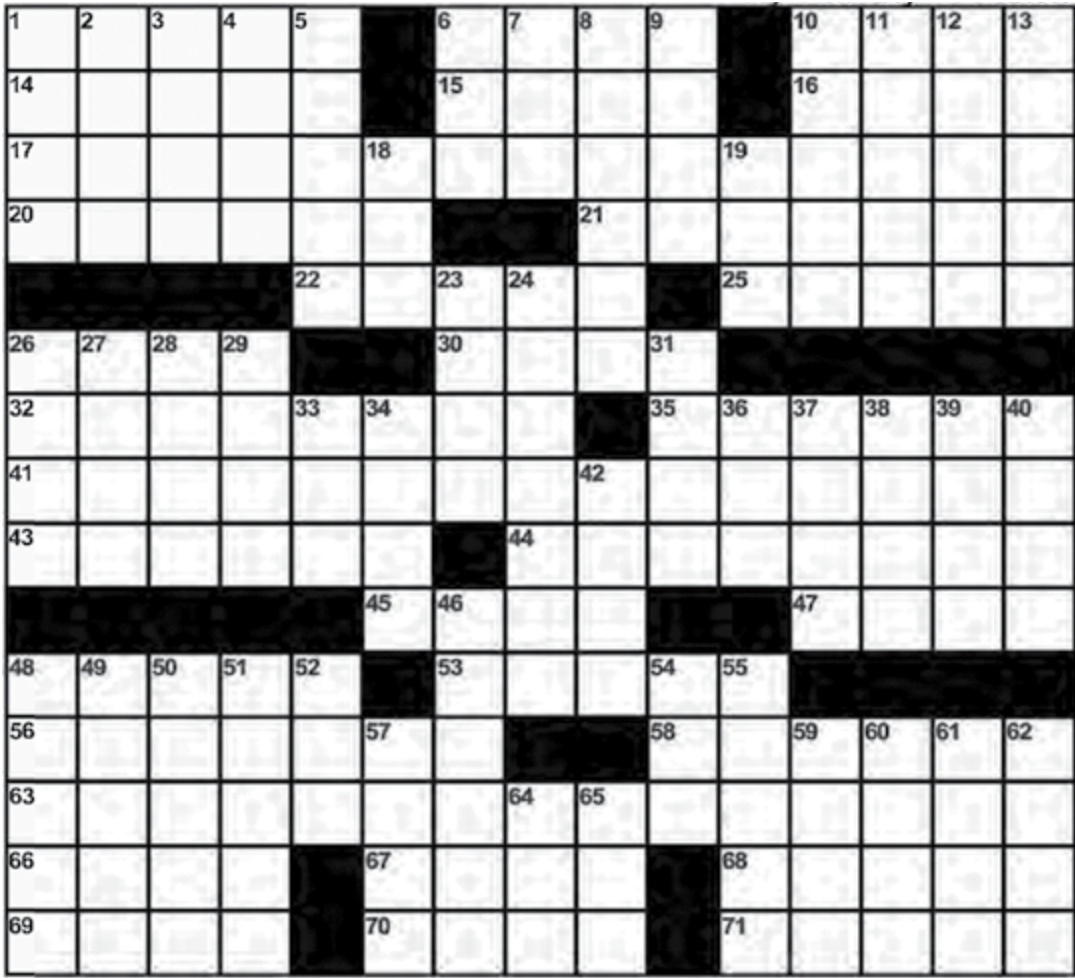
Consolidated And Parent Company Statement Of Financial Position As At 31 December 2021

	31-Dec-21	31-Dec-20
ASSETS		
Cash and bank balances	1,483,417	2,041,416
Financial assets at fair value through profit and loss	3,830,006	2,937,508
Trade and other receivables	688,807	864,375
Investment in associate	1,989,866	1,768,788
Deferred tax asset	78,496	401,105
Property and equipment	16,398	31,848
Investment properties	270,000	300,000
Total assets	8,356,990	8,345,040
LIABILITIES AND EQUITY		
Liabilities		
Trade and other payables	673,436	1,454,866
Taxation	7,614	7,614
Employees' end of service benefits	56,796	50,461
Total liabilities	737,846	1,512,941
EQUITY		
Equity attributable to owners of the Parent company		
Share capital	7,002,996	7,002,996
Legal reserve	934,792	858,714
Accumulated loss	(318,644)	(1,029,611)
Total equity	7,619,144	6,832,099
Total liabilities and equity	8,356,990	8,345,040
Net assets per share	0.109	0.098

Consolidated And Parent Company Statement Of Comprehensive Income The Financial Corporation Company Saog And Its Subsidiaries

	31-Dec-21	31-Dec-20
Income		
Brokerage commissions (net)	113,040	147,597
Management fees	244,494	133,235
Net gain from financial assets at FVTPL		
- unrealised	621,295	197,450
- realised	131,574	(298,500)
Dividend and other income	127,890	170,159
Total income	1,238,293	349,941
Expenses		
General and administrative expenses	(450,510)	(526,035)
Depreciation	(15,450)	(16,561)
Operating expenses	(465,760)	(542,596)
Operating (loss)/profit	772,533	(192,655)
Finance income	692	335
Finance costs	(1,389)	(26,418)
Finance (cost)/income - net	(697)	(26,083)
Reversal of allowance for expected credit loss	27,878	5,274
Share of loss from Associate	339,940	(112,480)
Net loss from change in fair value of investment property	(30,000)	-
(Loss)/profit before tax	1,109,654	(325,944)
Taxation	(322,609)	100,580
(Loss)/profit for the year	787,045	(225,364)
Attributable to:		
Equity holders of the Parent company	787,045	(225,364)
(Loss)/profit for the year and total comprehensive (loss)/profit for the year	787,047	(225,364)
(Loss)/profit per share (Basic and Diluted)	0.011	0.003

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

 - 1) Fable conclusion
 - 6) Keeps having birthday parties
 - 10) Mattress supporter
 - 14) Flaring skirt style
 - 15) Fourth down option
 - 16) Animated _ E. Coyote
 - 17) Tow trucks, e.g.
 - 20) Oklahoma U. athlete
 - 21) Point of view
 - 22) Grating, voice-wise
 - 25) Kind of cash or officer
 - 26) Farmer, on occasion
 - 30) Bringing up the rear
 - 32) Major, as a highway
 - 35) Go around and around
 - 41) They are left to chance
 - 43) Blood component
 - 44) Place for a bell ringer
 - 45) Badly wound
 - 47) Dog show partner?
 - 48) Beauty pageant wear
 - 53) Remove wooden pins from
 - 56) Zambian's neighbor
- 58) Biblical plague member

63) Win an election

66) Wood source

67) Food sticker

68) Control_ (obsessive type)

69) Puts in stitches

70) "I_ to recall ... "

71) Grassy plant

DOWN

1) "The War of the Worlds" planet

2) Blue Bonnet, for one

3) Puerto finisher

4) Soon, in romantic poetry

5) Part of a voting machine

6) Busy IRS mo.

7) Gal's partner

8) Diplomats

9) Kind of aerobics

10) Pigs and such

11) Allowed by law

12) Dole out

13) Itsy-bitsy

18) Victorian, in history books
- 19) Cool, old-school

23) Belgrade citizen

24) Traveling gunslinger of old TV

26) Large stringed instrument

27) Face-to-face exam

28) Volcano in Italy

29) 1990 World Series champs

31) Group of three

33) CD follower

34) Mosque VIP

36) Tool that makes waves

37) Cookbook abbr.

38) Kind of sax

39) High schooler

40) Catch a glimpse of

42) Cakewalk, in sports

46) Mame, for one

48) Bake sale sweets

49) Become accustomed

50) Vice president who resigned

51) Gads about

52) "Aladdin" prince

54) "Boola Boola" warbler
- 55) Makes silly mistakes

57) Play parts

59) Heal completely

60) Brought into play

61) Smelterly refuse

62) Little kid

64) Early afternoon

65) Deep sleep stage
- NOTE PAD**
-

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You're protected by a wonderful safety net, so go ahead and take a risk. Some extremely compassionate astral diplomats are here to accompany you on your journey. You can officially allow yourself to have fun and let loose. Take few days off and go on that long-awaited solo tour to the places of your dreams. It's time to stop being so pent up over everything. Change is coming whether you like it or not. Let go and let it happen.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Confrontation has a funny way of making things clear and forcing you to make a decision. Perhaps you're wondering what to do about a relationship issue. You probably won't have to wonder much longer. Be ready to put your money where your mouth is. You'll get your chance when someone who possesses a knack for BS comes along and pushes all the right (or wrong) buttons.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

Just because things are going a certain way now doesn't mean they'll continue in that direction forever. If you're bored or fed up with the status quo, take some time out of your day to dream a little. Visualize what you want for your life. If nothing else, the mental effort will bring the right kind of energy into your consciousness. Where that goes, who knows? It's up to you to make it happen.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

A hunter claimed to have seen what bird in 1688, thought to be the last recorded sighting?

A. Gryphon
B. Roc
C. Phoenix
D. Dodo

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You're protected by a wonderful safety net, so go ahead and take a risk. Some extremely compassionate astral diplomats are here to accompany you on your journey. You can officially allow yourself to have fun and let loose. It's time to stop being so pent up over everything. Change is coming whether you like it or not. Let go and let it happen.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You've been quite absorbed with a certain someone lately, and it's been keeping you quite busy for all the right reasons. If you're feeling adventurous, experimental, or just want to lay it all on the line, do it. When was the last time you risked it all for romance? Don't hesitate to live a little. You'll remember this burst of spontaneity for years to come. You two are going to have a wonderful time together in the coming few weeks.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

If you need to take a stand now for yourself or a loved one, it definitely won't be a problem. You'd never admit it, of course, but deep down you actually enjoy a little confrontation. The rush, the adrenalin. You're well equipped to deal with just about any scuffle, verbal, physical, or psychological. Just warn any innocent bystanders of the impending fracas. Give them ample time to get out of the way.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

At the moment, there's nowhere you'd rather be and nothing you'd rather do than snuggle up with a dear one and make the world go away. This behaviour is so uncharacteristic of you, but that's what love does! Meanwhile, let the naysayers put up or shut up. If they don't like how you're rolling today, tell them to back off and mean it! Why don't you plan a romantic getaway with your special someone and make everlasting memories?

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Every now and then you need to let go, so prepare yourself. The more you've been considering a change lately, the more fearful, erratic, and restricted you've been feeling (and behaving). That's no reason to stop, however. In fact, that's the universe telling you to push the accelerator. So strap yourself in and get ready to go on the journey of your life. It's gonna be a doozy! These experiences will mould you into a stronger person.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Try not to be so obsessive! Have some fun with your partner. Today it's all or nothing with you! Your love is an all-consuming endeavor, placing you and your beloved in the eye of the storm. If you're single, you're destined to find romance. In either case, you can expect good treatment at the hands of others. A compliment comes your way when you least expect it. Just say thanks and be glad someone noticed you.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

A whole bunch of explosive energy is on the way, so get ready for some fireworks! Today's frenetic energy could urge you to make some changes to your future goals. You'll also feel the need to associate with a whole new group of peers. If that's the case, try to ease away from your current crew gently or offer to take them along. Either way, you'll enjoy the momentum of new blood.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

A secret you've been guarding with practically your life is about to be revealed, if it hasn't been already. The dogs are on to you and they've caught your scent. Just be sure your significant other isn't caught off guard. You owe it to them to let them know what's going on, especially after your recent shenanigans. It's better if they hear it from you, so take the time today to explain your side of the story.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Finances are on your mind. In fact, they're on everyone's mind. You're wondering how you can add more cash to your budget, and you have a few interesting ideas. One of them is quite good. It involves making money by turning your hobby into a part-time job. Nice. You might eventually end up doing the hobby full time and your day job part time. Now don't let fear stop you from making this a reality.

2. When was the first award ceremony for the US's Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences held?

A. 1951
B. 1919
C. 1941
D. 1929

3. Which of these was a former name of Northern Rhodesia?

A. Zanzibar
B. Zimbabwe
C. Zaire
D. Zambia

Answers: 1. D 2. D 3. D

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

T	S	P	C
L	E	E	E
A	I	E	R
G	U	A	S

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Battle of Kyiv: ‘198 civilians including children killed’

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukrainian forces repulsed a Russian attack on Kyiv but ‘sabotage groups’ infiltrated the capital, officials said on Saturday, as Ukraine reported 198 civilians deaths, including children, following Russia’s invasion.

A defiant Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky vowed his pro-Western country would never give in to the Kremlin even as Russia said it had fired cruise missiles at military targets.

With explosions echoing around Kyiv on the third day of Russia’s assault, Zelensky spoke in a video message, wearing olive green military-style clothing and looking tired but determined.

“I am here. We will not lay down any weapons. We will defend our state, because our weapons are our truth,” he said.

“Our truth is that this is our land, our country, our children and we will protect all of this.”

Ignoring warnings from the West, Russian President Vladimir Putin unleashed a full-scale invasion that the UN refugee agency said has forced almost 116,000 people to flee to neighbouring countries.

Tens of thousands more are estimated to be displaced within Ukraine, with many on the move to less affected western areas of the country.

In Kyiv, residents took shelter in the subway system and in cellars and basements.

Ukrainian Health Minister Viktor Lyashko said 198 civilians, including three children, had been killed in the conflict and 1,115 wounded.

In Paris, French President Emmanuel Macron warned that the world must brace for a long war.

“This crisis will last, this war will last and all the crises that come with it will have lasting consequences,” Macron said.

‘We must be prepared’

After speaking to Macron, Zelensky tweeted to thank ‘partners’ for sending weapons and equipment.

Several NATO members have sent weapons and ammunition to Ukraine in recent weeks, including Britain, the United States and ex-communist countries in Eastern Europe.

In another video address, the 44-year-old leader also said that his country had ‘derailed’ the Russian plan of overthrowing him and establishing a puppet state in Ukraine.



A view of a high-rise apartment block which was hit by recent shelling in Kyiv, on Saturday (AFP)



Ukrainian service members look for unexploded shells after a fighting with Russian raiding group in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv in the morning of Saturday (AFP)

Air raid sirens and birdsong

In the early hours of Saturday, AFP reporters in Kyiv heard occasional blasts of what soldiers said were artillery and Grad missiles being fired in an area northwest of the city centre.

There were also loud explosions in the centre.

Emergency services said a high-rise apartment block was hit by shelling overnight, posting a picture that showed a hole covering at least five floors blasted into the side of the building.

Kyiv’s mayor, Vitali Klitschko, said the building had been hit by a missile.

“The night was difficult, but there are no Russian troops in the capital,” he said.

“The enemy is trying to break into the city, in particular from Gostomel, Zhytomyr, where the aggressors are neutralised,” he said, referring to two settlements to the northwest and west of the city.

“Now in Kyiv there are, unfortunately, sabotage groups, there were several clashes,” he said.

Hours later, AFP saw a destroyed Ukrainian military truck in the city centre and a civilian volunteer digging a trench for soldiers.

Ukrainian army tanks were also seen manoeuvring all over the centre but the streets were mostly empty and the centre silent except for the sound of air raid sirens and birdsong.

The city said it was toughen-

ing a curfew in place and anyone on the streets after 5:00pm would be considered ‘members of the enemy’s sabotage and reconnaissance groups’.

Russian plan ‘derailed’

Zelensky on Saturday said that Ukraine had ‘derailed’ Russia’s attack plan and urged Russians to pressure Putin into ending the war.

When he announced the assault in a pre-dawn television statement on Thursday, Putin called it a ‘special military operation’ aimed at defending Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The separatists have been fighting Ukrainian government

forces in the east for eight years in a conflict in which more than 14,000 people have been killed.

Russia’s communications regulator on Saturday told independent media to remove reports describing it as an ‘assault, invasion, or declaration of war’. In a statement, the regulator accused the media outlets of spreading ‘untrue information’ about the shelling of Ukrainian cities by the Russian army and civilian deaths.

‘Point of no return’

But Russia has brushed off international condemnation and increasingly stringent sanctions adopted by the United States, Canada, Britain and the European Union, including against Putin himself and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Russia said sanctioning the pair was ‘a demonstration of the complete impotence of the foreign policy’ of the West.

“We have reached the line after which the point of no return begins,” Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

The impact of sanctions has been far-reaching.

French naval forces on Saturday said that they had intercepted in the Channel a cargo vessel loaded with cars bound for Russia.

AFP

US announces new military aid of \$350mn to Ukraine to fight Russia

Washington, US - The United States is providing Ukraine with US\$350mn in additional military equipment to fight off Russia’s ‘brutal and unprovoked assault’, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced on Saturday. “This package will include further lethal defensive assistance to help Ukraine address the armored, airborne, and other threats it is now facing,” Blinken said in a statement.

Blinken said that last fall as Russia started amassing troops on the border with its pro-Western neighbour, President Joe Biden authorised US\$60mn in immediate military assistance to Ukraine, then another US\$200mn in December as President Vladimir Putin’s threat became more acute.

Now the US is authorising a third package ‘as Ukraine fights with courage and pride against Russia’s brutal and unprovoked assault,’ Blinken said.

This means total US security assistance committed to Ukraine



Antony Blinken (AFP)

over the past year now exceeds a billion dollars, the secretary said. Blinken did not detail what kind of weaponry was involved.

“It is another clear signal that the United States stands with the people of Ukraine as they defend their sovereign, courageous, and proud nation,” he said.

The new assistance follows a series of US and other western sanctions against Russian banks and oligarchs in an effort to punish Putin and his inner circle for the invasion of Ukraine and cripple the Russian economy.

AFP



This file photo shows a plane of Polish Airline LOT arriving at Warsaw Airport in Poland on August 4, last year (AFP)

Russia bars flights from Bulgaria, Poland, Czech Republic

Moscow, Russia - Russia on Saturday closed its airspace to flights from Bulgaria, Poland and the Czech Republic in tit-for-tat punitive measures following Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine.

Britain has banned Russian flagship carrier Aeroflot from flying over the UK and several countries, including Bulgaria, Poland and the Czech Republic, have closed their airspace to Russian carriers. “Air carriers of these states and/or registered in them are subject to restrictions on flights to destinations on the territory of the Russian Federation, including transit flights through the airspace of the Russian Federation,” the federal air transport agency Rosaviation

said, referring to Bulgaria, Poland and the Czech Republic.

Meanwhile, Estonia, Latvia and Slovenia on Saturday also said they were banning Russian flights. “We invite all EU countries to do the same,” Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallashe tweeted, adding: “There is no place for planes of the aggressor state in democratic skies.”

Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa quoted Kallas’s tweet saying that ‘Slovenia will do the same’.

Latvian Transport Minister Talis Linkaits also said on Twitter that ‘Latvia will close its airspace to Russian-registered airlines for commercial flights’.

AFP

Kyiv civilians huddle in cellars as Russian forces attack

Kyiv, Ukraine - As a street battle with invading Russian forces raged overhead, Kyiv resident Yulia Snitko spent the night cowering in the basement of her apartment block praying for her unborn baby.

Eight months pregnant and with her bulging belly showing through her clothes, she was terrified that each blast or volley of gunfire from an attack on a nearby military facility could send her into labour.

“I’m trying to stay as calm as possible to not cause a premature birth,” the 32-year-old told AFP on Saturday morning in the Soviet-era bomb shelter.

“At night it was more than one hour of huge explosions, it was very stressful. When I realised what was happening, I was trembling, totally shaking for five minutes.” Around her, families huddled together on the cardboard boxes and camping mats they were using as makeshift



Five-year-old Mikhailo holds a puppet as he waits in an underground shelter in Kyiv on Saturday (AFP)

beds.

On the streets above it was a

bright sunny day, but only a handful of civilians were brave

enough to queue for emergency food supplies, as Kyiv has been

transformed within days into a war zone.

Tanks manoeuvred along the streets as the city, home to three million people, braced for an all-out assault by Russian forces pushing towards it.

The burnt-out wreckage of a Ukrainian military truck still smouldered in the middle of the grand Soviet-era Victory Avenue and soldiers cleared away debris. Nearby, a Ukrainian soldier commanded an elderly volunteer as he hastily dug a trench in preparation for fresh attacks.

Several servicemen said Russian forces a few kilometres away had been firing barrages of rockets indiscriminately from their feared Grad systems.

The sounds of explosions rumbled in the distance.

‘We are not afraid!’

Suddenly the wail of an air raid siren sounded and the civilians on the street sprinted for the

nearest shelter.

City authorities blamed Russian ‘sabotage groups’ for the attacks in the city overnight and said Moscow’s regular forces were fighting to break in.

Missiles pounded multiple locations around the capital.

One rocket blasted a gaping hole across several floors of an apartment block not far from the city centre sending rubble spewing onto the street below.

Teacher Irina Butyak, 38, has spent two days in the basement of her apartment block sheltering together with some 20 people.

As air raid sirens blared directly overhead, some tried to sleep on mattresses on the ground, some sat on stools chatting. “We have train tickets for western Ukraine for tomorrow. I don’t think we will make the train,” she told AFP.

Buses have stopped running and Kyiv’s metro has been turned into a giant bomb shelter.

“We’ll sit here until we can get to the train station,” she said.

She was still struggling to digest the nightmare unfolding around her as the city plunged into violence.

“We thought something like this might happen but we were hoping until the end that it wouldn’t,” she said.

“We were hoping that common sense and common decency would prevail. Well, it didn’t.”

Pensioner Anatoly Shayduk could not control his rage at the man - Russian President Vladimir Putin - who has unleashed this horror.

“This Hitler is trying to seize power,” he said.

“We are not afraid! If you knew how many young people have already stood up and taken their machine guns! I am 68 years old, but I will take any gun tomorrow and will shoot.”

AFP

Torrential rains, floods lash eastern Australia, five dead

Sydney, Australia - Torrential downpours lashed eastern Australia on Saturday, raising deadly floodwaters to decades-long highs, swamping homes and sweeping away cars.

Police in the eastern state of Queensland said they had found the body of a 37-year-old man, raising the flooding death toll to five people since early this week. At least one person is still missing.

Images of southeast Queensland broadcast on Australian media showed homes and roads flooded, areas of land transformed into lakes and a large chunk of a concrete pier floating down the fast-running Brisbane River.

The water snatched the car of a team of four emergency services workers who were heading to rescue a family from their flooded home overnight, said state police disaster coordinator Steve Gollscheski.

"The vehicle in which they were travelling was swept off the road into floodwaters. Three of our members were rescued. One of those members is deceased," Gollscheski told a news conference.

Elsewhere, another man's body was found overnight.

"In some parts of southeast Queensland, this is the biggest event that they will see in a number of decades," said state police and emergency services minister Mark Ryan.

"And the rain has not stopped - in fact, there are some parts where it is intensifying."

The Queensland town of Gympie was facing a 'hell of a lot



A truck drives past an abandoned car by a flooded road at Rocklea, Australia's Queensland state on Saturday (AFP)

of water' as the Mary River rose, Gympie Mayor Glen Hartwig was quoted as saying by national broadcaster ABC.

In the town's Royal Hotel, 'without a submarine or a snorkel, you will not be having a beer', Hartwig said.

"It's floor-to-ceiling and over the roof in some areas."

'Dangerous'

Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk said the Mary River could rise above 21 metres at Gympie. It may exceed levels last seen there in February 1999, the

bureau of meteorology said. As a precaution, Queensland would be issuing evacuation alerts, notably targeting about 700 residents in the Gympie area, the premier said.

"If we don't do this now people will become isolated and trapped," she warned.

The premier said her 'heart goes out' to the volunteer emergency services worker, 62-year-old Merryl Dray, who died 'trying to save her community'.

Emergency services had responded to more than 1,800 calls for help in 24 hours in

southeast Queensland, officials said. Rainfall in some areas of the state had exceeded records going back decades, said senior Queensland meteorologist David Grant.

He predicted further rain on Sunday as the weather system moved away more slowly than had been anticipated.

"There is now going to be an increased risk of dangerous and life-threatening flash flooding, and even the potential for localised landslides," he told a news conference.

Heavy rain also hit the state

capital Brisbane.

"Essentially we've seen a month's worth of rainfall fall in one day for just Brisbane alone," Grant said.

Rescuers undertook 132 rescues in swift water conditions in 24 hours, said Greg Leach, Queensland's commissioner for fire and emergency services.

"Our catchments are completely saturated. Our rivers are rising. We have flash flooding. Now is not the time to be out in southeast Queensland if you don't have to be," Leach said.

AFP



People gather in a tent to avoid aftershocks in West Pasaman, Indonesia's West Sumatra province on Saturday (AFP)

Rescuers in search for missing after quake in Sumatra

Jakarta, Indonesia - Rescue teams in Indonesia were searching on Saturday for six people still missing after a strong earthquake rocked Sumatra island a day earlier, killing at least eight people and injuring dozens, an official said.

The 6.2-magnitude quake hit the island's north at a depth of 12km minutes after a less violent tremor on Friday morning, according to the United States Geological Survey (USGS), displacing thousands.

It damaged hundreds of homes and buildings including mosques, schools and banks, forcing terrified residents to evacuate and shuttle loved ones to safety in temporary shelters.

"At the moment the search is ongoing for six people we predict have been buried by a landslide," said Abdul Muhari, spokesman of Indonesia's National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB), in a statement on Saturday. At least 86 people were injured in the quake, with 10 suffering serious injuries, according to the BNPB.

More than 6,000 people have been evacuated in Sumatra's West Pasaman and Pasaman

city, where rescue workers were using heavy equipment to search for survivors in the rubble of buildings, the agency said.

Indonesian meteorological agency BMKG warned people to stay away from slopes over fears of landslides at the peak of the rainy season.

Authorities in West Pasaman have declared a two-week state of emergency while the search and relief efforts continue.

"People affected by the quake urgently need tarpaulin, tents, instant food, clean water and family supplies," Muhari said.

Images shared with AFP from Pasaman city, near the quake's epicentre, showed partially collapsed houses with bricks lying on the ground and holes in the walls. The town mayor's residence also suffered damage, with shattered glass all over the floor, according to BNPB head Suharyanto, who like many Indonesians goes by one name.

The tremors were felt as far away as Malaysia and Singapore.

Indonesia sits on the Pacific 'Ring of Fire', causing it to experience frequent earthquakes.

AFP



Pakistan's traders and Afghan nationals gather at the Pakistan-Afghan border in Chaman on Saturday (AFP)

Pakistan-Afghan border still closed two days after deadly fighting

Chaman, Pakistan - Hundreds of people were stranded on Saturday at a key border crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan, days after fighting between security forces left at least three dead.

Border tensions have risen since the Taliban's return to power last year, with Pakistan alleging militant groups are planning attacks from Afghan soil.

The Taliban deny harbouring Pakistani militants, but are also infuriated by a fence Islamabad is erecting along their 2,700km border, drawn up in colonial times and known as the Durand Line.

Each side blamed the other for Thursday's fighting at the Chaman-Spin Boldak crossing.

"The border remains

closed for passengers as well as trade," a Pakistani security official told AFP.

"A delegation of tribal notables and religious leaders has been formed to hold talks with the Taliban," he added. An Afghan official said talks held so far had been fruitless.

"They are trying to speak again. but if nothing happens then the issue will be discussed on a higher level," the Kandahar governor's spokesman, Mahmoud Azaam, told AFP.

An AFP reporter saw hundreds of people waiting at Chaman on the Pakistan side for the border to reopen. Thousands usually cross every day, including traders, Afghans seeking medical treatment in Pakistan, and people visiting relatives.

AFP

US President picks Ketanji Brown Jackson as first Black woman on Supreme Court

Washington, US - President Joe Biden lauded 'uniquely accomplished' Ketanji Brown Jackson on Friday as he nominated her to be the first Black woman in US history to serve on the Supreme Court.

Jackson was appointed to the federal bench in 2013, and was backed by three Republican senators last year when she was elevated to the DC Circuit Court of Appeals, seen as a staging ground for aspiring Supreme Court justices.

"She steps up to fill Justice (Stephen) Breyer's place on the court with a uniquely accomplished and wide ranging background," Biden said as he officially unveiled his decision at a White House appearance with the 51-year-old jurist.

"As it happens, I share a birthday with the first Black woman ever to be appointed as a federal judge, the Honourable Constance Baker Motley," Jackson said as she accepted the nomination.

"We were born exactly 49 years to the day apart. Today, I proudly stand on Judge Motley's shoulders, sharing not only her birthday, but also her steadfast and courageous commitment to equal justice under law."

With one liberal justice replacing another the announcement will not reshape the ideological make-up of the court - but it is a huge moment for Biden personally and politically.

White House officials hope it will provide a few days of positive news coverage ahead of the president's State of the Union address on Tuesday.

The pick presents an opportunity for the administration to



US President Joe Biden looks on as Ketanji Brown Jackson delivers brief remarks during an event in the White House on Friday (AFP)

pivot from a spate of bad news in recent months, with Biden's domestic agenda stalled amid runaway inflation and plummeting poll numbers.

The announcement is a chance for Biden to show the Black voters who rescued his floundering 2020 primary campaign that he can deliver for them following the recent defeat of voting rights legislation.

"For too long, our government, our courts haven't looked like America," Biden said. "I believe it's time that we have a court reflects the full talents and

greatness of our nation with a nominee of extraordinary qualifications, and that we inspire all young people to believe that they can one day serve their country at the highest level."

Political attacks

Black Americans are among Biden's strongest supporters, with two-thirds approving of his job performance, according to a CBS poll released last week.

His popularity among the key demographic however declined over the months following his inauguration and he has not re-

As it happens, I share a birthday with the first Black woman ever to be appointed as a federal judge, the Honourable Constance Baker Motley. Today, I proudly stand on Judge Motley's shoulders sharing her commitment to equal justice

KETANJI JACKSON

covered the lost ground.

In his first year in office, Biden nominated 62 women to the federal judiciary, including 24 Black women. But there are still only a few dozen active Black female judges on the federal bench out of almost 800 total.

The president had promised during his successful 2020 White House run to nominate a Black woman to the Supreme Court for the first time in US history. The pledge dismayed some Republicans who thought ruling out candidates of other backgrounds would further politicise the judiciary.

Dismissing the objections, Biden shortlisted a handful of top Black women to replace the retiring Breyer, including southern jurists J. Michelle Childs and Leandra Kruger.

Reflecting Washington's bitter political divisions, at least two top Republicans depicted

his eventual nominee as the darling of what they called the American far left.

Lindsey Graham had argued that it was 'about time' a Black woman sat on the bench but the senator went to bat for Childs, who is from his home state of South Carolina.

Graham was among the three Republicans who supported Jackson last year when she was nominated for the DC Circuit Court of Appeals. But he complained on Friday that her nomination for the higher court meant 'the radical left has won President Biden over again'.

Bumpy ride ahead?

Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell echoed Graham's objection, saying Jackson was 'the favoured choice of far-left dark-money groups that have spent years attacking the legitimacy and structure of the Court itself'.

But neither said outright they would oppose Jackson's appointment. Jackson will now go through weeks of hearings and meetings with senators before her nomination comes to the floor, likely in April.

Republicans cannot block a Supreme Court nomination as long as all 50 Senate Democrats stick together, but the comments by Graham and McConnell signal a bumper confirmation process than had been expected.

But the party has shown little appetite for a fight, which they fear could backfire, and are trying to keep the focus on kitchen table issues such as spiraling fuel and food costs.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

US top health agency loosens mask guidelines

Washington, US - The United States top health agency on Friday drastically revised its guidelines for masking to stop COVID-19 transmission, a decision that means most Americans won't be advised to wear them in indoor public spaces, including school children.

"We're in a stronger place today as a nation with more tools to protect ourselves and our communities from COVID-19," said Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in a call with reporters.

The changes involve the metrics used to determine whether people should mask up.

Under previous guidance, this was pegged to case rates - with 95 per cent of the country considered areas of high or substantial transmission, and thus covered by mask advisories.

The new metrics use case-loads but also include COVID



A man wears his mask as he walks past a sign posted on a storefront reminding people to wear masks, in Los Angeles on Friday (AFP)

hospitalisations and local hospital capacity, to create a new measure known as 'COVID-19 community level'.

Residents can look up on the CDC website whether their area is green, yellow or orange on a national map. Now, more than 70 per cent of the population live in areas that aren't advised to mask up according to the new framework, including schools in the green or yellow areas.

Calls to lift school mask mandates had multiplied in recent weeks, as concerns grew about their impact on children's social, emotional and educational development. Walensky said the new guidance was statistically rigorous, but could be reviewed 'if or when new variants emerge, or the virus surges'.

The revised guidelines don't however apply to transport systems. A federal rule on that will be reviewed in mid-March when it is set to expire.

The United States is coming out of its latest COVID-19 wave, driven by the Omicron variant, which while highly transmissible, generally leads to less severe outcomes among people who were vaccinated or had a prior infection. Some 65 per cent of the US population are now fully vaccinated, and high caliber masks, such as N95s, which provide strong one-way protection to wearers, are now more widely available for people who require them, such as the immune compromised. The administration of President Joe Biden has increased its rhetoric around normalisation as the pandemic transitions to a new endemic phase.

The guidance is largely symbolic, since both Republican and Democrat-led states and cities have already taken the lead, either dropping their mandates or setting imminent timelines for doing so.

AFP

Dutch revellers celebrate carnival as most curbs end

Breda, Netherlands - Decked out from head to toe in fancy dress, singing and dancing, Dutch revellers celebrated carnival on Friday, as the Netherlands axed most COVID-19 restrictions.

The country is one of the last in Europe to ease towards normal after last December imposing some of the continent's toughest measures to curb a surge in Omicron infections, especially unpopular among Dutch party animals.

"COVID-19 is over, now it's time to party," said Senna Godefroy, dressed in a yellow and fluorescent orange jumpsuit in the carnival town of Breda in the southern Netherlands.

Friday saw bars and restaurants allowed to stay open beyond 1am, health passes dropped and social distancing axed. Masks remain compulsory only on public transport.

In Breda, hundreds of people



A teacher and pupils celebrate carnival at a school in Heerlen, Netherlands on Friday (AFP)

thronged bars and cafes in balloon-festooned streets as music blared out and disco balls glittered again until late.

"It's weird that everything is suddenly free of measures but it's fantastic," said Jesper Naio, a 22-year-old financial advisor.

"We've been waiting for it for

so long," said Sanne van de Wael, a 22-year-old student.

Carnival season in 2020 marked the start of coronavirus spreading in the Netherlands.

With a population of 17mn people, the Netherlands has recorded 21,414 deaths linked to COVID-19 and 5.8mn cases

during the pandemic. More than 85 per cent of the adult population is vaccinated.

"Two years to make up for," chanted party goers in Breda, brimming with enthusiasm, wearing flower garlands and carnival masks.

AFP

Indian capital ends restrictions as cases fall, lifts night curfew

New Delhi, India - India's capital has announced the end of all the remaining coronavirus restrictions after government data showed cases of the recent Omicron variant had fallen.

The country recorded 11,499 new daily cases and 255 deaths, according to the Health Ministry's latest statistics on Saturday, a tiny fraction of those seen during the devastating peak last year.

Local officials in the Delhi region, which recorded 460 cases and two deaths on Friday, decided to lift a night curfew and allow restaurants to operate at full capacity.

Places of religious worship were also permitted to reopen.

Schools will function fully offline from April 1 while fines for not wearing masks were also reduced.

The area's disaster management authority 'withdraws all restrictions as situation improves' and because people



Preschool children gesture as they attend a class after the schools resumed physical classes in Ahmedabad on February 17 (AFP)

were 'facing hardships due to loss of jobs', Delhi's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal announced on Twitter.

India was battered by a devastating COVID outbreak last year that saw 200,000 people killed in a matter of weeks, overwhelming hospitals and crematoriums.

Since the outbreak in 2020, India has officially recorded 42,905,844 cases and 513,481 deaths, third behind only the US and Brazil.

AFP

Los Angeles counts its growing population of homeless

Los Angeles, US - Tents, makeshift shelters and dilapidated campervans line the streets of Skid Row as Mike Murase and his team tally the exploding population of homeless people in Los Angeles.

In the United States' second biggest city, the unhoused huddle by small fires, trying to keep warm on one of the coldest nights of the year.

Homelessness is 'an intractable, stubborn issue that the politicians and agency leaders have not had the will to try to solve', 75-year-old Murase tells AFP. Murase and his colleagues criss-cross the dozen-or-so roads they have been assigned as part of a three-day effort to count the number of people living on the streets.

Figures from 2020 - the last time the survey was carried out - showed Los Angeles city alone had more than 66,000 homeless people, up more than 13 per cent from the year before.

Everyone expects this year's number to be much higher.

"During COVID-19 there were so many jobs that were lost, you know, restaurant workers or labourers," says Murase.

"A lot of these people were unable to pay rent for maybe two, three months. They get



A pedestrian walks past a homeless on the streets of Los Angeles, California on Thursday (AFP)

kicked out and they have no family or other relatives to go to and they end up on the street.

"I think there is a misconception that they're mostly criminals, or addicts, or mentally ill people.

"There's a large number of people with those conditions, but there are (also) families, children."

Tourists shocked

Visitors to Los Angeles often ex-

press shock at the sheer number of people living on the streets of one of the wealthiest cities in the wealthiest state of the wealthiest nation on the planet.

Tents and tarpaulin shelters clump next to Hollywood tourist spots, or string out along embankments next to the city's freeways. Rusting mobile homes with broken windows line the roads of Venice Beach, where multi-million dollar houses glower down at them.

Obviously ill people wander through traffic, railing at unseen demons, or picking at their grimy clothes as they mutter into greasy beards.

Others rummage through trash cans, or lie dazed on thoroughfares, the smell of urine a fug that pedestrians pick their way distastefully around.

Some of the unhoused are new to the streets, victims of the pandemic economic crush, but others have been there for years.

"I've lived downtown for about like seven, eight years. And it's always been an issue seeing people on the street," says Kimberly Briggs, who is volunteering alongside Murase.

"I just want to participate in something that helps bring resolution to this problem, because there is suffering on the streets and housing is a human right."

The count is a federal government requirement that will help to determine grants to the local

organisations trying to fix the unfixable. Volunteers are instructed not to interact with people; rather they must simply document what they see.

The survey Murase and Briggs are doing takes them between warehouses ripe with spices whose heady scents mingle with the smell of cannabis.

Many of the streets appear deserted, though there is evidence of people: here, the carcass of a campervan; there, plastic sheets stretched between shopping carts to form a rudimentary tent.

A closer look at a darkened area reveals a human form lying against a brick wall, almost camouflaged by the head-to-toe blanket that covers him or her.

Briggs carefully logs their presence in a special app on her phone, and the team walks on.

An occasional 'good evening' comes from some of those trying to settle in for the night, but most - like the man who sits blankly in his wheelchair - ignore the census-takers.

Trash and rats

Homelessness comes easy in the United States, where the welfare safety nets of other developed countries are largely absent, and the uninsured or under-insured

can be a hospital bill away from a missing rent check and the resulting eviction.

In California that problem is exacerbated by skyrocketing real estate prices that have pushed the average purchase price of a home to around US\$700,000 - twice the national figure.

Before the pandemic, experts calculated that a person earning minimum wage would have to work 80 hours a week just to afford the rent on a one-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles.

To be able to pay for food and bills, they would have to work even longer.

On Skid Row, the flickering campfires fuelled by scraps of trash cast shadows on the walls, revealing the occasional rat scurrying from one hiding place to another.

Less than a mile away, ritzy apartment buildings and office towers gleam silently into the night sky. "Look at all the private developers that are building all these tall buildings in Downtown LA," splutters Murase.

"What we need in the city is more affordable housing, and more services. That's what we should be spending our dollars on. Let's treat people as human beings."

AFP

THREE PIETAS

MICHELANGELO'S *Masterpiece*



A photograph taken on February 23, 2022 shows a cast of the Vatican Pietà during a preview of the exhibition 'The three Michelangelo's Pietas' at the Cathedral Museum in Florence

With 'Ash Wednesday' round the corner (March 2) Michelangelo's three 'pietas' unite in historic first in Florence's Opera del Duomo museum in Italy

It is admired the world over as an exquisite depiction of maternal grief. But Michelangelo's 'Pietà' has overshadowed two other moving sculptures on the same subject by the Renaissance giant.

That is why Florence's Opera del Duomo museum in Italy is putting on display together for the first time all three versions of the Virgin Mary mourning over the body of her son Jesus Christ.

The Tuscan museum's original 'Bandini' goes on show Thursday alongside casts of the Vatican 'Pietà' and 'Rondanini', which are on loan from the Vatican Museums.

Positioned to face each other in an intimate setting, there are striking contrasts between these variations, which mark different phases in the life of the artist, who died aged 88 in 1564.

The museum's director, Timothy Verdon, said it was a unique opportunity to observe Michelangelo's intellectual maturation on the

A unique opportunity to observe Michelangelo's intellectual maturation on the theme of the sacred

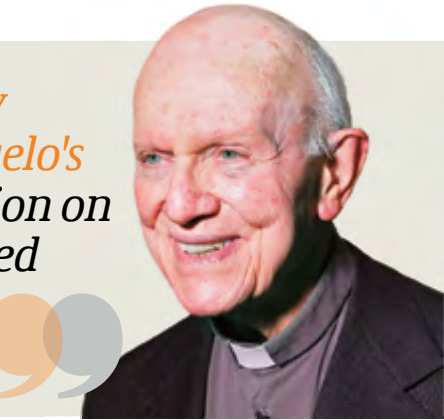
TIMOTHY
VERDON

theme of the sacred.

The exhibition, which runs until August 1, highlights the link between life and art in this religious sculptor, who served the popes for most of his career.

Purity

The 'Pietà' housed at the Vatican - masterfully executed when Michelangelo was not yet 25



years old - amazed his contemporaries, who were dazzled by the beauty of this virgin, clothed in billowing drapery.

The artist rejected criticism that his Mary appeared too youthful, saying purity kept women beautiful.

Mary cradles her 33-year old son, whose serene expression suggests he could almost be sleeping in a nod to the coming 'resurrection'

(the rising of Jesus from the dead in Christian belief).

This sculpture was damaged by a Hungarian hammer-wielding attacker in 1972, and the restored work of art is now protected behind bulletproof glass.

Centuries earlier, Michelangelo himself - dissatisfied with the 'Bandini', his second pietà - attacked it with a hammer, leaving marks which can still be seen today on Jesus' shoulder and Mary's hand.

This version was done when the then-72-year old artist was suffering from depression. Convinced death was near, Michelangelo took a vow of poverty and placed religion at the centre of his life.

He lent his own features and beard to the character of Nicodemus, who dominates the 'Bandini', shielding Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Mary, who here has lost her earlier timeless beauty.

AFP

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HASEER MATS



THE GREAT LEVELLER

James Wagstaff, a British artist residing in Oman, has summed up what he calls the 'Essence of Arabia' in 87 intriguing exhibits showcased at Bait Muzna Gallery. There's heritage, nostalgia, spirituality, hospitality, and much more on display, but the key element evident in this exhibition is the artist's personal journey of self discovery

Hubert Vaz

The exhibits currently on display in a unique solo exhibition at Bait Muzna Gallery are a few hundred years old....or so you would think. And you would, indeed, resist the temptation to touch and feel what could take you back through time, as some of the decayed and degenerated artefacts appear to crumble and fall apart at the slightest touch.

Intricate weaves of palm fronds used to create mats and rugs, thatched roofing and blinds, household essentials and furniture of a bygone era in Oman are on display through the exhibits. The surprise factor, however, is the fact that these are not light-weight originals, rather true-to-life representations of the originals, cleverly cast in heavy metals with painstaking effort and eye for detail.

Yes, now you reach out and touch them. You knock on them and hear a resonance that hits you in the face as you simply don't believe the craft and credibility of the artist's deep-rooted quest to celebrate the past through contemporary artworks. The exhibits are created on porcelain, aluminium, bronze, and are quite heavy - they appear to be a preservable prototype of a dying craft that needs to be consciously passed down to the new generation despite the exposure to an ultra modern, high tech lifestyle these days.

Wagstaff is a sculptor and installation artist who claims to be influenced by conceptual art, design, and anthropology, and his current work features the physicality and psychology of culturally significant objects.

"My art includes references to my personal journey of inner healing and deconstruction of my worldview, in the context of living cross-culturally in the Middle East," he states, adding, "As an artist, I enjoy making 3-dimensional work and curating experiences. I appreciate all mediums, ranging from performance and installations, to sculpture and prints, using whatever is necessary to convey the

message."

About the current exhibition, Wagstaff disclosed that he had taken a fascination for an ancient traditional art in Oman and travelled to different parts of Oman to encounter, understand, research and dig out, not just the social and cultural aspects, but also the spiritual roots of the traditional Omani *Haseer* mat which had been the

“My art includes references to my personal journey of inner healing and deconstruction of my worldview, in the context of living cross-culturally in the Middle East

JAMES WAGSTAFF



focal point of most activity within the household as well as the community. The *Haseer* mat, he discovered, had a special place in every individual's personal life as well as a distinct dimension in the community he/she was involved with. It connected, not just people but also individuals with different aspects of their inner being and persona.

Pointing towards a set of artworks that depict how traditional prayer mats appeared in the days of yore, Wagstaff explains, "Many people have forgotten that this is how prayer mats used to look. These portable mats foster a sacred meditative space where we deepen our connection with God, reflected in the behaviours that it produces. Even though the mat deteriorates over time, it reflects the opposite of how our spirits are built up over the time we have spent in this space."

The exhibits on display have been created over the past four years, though he has been in Oman for sever odd years. Explaining the tedious craft behind creating each piece, he says, "To produce the bronze pieces, I had to bring the Omani mats to China where I could find a factory that could cast them. The journey took me six weeks and I had to convince the craftsmen to use colours that they hadn't used before."

Explaining the significant role the *Haseer* mat played in family/community gatherings, in schooling, in weddings, even in funerals, Wagstaff said, "There is no prestigious position around the *Haseer* mat. It creates a sacred and beautiful space, and everyone becomes equal and united around this mat. It signifies the best aspects of the culture in Oman."

Hoping to get his artworks sold during the exhibition, which opened on February 22 and would continue for a month till March 22, Wagstaff, however, expressed the desire to be able to showcase it at prestigious galleries in the region to showcase not just the crafts but also the vibrant culture of a bygone era in Oman



'Haseer' mat

The *Haseer* mat is the traditional hand-woven mat made from date palm leaves and wadi reeds which are in abundance in Oman. The craftsmen who create these *Haseers* are now not many in number. Wagstaff uses visual representation to highlight the subconscious symbolism behind the *Haseer*, being a valuable component that brings together the beauty of local culture and values. Through sculpture and installation, he explores the idea of time and inevitable evolution of culture and tradition.

With his current works, Wagstaff observes how people come together on the *Haseer*, how it immediately creates a sacred and holy space where one connects with the Almighty and others - where everyone is equal, where there is safety, peace, rest, even engulfed by danger.



Photos: Syed Fasiuddin

Big-hitting de Grandhomme rallies New Zealand as South Africa dominate

NEW ZEALAND - SOUTH AFRICA TEST

Christchurch, New Zealand - Colin de Grandhomme and Daryl Mitchell mounted a crucial rescue mission for New Zealand as South Africa continued to dominate the second Test on day two in Christchurch on Saturday.

Their 66-run, sixth wicket partnership, dominated by a half-century to de Grandhomme, lifted New Zealand to 157 for five at stumps in reply to South Africa's 364.

Playing with the lights on during a gloomy afternoon at Hagley Oval, South Africa had New Zealand at five for 91 before de Grandhomme joined Mitchell in the middle.

The burly all-rounder favoured attack as the best defence and was not out at 54 off 61 deliveries at stumps, with the more circumspect Mitchell on 29. After being outplayed on day one, New Zealand battled back into the reckoning on the second morning with four wickets for 60, to have South Africa 298 for seven at lunch.

Two overs after the resumption, South Africa were 302 for eight but then, following a 20-minute rain disruption, the momentum swung back the Proteas' way.

Marco Jansen and Keshav Maharaj mounted a rollicking 62-run stand off 78 deliveries - a record ninth wicket partnership for South Africa against New Zealand - and South Africa were



New Zealand's Colin de Grandhomme (2nd R) plays a shot on day two of the second cricket Test match against South Africa at Hagley Oval in Christchurch on February 26 (AFP)

back in the box seat.

When Kyle Jamieson eventually mopped up the tail, New Zealand's situation worsened.

Kagiso Rabada removed openers Tom Latham for nought and Will Young for three, both caught behind - and New

Zealand were two down for just nine runs.

Devon Conway and first Test century-maker Henry Nicholls attempted to put some backbone into the innings, although Conway never looked at ease.

He was given a hard time by

Rabada who had an lbw appeal turned down and dropped a sharp caught-and-bowled chance before Jansen claimed the wicket with Kyle Verreynne taking another legside catch.

South Africa lost two reviews appealing for leg-before deci-

sions before eventually getting the fourth wicket with a carefully laid plan to catch Nicholls for 39.

Jansen delivered a tempting short, wide delivery similar to one which Nicholls had cut for four early in his innings.

He could not resist slashing

again - but this time Sarel Erwee was waiting at backward point for the catch.

Tom Blundell lasted six balls for six runs before he was bowled by Rabada, who has figures of three for 37, while Jansen has two for 48.

SCOREBOARD		
South Africa 1st Innings 364		
NEW ZEALAND 1st INNINGS		
Tom Latham	c Verreynne b Rabada	0
Will Young	c Verreynne b Rabada	3
D Conway	c Verreynne b Jansen	16
Henry Nicholls	c Erwee b Jansen	39
Daryl Mitchell	not out	29
Tom Blundell	b Rabada	6
C de Grandhomme	not out	54
Extras:	(lb 6, nb 2, w 2)	10
TOTAL:	(45 Ov, RR: 3.48)	157/5
Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-9, 3-51, 4-83, 5-91		
Bowling: K Rabada 12-2-37-3, M Jansen 12-2-48-2, L Sipamla 11-4-34-0, Wiaan Mulder 6-2-25-0, K Maharaj 4-1-7-0		

New Zealand had the measure of South Africa before lunch with Matt Henry and Neil Wagner taking two wickets each.

Henry removed Temba Bavuma for 29 and Verreynne for four in the space of 10 deliveries, and Wagner claimed the wickets of Rassie van der Dussen for 25 and Wiaan Mulder for 14.

But after Wagner dismissed Rabada for six after lunch Jansen and Maharaj regained control for the tourists.

They were particularly harsh on Wagner, taking 39 including seven fours in five overs, before the South African-born New Zealander was taken out of the attack.

He was replaced by Jamieson who wrapped up the innings in his first over with the dismissal of Maharaj for an entertaining 36 off 50 deliveries, while Lutho Sipamla went without scoring and Jansen was left unbeaten on 37.

AFP



Norway's Henrik Kristoffersen celebrates after winning the men's slalom event of the FIS Alpine Ski World Cup in Garmisch-Partenkirchen

Kristoffersen wins slalom in WC as other stars struggle

Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany - Norway's Henrik Kristoffersen won the men's World Cup slalom in Garmisch-Partenkirchen on Saturday as several top names struggled to recapture their medal-winning form from the Winter Olympics.

Kristoffersen is the seventh different winner this season in seven slalom races on the World Cup circuit after clocking a winning time of one minute, 46.14 seconds.

"This is one closer to the goal and everything is still possible," said Kristoffersen.

His win leaves him just one point behind overall slalom World Cup leader Lucas Braathen with another race in the discipline to come Sunday in Garmisch.

Loic Meillard of Switzerland was second at 0.14sec back with Manuel Feller third at 0.51.

His fellow Austrian Johannes Strolz, who won Olympic silver ten days ago in the slalom, finished just off the podium at 0.76 in fourth.

The other slalom medallists from the Beijing Winter Games struggled in the warm conditions. French Olympic champion Noel Clement paid the price for a conservative first run, after which he was 1.11 seconds off the pace, and then did not finish the second.

Norway's Sebastian Foss-Solvaag, who earned slalom bronze in Beijing, had already crashed in Saturday's opening run. The soft snow in the Bavarian Alps also accounted for overall slalom World Cup leader Braathen, who failed to finish the first run.

Kristoffersen is now hoping for back-to-back wins this weekend as conditions suit him after salt was sprayed on the course to firm up the soft snow.

"Salt is my fortune, since we ski so much on salt in Norway in the spring, summer and fall, so I am not complaining for sure," added Kristoffersen, who was fourth in the men's slalom at the Olympics.

AFP

Iyer, Jadeja lead India to T20 series win over Sri Lanka

Dharamsala, India - Shreyas Iyer smashed an unbeaten 74 as India hammered Sri Lanka by seven wickets in the second Twenty20 international to clinch the series on Saturday.

Chasing 184 for victory, Iyer led the batting charge, putting on an unbeaten 58-run stand with Ravindra Jadeja, who hit 45 off 18 balls, to take the team home with 17 balls to spare in the Himalayan hill town of Dharamsala.

India took an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series with their 11th successive T20 victory and a seventh straight series win at home.

India lost skipper Rohit Sharma for one off Dushmantha Chameera in the first over of their chase.

Ishan Kishan survived a nasty blow on the helmet by a short ball from Lahiru Kumara but the bowler soon got the left-handed opener out for 16.

Iyer kept up the attack on the bowlers and soon got company from Sanju Samson, who emerged from a slow start to hit 39 off 25 balls, and the duo put on 84 runs off 47 deliveries.

Iyer hit Chamika Karunaratne for a six to reach his second successive half-century and finished with six fours and four sixes in his 44-ball knock.

Samson smashed Kumara for a four and three sixes but fell on the final delivery of the over as Binura Fernando pulled off a stunning one-handed catch at short third-man.

But the hosts had seized the momentum and the left-handed Jadeja joined the onslaught to complete the chase with ease.

Earlier Sri Lanka were in trouble at 102-4 after being put into



India's Ravindra Jadeja (R) and India's Shreyas Iyer run between the wickets during the second T20 match against Sri Lanka in Dharamsala (AFP)



Sri Lanka's Pathum Nissanka plays a shot during the second T20 match against India in Dharamsala on February 26 (AFP)

bat before Pathum Nissanka, who made 75, and captain Dasun Shanaka, who hit an unbeaten 47 off 19 balls, helped the team reach 183-5.

The pair put on 58 in 26 deliveries as Sri Lanka smashed 72 runs from the final four overs and Shanaka finished off the innings with his fifth six.

The Sri Lankan openers started cautiously as they scored just 15 runs from the first four overs before Nissanka and Danushka Gunathilaka, who made 38, took on the bowlers.

Sri Lanka lost four wickets, but Nissanka stood firm to raise his fifty in 43 balls and found company in Shanaka to take on the Indian bowlers.

The final match is on Sunday at the same venue.

AFP

SCOREBOARD		
SRI LANKA		
P Nissanka	lbw b Kumar	75 (53)
D Gunathilaka	c VR Iyer b Jadeja	38 (29)
C Asalanka	lbw b Chahal	2 (5)
K Mishara	c SS Iyer b Patel	1 (4)
D Chandimal	c Sharma b Bumrah	9 (10)
D Shanaka	not out	47 (19)
C Karunaratne	not out	0 (0)
Extras:	(lb 7, w 4)	11
Total:	(20 Ov, RR: 9.15)	183/5
Fall of wickets: 1-67, 2-71, 3-76, 4-102, 5-160		
Bowling: B Kumar 4-0-36-1, J Bumrah 4-0-24-1, H Patel 4-0-52-1, Y Chahal 4-0-27-1, R Jadeja 4-0-37-1		
INDIA		
R Sharma	b Chameera	1 (2)
Ishan Kishan	c Shanaka b Kumara	16 (15)
Shreyas Iyer	not out	74 (44)
S Samson	c Fernando b Kumara	39 (25)
R Jadeja	not out	45 (18)
Extras:	(lb 2, nb 1, w 8)	11
Total:	(17.1 Ov, RR: 10.83)	186/3
Fall of wickets: 1-9, 2-44, 3-128		
Bowling: D Chameera 3.1-0-39-1, Binura Fernando 4-0-47-0, L Kumara 3-0-31-2, P Jayawickrama 2-0-19-0, Chamika Karunaratne 3-0-24-0, Dasun Shanaka 2-0-24-0		

Oman Sail to kick off 2022 season at Asian sailing event in Abu Dhabi

Oman Sail’s 49er, Windsurfing and ILCA 4 teams join over 140 sailors from 17 countries

Muscat – Oman Sail will kick off the 2022 sailing season at the Asian Sailing Championships in Abu Dhabi where teams in three classes will compete from February 27 to March 6. The 49er, Windsurfing and ILCA 4 teams will join over 140 sailors from 17 countries at the Abu Dhabi Marine Sports Club for a week of action against some of the best in Asia, under the guidance of team leader Mohsin al Busaidi.

This is an important test for our sailors across three classes. Qualifying for Paris 2024 is our main objective and this tournament is the first step this year to reach that level.

MOHSIN AL BUSAIDI

tures Musab al Hadi and Waleed al Kindi in the 49er class, coached by Zakariya al Wahabi; Abdulmajeed al Hadrami and Abdullah al Sarhi in the Windsurfing class, along with coach Sultan al Balushi; and Nibras al Owaisi will team with Elyass al Fhadli in the ILCA 4 class which is coached by Mundher al Kindi. Team leader, Mohsin al Busaidi, Head of the Youth Sailing Pathway at Oman Sail, said, “This is an important test for our sailors across three classes and a great opportunity to put into practice the techniques we have

been learning in training. Qualifying for Paris 2024 is our main objective, and this tournament is the first step this year to reach that level. It will be an interesting opportunity for the team and a great chance to get into the rhythm of competitive sailing early in the year.”

Racing will be staged in the harbour and open waters surrounding the Abu Dhabi Marine Sports Club every day from Tuesday, March 1 until Sunday,



File photo of Laser 4.7 or ILCA 4 boats during a training session



File photos of (L to R) Omani Sailor Abdullah al Sarhi, Abdulmajeed al Hadrami and the Oman Sail 49er Team

Nadal beats Medvedev again to reach Acapulco final

Acapulco, Mexico - Rafael Nadal beat Daniil Medvedev 6-3, 6-3 on Friday to reach the final of the ATP Mexico Open and insure the Russian will not celebrate his rise to number one with the Acapulco trophy.

Medvedev was unable to avenge his loss to Nadal in the Australian Open final, where the Spaniard rallied from two sets down to triumph in five and claim a record-setting 21st Grand Slam singles title.

But the 26-year-old Russian departs Mexico knowing he'll move to number one in the world on Monday. He was assured of reaching the summit when Serbian star Novak Djokovic fell in the quarter-finals at Dubai on Thursday.

Nadal pushed his perfect 2022 record to 14-0, but it wasn't as simple as the scoreline might suggest.

He powered through the first set without facing a break point and broke Medvedev in the opening game of the second.

But the 35-year-old world number five found himself in trouble in the fourth game, fight-



Spain's Rafael Nadal celebrates after defeating Russia's Daniil Medvedev in Mexico (AFP)

ing off four break points to preserve his advantage.

Medvedev pushed him again in a marathon sixth game but failed to convert any of his seven break chances.

"I played some amazing points on the break points," said Nadal, who used everything in

his arsenal to fend off Medvedev -- from his classic powerful forehands to aggressive forays to the net.

"The second set was very emotional," Nadal said. "Daniil was playing very aggressive — drop shots, winners. It was a very difficult set.

"I feel lucky to win that set, because he had a lot of chances."

Serving to extend the match at 5-3, Medvedev took a 40-0 lead before a spate of errors, including his seventh double fault of the contest, gave Nadal an opening and allowed him to wrap it up on his second match point.

In Saturday's final, Nadal will face Cameron Norrie, who pushed his winning streak to eight straight matches with a 6-4, 6-4 victory over Stefanos Tsitsipas of Greece.

Britain's 12th-ranked Norrie, who lifted the trophy at Delray Beach last week, broke in the ninth game of each set and calmly served them out.

Tsitsipas, who reached the Rotterdam final earlier this month, had not dropped a set all week until he ran into the in-form Briton - who faced just one break point in the match.

Nadal has won all three of his career meetings with Norrie - at the Australian Open, Barcelona and Roland Garros in 2021.

But he said Norrie has made big strides since then.

"His level of tennis is huge," Nadal said. "He improved a lot at the beginning of last year, and this year he continues.

"It's going to be a big challenge, but we are in the final of a 500 here in Acapulco, so can't expect an easy opponent. I'm excited about being in the final."

AFP

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