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OMAN'S INFLATION RISES TO 10-YEAR HIGH OF 3.6%
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Study raises mental health concern

COVID-19 STUDY

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A study on the social and behavioural changes among COVID-19 recovered patients in Oman has raised concern about mental and psychological health during the pandemic. Considering the fact that the pandemic may continue for an even longer period of time, people will have to cope with a high level of stress, anxiety and depression.

The study – titled 'Public Health Messages for Social Behaviour Change in the Wake of COVID-19: A Qualitative Study' published in *Oman Medical Journal* – targeted 40 participants divided into four focus groups for discussions conducted via video conferencing to record their insights on public health messages.

'We are in the midst of an unprecedented era where social isolation, fear of infection, boredom, fake information, financial loss and stigma have affected almost everyone. We examined the impact of public health messages on people in adhering to the precautionary measures and coping with stress,' the study said.

The severity of COVID-19 has called for extreme measures, and ensuring people comply with recommended social behaviour changes is a challenge. 'Public



The severity of COVID-19 has called for extreme measures, and ensuring people comply with recommended social behaviour changes is a challenge

health messages are being sent out to the population to adhere to the precautionary measures.'

The study observed a generally positive attitude towards public health messages. However, it stressed that the nature of behavioural change recom-

mended posed a significant risk for psychological health. 'Lack of social interaction, for example, led to lower motivation, a sense of losing the meaning of life, and personal distress. While all participants acknowledged and appreciated the government authorities' efforts in disseminating and educating the masses on such a large scale using different modes of message delivery, all showed a serious concern on whether they will be able to continue coping with the ongoing situation.'

The study was conducted by lead authors Salah T al Awaidey and Fannah al Araiimi from the Office of Health Affairs, Ministry of Health, and Sitwat Usman Langrial, Department of Information

Systems and Technology, Sur University College.

According to participants, the messages had a significant impact on how people gradually started taking COVID-19 seriously. 'Discussions revealed a general sense of emotional distress as a consequence of losing social life. Participants spoke about how they were 'taking it easy' in the beginning. However, as time passed and there was a spike in cases, people started fearing not knowing how to tackle the situation. The swiftness of the government in initiating a nationwide campaign sharing information as well as precautionary measures was helpful.'

All participants expressed concerns about growing psycho-

Supreme Committee lifts ban on arrivals from southern Africa

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments arising from the COVID-19 pandemic held a meeting on Sunday under the chairmanship of H E Sayyid Hamoud Faisal al Busaidi, Minister of Interior, where it reviewed updates on the pandemic, measures of protection against the disease, ways of curbing its spread and addressing its impacts.

During the meeting, the committee cancelled the earlier decision banning entry of arrivals from South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Eswatini and Mozambique.

The committee reaffirmed that vaccination remains a condition for entry in public and private establishments. 'The Supreme Committee stresses that all precautionary



1 death reported

Muscat - A total of 121 new cases of COVID-19 were registered in the last three days in Oman, in addition to one related death. This takes the total number of cases to 305,105 and COVID-19-related deaths to 4,114 in the sultanate, according to the Ministry of Health.



measures have to be applied, prohibiting people who suffer from pulmonary diseases from entering workplaces and applying all precautionary measures within and outside workplaces, including wearing face masks properly, observing physical distancing, keeping hands clean, avoiding unauthorised assembling and crowds and physical greetings like shaking hands and embracing,' it stated.

The Supreme Committee took the decisions listed below to be applied till January 31, 2022.

It announced that two-dose vaccination is a prerequisite for entry of non-Omanis aged 18 years and older to the sultanate through all checkpoints. The decision stated that entry to Oman is allowed only for arriving passengers who show a negative PCR test issued within a maximum of 72 hours from time of arrival.

logical stress. It was observed that the sudden change in social norms and behaviours brought with it stress, anxiety and depression. One participant highlighted the need for 'enhanced mental health support'.

All participants believed that

staying at home with no social life had negative psychological affects. "Besides social restrictions, the pandemic has made people suffer financially and mentally. The way people had to change their lifestyles in just a matter of days caused a great deal of dis-

tress," said a 37-year-old study participant.

A significant number of participants shared their views about anxiety and depression as they were confined to their homes. Others added that losing jobs left many people in distress.

► NEWS BRIEFS

MUSCAT DECLARED 'ARAB DIGITAL CAPITAL' FOR 2022
Muscat - The Council of Arab Ministers for Communications and Information announced that Muscat will be the Arab Digital Capital for 2022. The decision came at the conclusion of the 25th session of the Arab minister's council hosted on Sunday via videoconferencing by the Arab League's technical secretariat general of Arab Ministers of Communications and Information.

H E Said Hamoud al Ma'awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, said that the decision reflects the confidence of Arab countries in the digital and legal capabilities of Oman.

MINISTRY DIRECTS COMPANIES TO ALLOCATE 20% TO CHARITY
Muscat - H E Qais bin Mohammed bin Moosa al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, has issued Ministerial decision No 205/2021 to allocate 20 per cent of budgets of institutions and companies to activities of Oman Charity Organisation (OCO).

The decision stated that companies and institutions should allocate no less than 20 per cent of their budget to social responsibility programmes of Omani organisations for charitable activities run by OCO.

150m zipline opens in Al Khadif area of Dhofar

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To boost tourism, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, in cooperation with Dhofar Adventure and Tourism Company, has set up a zipline in Dhofar.

The zipline was inaugurated coinciding with the opening of the Empty Quarter Festival on December 23.

The first Empty Quarter Festival kicked off in Al Khadif in the Al Shasr area of the wilayat of Thumrait in Dhofar. It will continue for 17 days.

The festival includes various entertainment, sports, family and cultural events, besides economic activities including handicraft shops in cooperation with the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority in Dhofar.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Abdul Hakim Amer al Ma'ashani from Dhofar Adventure and Tourism Company said, "We built the 150m zipline in 40 days. We contracted with an American company called Zip Line Gear to build the zipline in Al Khadif. The zipline is operated and managed by Omani youth from Dhofar. They have undergone a training course in security and safety."

He informed that the zipline is designed for children, adults as well as adventure lovers, and is open on weekends from 8am to 11am and 3pm to 6pm for an entrance fee of RO2 for adults and RO1 for children for the 18-second ride.

According to Ma'ashani, the



(Supplied photo)

The zipline in Al Khadif is open on weekends from 8am to 11am and 3pm to 6pm for an entrance fee of RO2 for adults and RO1 for children for the 18-second ride

project aims to promote tourist sites in Thumrait. The zipline will attract adventure lovers, especially during the tourist season, which runs from October to April.

"While riding the zipline, guests can enjoy the sunset and the beauty of the sand dunes in that area. We have ensured international safety standards for it," Ma'ashani said, adding that Dhofar Adventure and Tourism Company is looking at setting up ziplines in various regions of

Dhofar and the sultanate to stimulate tourism.

Ma'ashani informed that the company is also looking at exploring caves in the sultanate and documenting these, besides spreading the culture of adventure among members of the community and promoting Omani tourism.

Meanwhile, Oman Tourism Development Company Omran has implemented a zipline project in the wilayat of Khasab in Musandam governorate.

Omran is currently deploying the 1,800m dual zipline project, which begins at Jebel Fitt and passes through scenic landscapes of Khor Qadi and the Mokhi area on the coast of Khasab. The landing point of the zipline will be connected to the upcoming Atana Khasab Hotel, where a visitor centre will be established to offer a host of facilities, including leisure and adventure activities.

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WINTER... IS A CELEBRATION

How can Oman make good use of the winter season to improve tourism?**Fareed Hamoud**
Banking sector employee

We need more winter carnivals and trekking programmes with proper guidelines to capitalise on the country's potential for winter tourism. Also, there should be more winter sports activities and cultural fests. Malls and hotels should also be encouraged to offer discounts during winter to attract more visitors.

**Vinayak Patil**
Technical manager

Winter is the best and most pleasant time in Oman when everyone wants to explore the outdoors - beaches, deserts, mountains etc. The region attracts maximum tourists during winter. Many activities can be organised to attract more tourists such as beach sports, food festivals with winter-themed food from different countries, marathons, winter carnivals, desert adventures and guided tours of historical places.

**Mohan Anandan**
Banking sector employee

Oman's iconic spots such as Jebel Akhdar, Jebel Shams, turtles beaches of Sur, its pristine beaches, etc must be actively promoted globally to attract more visitors. In addition to the Muscat Festival, trade fairs must also be held in parallel. Malls and hotels could introduce 'tourist discounts' to offer attractive rates to visitors.

**Ruskeen S**
Sales manager

This can be done by connecting with international winter tourism organisations, hosting desert and mountain camps, introducing winter sports and games alongside local and international folk culture festivals and encouraging locals to invest and participate in these activities.

**Abdul Raziq Kazi**
Advertising agency executive

Oman has always been a good destination for tourism. Except for a few months, most of the time it is pleasant and winters are a special attraction. More water sports, mountain camps and desert adventure activities must be organised to attract visitors from all around the world during winters.

**Jay Prakash**
Private sector employee

Oman has abundant natural resources and infrastructure to attract tourists, especially Europeans. Oman has to engage more youngsters and volunteers who can connect with foreign tourists and introduce them to the country's culture and rich heritage. National celebrities can promote the scope of winter tourism activities through print and social media.

**? NEXT ON
YOUR SAY**

How was 2021 and what are your expectations from 2022?

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

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Expats queue up for six-digit PIN number

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Crowds of confused and excited expatriates were seen since early morning on Sunday at Royal Oman Police's civil status office in Qurum. The crowd, comprising mostly of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Egyptian and Filipino nationals, queued up to generate their unique six-digit PIN number which is required, among other purposes, to renew employment contracts online.

In keeping with a Ministry of Labour deadline, private sector companies asked employees to get six-digit number for their resident cards before December 31. With precious few days remaining, the ROP office in Qurum witnessed a big rush of expatriate workers since early morning.

Running down the staircase from a second floor office in ROP's Qurum complex, the queue snaked out to the front of the building. Not expecting such

An extra period has been given to institution owners to complete the registration of work contracts for their expatriate workforce until January 31, 2022

MINISTRY STATEMENT

As the crowds swelled, traffic to the complex built up and parking space ran out. But many parked in the earlier ROP office adjacent to the new complex.

F John, an Indian expatriate, arrived at Qurum at around 10.30am stood in the queue for 30 minutes before "an ROP officer collected the resident cards from all of us in the line. After about an hour, he returned the residents cards and announced the password - the same for all of us."

John was informed by his PRO that he was renewing his work contract and that he needed the six-digit PIN and resident card for approval.

The common PIN generated by the ROP has confused most.

"When my PRO is asking for my resident card password, then what was the point in my going to generating the password myself? Also, if ROP is generating a common password for many expats, where is the secrecy and

the need of hundreds of people to queue up at civil services offices during a pandemic and risk getting infected with COVID-19?" asked an expatriate speaking on the condition of anonymity.

According to a PRO of a private sector company, ROP earlier allowed PROs to take the resident cards of expat employees to generate the password on their behalf. "Later, they did not allow us to generate passwords. Employees were asked to go and create the six-digit password of his choice."

Much to the relief of many and to ease down the rush, on Sunday the Ministry of Labour extended the deadline for completion of registration of expatriates' work contracts.

"An extra period has been given to institution owners to complete the registration of work contracts for their expatriate workforce until January 31, 2022," a ministry statement said.

255 new trainees join second batch of Etimad



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Etimad - the national leadership programme to upskill and empower potential Omanis for middle and senior management positions in the private sector - has received its second batch for training.

According to the Ministry of Labour (MoL), the second batch of senior administrators comprises 255 private sector employees. The programme aims to empower national competencies in the private sector and raise the level of their leadership and supervisory skills.

Etimad held an orientation meeting for the new batch at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre on Sunday. The session detailed the objectives of the training, which includes classroom and practical activities, e-learning and Action Learning Projects, besides the timeline of the programme.

Welcoming the participants, H E Sayyid Salim Musallam al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Human Resources Development in MoL, informed that "the highest goals of the



The goals of the Human Resources Development Sector is to promote the national human resource at all administrative levels

H E SAYYID SALIM
AL BUSAIDI

Human Resources Development Sector in the Ministry of Labour are to promote the national human resource at all administrative levels".

According to Dr Yasmin bint Shanan al Balushi, project manager of Etimad, the programme aims to invest in human resources and prepare national cadres to assume



The development of national competencies and capabilities is one of the most important objectives of Oman Vision 2040

DR YASMIN
AL BALUSHI

leadership positions in the private sector.

"The development of national competencies and capabilities is one of the most important objectives of Oman Vision 2040, and one of the main pillars of preparing them for a high degree of efficiency and leadership to face challenges," said Yasmin.

be'ah continues its journey towards green economy

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be'ah) announced on Sunday the continuation of Eco-Innovate Oman (EIO) - its flagship accelerator programme for Omani businesses seeking to make their commercial operations even greener.

EIO is a business accelerator programme designed to develop the skills sets and growth trajectories of Omani SMEs that aspire to green their businesses, fight climate change, and maximise financial, environmental, and social returns.

EIO aims to increase the level of competitiveness among Omani SMEs enabling them to compete locally and internationally. EIO will train Omani SMEs to evaluate their operations and their value chains using Green House Gas Accounting which is considered the first step in identifying ways to make their operations greener and more sustainable.

Launched in December of



2019, the first EIO contributed in accelerating the skills sets of SME owners working in the waste management, resource recovery, and other eco-conscious sectors.

The programme has benefited owners like Tasnim al Dawudi, co-founder of T&S Petroleum, which has a patented date seed oil product used in the oil and gas industry who took part in the first edition of EIO. According to Dawudi, "EIO was a life changing experience, giving our team the commercial

maturity and skills to grow T&S into a sustainable and highly competitive organisation."

The second edition of EIO will build upon this success, attracting Omani small and medium sized businesses which are committed to greening their operations through a practical Green House Gas Accounting process of identifying the environmental impact of their operations and those of its suppliers and employees.

As with the first edition of EIO, the second cohort will un-

dergo a challenging 'boot camp' which will quickly enhance skills sets with regards to business strategy and operations. The participants will learn practical skills in not only sustainable business practices but also financial management and the attraction of growth capital. EIO will train the participants to focus on the three pillars of impact namely, financial, social, and environmental returns. At the end of EIO, successful SMEs will pitch for growth financing in front of

angel investors, lenders, and impact investment funds. Growth financing will be in the form of equity and/or debt.

Dr Farah al Barwani, research and development manager at Environmental Center of Excellence in be'ah, said, "Due to be'ah's drive to support Oman's transition towards sustainability and a circular economy, and in support of the Oman Vision 2040, we are pleased to announce the launch of the second edition of EIO as we aim to encourage further adaptation of sustainable best practices by Omani SMEs."

William Crew, CEO of Inspired Solutions, said, "Sustainable best practices are increasingly becoming a litmus test for doing business with large multi-national companies and governments and for attracting funding from equity investors. Through this programme, SMEs will embrace sustainable business practices within their organisations, and become more competitive which will open up new horizons for SMEs growth."



Pacts inked to boost medical services in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman LNG signed two agreements with the Ministry of Health (MoH) recently to finance two projects, which are set to boost medical services in the sultanate.

The first agreement involves funding the provision of cancer detection devices at the Royal Hospital in Muscat. It will help to raise awareness on the concept of preventive medicine, allowing seamless and early diagnosis, intervention and treatment of cancer; which would ultimately reduce its severity. In addition, the agreement will improve the quality of life for patients and provide a cost-saving, simple and fast alternative to other expensive detection alternatives.

The second agreement is for the purchase of Complete Blood Count (CBC) devices for five different health centres across North Sharqiyah governorate. These devices facilitate fast and easy detection of different diseases, allowing patients to explore preventive methods early on. Additionally, these devices help to evaluate the overall

health with a focus on blood conditions. Consequently, this advocates for a healthy lifestyle and detecting any present disorders.

H E Dr Fatima al Ajmi, Undersecretary for Administrative, Financial and Planning Affairs in the Ministry of Health, said, "It gives us a great pleasure to extend our hands to Oman LNG and cooperate to serve the nation. The company is renowned for pioneering corporate social responsibility and dedicating special attention to the health sector. Not only are we seeking to raise awareness on preventive treatment through these agreements, but also we are aiming to encourage people to seek early detection of illnesses and adopt healthier lifestyles."

Dr Amor al Matani, CEO of Oman LNG Development Foundation, said, "Thanks to our strategic partnership with the Ministry of Health, we have been successful in delivering many projects across the country. We strive to ensure the provision and introducing necessary medical equipment and tools to the health institutions. Therefore, we were extremely delighted to collaborate with the MoH."

Upgrade winners rise in the world of innovation and technology

Muscat - The 5th edition of the Upgrade programme, which transforms the best graduation projects in the 4th Industrial Revolution technologies into successful ICT startups to bring socio-economic benefit to Oman, announced the three winning projects for this year at the 8th Annual Research Forum on December 15.

Upgrade is a competition-based programme in which the winners will be assisted to transform their graduation projects into startups in the Information and Communication Technology



(ICT) sector on topics such as Smart Cities, IoT, Information Security, Artificial Intelligence, Big Data and Blockchain.

Out of the ten finalists, the

winning projects of this year's Upgrade programme were awarded to 'Development of AI based Arabic natural language processing of sentiment analysis

application software for national security and planning', prepared by Ali al Harthi and Safiya al Harthi from Middle East College, 'Industrial IoT for operational efficiency improvement', prepared by Ahmed al Ghadani from the National University of Science and Technology and 'Thermal infra-red imaging assessment of solar PV modules', prepared by Al Qaisar al Aamri, Majid al Omairi and Sultan al Shabibi from Sultan Qaboos University.

The winning teams will be provided with incubation services, business and marketing

consultation, networking and mentoring opportunities, as well as educational awareness programmes that include a group of workshops and lectures in the incubation center.

Upgrade is a collaborative partnership between the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, Omantel, Oman Technology Fund, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Sas Center of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, and the Authority for SME Development.

MARKET WATCH

MSX304,122.42

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs	195.89
Pakistani Rs	462.74
Bangladeshi Taka	222.72
Philippine Peso	129.95
Sri Lankan Rs	526.14

*Rates as on December 26

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

UAE introduces AED50 polymer banknote

The Central Bank of the UAE (CBUAE) has announced that the new AED50 polymer banknote is an official currency and to be used alongside the paper banknote of the same value.

The new banknote has been distributed to banks and exchange houses, according to the CBUAE statement.

The CBUAE had issued the banknote recently to mark the UAE's Golden Jubilee, and in honour of the founding father, the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, and the first generation of rulers of the Emirates, and their dedication and historical role in uniting the country.

The new banknote is made of polymer, which other central banks have found to be longer-lasting and more environmentally-friendly than paper banknotes.

Polymer banknotes can contain many more security features than paper banknotes.

The design of this new banknote contains distinctive aesthetic characteristics.

Oman's inflation rate rises to 10-year high of 3.6%

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's annual inflation further increased in November after a sharp rise in prices for transportation and fish and seafood products during the month.

The sultanate's inflation rate - which is based on the consumer price index (CPI) - increased to 3.56 per cent in November 2021 from 3.35 per cent recorded in the previous month, according to CPI data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The annual inflation rate in November was at its highest level since 2011. The sultanate's consumer prices in November inched up 0.12 per cent compared to October prices, the data showed.

An increase in inflation rate was expected this year after the implementation of value-added tax (VAT) in April. Rising commodities prices globally have also contributed to the higher inflation in recent months in the sultanate.

Sharp price increases for transportation group, fish and seafood products, and education have largely contributed to the overall inflation growth in November, the NCSI data showed.

The annual inflation rate in food and non-alcoholic beverages group - which has nearly 24 per cent weight in Oman's CPI - decreased to 2.76 per cent in November this year from 3.42 per cent recorded in October. Consumer prices for food and



Fish and seafood prices recorded 10.6 per cent year-on-year rise in November (Muscat Daily)

non-alcoholic beverages group in November fell 1.23 per cent compared to the previous month.

Within the food items, fish and seafood recorded a 10.6 per cent jump in November prices compared to the same month a year ago, while prices for fruits rose 4.3 per cent on an year-on-year basis. Prices for vegetables also increased by 3.2 per cent year-on-year in November.

On the other hand, prices in transport group - which has more than 19 per cent weight in the CPI - jumped by more than 11 per cent in November compared to the same month a year ago. Furnishing, household equipment and household maintenance group also witnessed an

year-on-year price increase of 1.44 per cent in November.

Prices for the group of housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuel items remained 1.24 per cent higher in November compared to the same month of 2020.

The sultanate's annual inflation averaged under 1 per cent over the six years to 2019 and was negative during 2020. The inflation rate returned to positive territory in April 2021 after remaining negative for more than a year.

The average inflation rate during January-November period of 2021 stood at 1.34 per cent, according to NCSI data.

However, the spike in Oman's

inflation this year is not a surprise. International institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMFO, World Bank and global credit ratings agencies were already expecting Oman's inflation to rise above 3 per cent level this year.

As per the IMF's forecasts, Oman's annual average inflation is expected to rise to 3.8 per cent in 2021, mainly due to the implementation of VAT and increase in global prices. Similarly, the World Bank in its latest economic outlook for Oman said the inflation is projected to pick up to over 3 per cent in 2021, reflecting the recovery of domestic demand and the introduction of VAT.

CEOs optimistic despite new COVID variants: Survey

Muscat - CEOs of the world's largest businesses are increasingly optimistic about the outlook for their own business and, despite COVID-19 variants slowing down the 'return to normal', their confidence in the global economy has returned to the levels not seen since the start of the pandemic.

The KPMG 2021 CEO Outlook Survey, which interviewed 1,325 global CEOs from 11 major markets, found that 60 per cent of the business leaders are confident about the global economy's growth prospects over the next three years (up from 42 per cent in the January-February pulse survey).

The prospect of a stronger global economy is leading CEOs to invest in expansion and business transformation, with 69 per cent of senior executives identifying inorganic methods (e.g. joint ventures, merger and acquisitions and strategic alliances) as their organization's main strategy for growth. A majority (87 per cent) of business leaders stated that they are looking to make acquisitions in the next three years to help grow and transform their businesses.

The survey found that 30 per cent of CEOs plan to invest more than 10 per cent of their revenues toward sustainability measures and programs over the next three years.

In a press release, Kenneth Macfarlane, office managing partner - Oman, KPMG Lower Gulf, said, "Well managed by government leadership, Oman



Kenneth Macfarlane

has handled the pandemic effectively and is turning a crisis into an opportunity for growth. This stability creates a foundation for CEOs to project a positive, optimistic environment and encourage employee productivity and creativity."

He said, "To tackle the potential environmental challenges, CEOs would do well to invest in digitalization and disruptive technology. CEOs are also pushing investment in environment, social and governance (ESG) strategies up the business agenda to deliver expected returns and help build a more equitable and sustainable future."

Among the many socio-economic, social and environmental challenges facing the world, stakeholders are putting immense pressure on businesses to tackle climate change and leave a positive impact on society. Over half (58 per cent) of CEOs said that they face increased demands from stakeholders (e.g. investors, regulators and customers) for more reporting on ESG issues.

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MSX inches down amid thin trading

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) marginally decreased 0.06 per cent on Sunday to close at 4,122.42 points. Trading activity at the bourse remained weak compared to the previous session.

The marginal gain in the MSX30 index was supported by Services index which closed 0.51 per cent higher. Financial and Industrial indices decreased 0.02 per cent and 0.13 per cent, respectively.

MSX Sharia index also decreased 0.5 per cent to close at 536.34 points.

Total trading volume fell by more than 23 per cent to 5.85mn shares on Sunday compared with 7.62mn shares on Thursday. Market turnover increased 3.5 per

cent to RO1.76mn against RO1.71mn recorded in the previous trading session.

Market breadth of the MSX remained negative with nine advancing stocks to 14 decliners. As many as 19 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Among top gainers of the day were Al Maha Petroleum (6.79 per cent), Oman Qatar Insurance (2.89 per cent), Raysut Cement (2.43 per cent), Al Sharqia Investment (2.35 per cent) and Oman United Insurance (2.25 per cent).

Top losers were Oman and Emirates Investment Holding (-6.15 per cent), SMN Power Holding (-4.44 per cent), Al Maha Ceramics (-3.16 per cent), Galfar Engineering and Contracting (-2.67 per cent) and Global Investment Holding (-1.64 per cent).

ONLY WHAT'S ESSENTIAL



Israeli environmentalists hail blow to UAE oil deal

Jerusalem – Israeli environmentalists applauded on Thursday after a court dealt a blow to a controversial oil transport deal with the United Arab Emirates, agreed after the two countries normalised relations last year.

The deal would have seen Gulf oil brought to Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat by tanker, then moved overland by pipeline to its Mediterranean port of Ashkelon, for onwards shipment to Europe.

Environmental advocacy groups filed a petition in May to block implementation of the deal, citing risks to the northern Red Sea corals off Eilat.

The three organisations – Adam Teva Vadim, the Society for Protection of Nature in Israel and Zalul – argued that the gov-

ernment should not be allowed to increase the amount of crude transiting through Eilat, a prerequisite for the UAE deal to be viable.

The groups withdrew their petition at a supreme court hearing in Jerusalem on Thursday after the government said it would accept the recommendations of the environmental protection ministry and not increase crude flow through the port.

'We welcome this significant achievement, which came following widespread public opposition to the (UAE) agreement,' the groups said in a statement.

Minister for Environmental Protection Tamar Zandberg also welcomed the outcome.

"Israel cannot be turned into a

dangerous and polluting oil transit hub," she said in a statement.

"We will continue to protect the unique coral reef."

The ministry had long opposed the deal involving Israel's state-owned Europe-Asia Pipeline Company (EAPC) and an Israeli-Emirati company called MED-RED Land Bridge Ltd.

It had previously put a freeze on the agreement, citing the need for further environmental study. EAPC and MED-RED did not disclose the amount of oil they intended to bring through Eilat, but without an increase of the import caps, there is likely to be little space for the deal to go ahead.

Zandberg said her ministry was committed to 'stop the ex-

pansion of the EAPC's activities'.

The oil agreement was one of several negotiated between Israeli and Emirati firms after ties were normalised under the Abraham Accords brokered by former US president Donald Trump.

Israel has estimated that trade between the countries could soon surpass US\$1bn.

The UAE last year became the third Arab nation to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel after Egypt and Jordan, and was swiftly followed by Bahrain and Morocco.

Sudan also agreed to normalise ties with Israel under the Abraham Accords, but full relations have not yet materialised.

AFP

Russia denies withholding gas supplies to Europe

Moscow, Russia – Russian energy giant Gazprom has rejected accusations that Moscow is limiting gas deliveries to Europe and denounced Germany's resale of gas to Poland amid soaring prices.

Poland last week accused Moscow of having stopped its deliveries via the Yamal-Europe pipeline that sends Russian gas to Western Europe, accusing Gazprom of 'manipulation'.

The pipeline was operating in reverse mode this week, sending gas from Germany to Poland, public data showed, as European gas prices ticked up.

President Vladimir Putin on Friday denied that the flow direction was a political move and said that Poland had 'sidelined' Russia in managing the pipeline.

"All accusations against Russia and Gazprom that we are not supplying enough gas to the European market are absolutely groundless and unacceptable and untrue," Gazprom spokesman Sergei Kupriyanov said late Saturday, calling the accusations 'lies'.



He said some buyers of Russian gas, in particular Germany and France, have not made additional orders, and slammed the reverse flow of gas that came as 'winter is just beginning' as 'not the most rational decision'.

"I don't even want to talk about the price of such reverse supplies. These prices are significantly higher than the prices for contract volumes set by Gazprom," he said in an interview on state television.

"All problems in Western Europe have been created by themselves and there is no need to blame Gazprom for this. It is better to look in the mirror."

Western countries have for weeks accused Russia of limiting gas deliveries to put pressure on Europe amid tensions over the Ukraine conflict and to push through the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline set to ship Russian gas to Germany.

Germany's Energy Ministry, for its part, on Sunday poured cold water on accusations of Russia withholding deliveries.

'Long-term supply contracts, including the Russian ones, are being adhered to and the long-term quantities of gas are arriving in Germany,' the ministry told AFP.

AFP

IMF extends emergency funding by 18 months

Washington, US – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said it will extend its flexible access to emergency funding for an additional 18 months to help nations severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The IMF's executive board agreed on Monday to 'temporary increases to the cumulative access limits under its emergency financing instruments' through June 2023, the Wash-

ington-based crisis lender said in a statement.

In April 2020, as the world faced the first wave of coronavirus infections and deaths, the IMF eased access to such aid, including raising the level of funding that countries could obtain. The programs have already been extended twice, in September 2020 and again last March. The board also agreed that 'all other access limits'

which had been temporarily increased will be reduced to their pre-pandemic levels beginning January 1, 2022 as scheduled.

'This decision reflects the expected and ongoing gradual shift to upper-credit-tranche quality arrangements from emergency financing triggered by urgent, pandemic-related balance of payment needs,' the IMF said.

AFP

TENDERS ADVERTISEMENT

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

Sr.No	Tender No.	Tender Name	Last Date for Obtaining Tender Documents	Closing Date	Grade	Tender Document's Fees (Including VAT) (RO)
1	69/2021	Providing maintenance services for OETC Virtual environment & SAN storage	10/01/2022	08/02/2022	Local companies with experience in same field, Have a valid tender board registration certificate.	105.000
2	70/2021	Supply and Installation of 02 Nos Chillers at LDC Building.	10/01/2022	08/02/2022	Local companies with experience in same field, Have a valid tender board registration certificate.	157.500

Participation:	Interested Companies may obtain Tender Document with the necessity of sending a valid Tender Board certificate in the same required field.
Buying the Tender:	The documents required for the purchase of the tender are sent by e-mail to the Tenders, Procurement and Contracts Department, to ensure the authenticity of the documents before purchasing the tender through the official working days of the hour from 8.00 am - 01.00 pm .
Fees:	Against non-refundable payment as mentioned above against each set of document.(Payment Through Bank Transfer)
The deadline for clarification:	Before (21) Days from closing date.
Submission:	Each bid should be submitted in a separate sealed envelope addressed to The Chairman of tender committee mentioning Tender Number and Name on the top of the envelope.
Terms and conditions:	- No other writing or any reference thereto should be mentioned on the envelope. - The bid should be valid for not less than (90) days from closing date. - The Tenderer should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of 1% of the bid value and should be valid for (90) days from closing date, addressed to Oman Electricity Transmission Company (SAOC). - Any bid not comply with the required guarantee, will not be accepted. - OETC is not bound to accept the lowest or any other offers.
Offer:	The complete bid documents should be deposited in Tender Box No. (1) at the company's building before 11:00 am on the assigned date for submission of the Tenders.
Company Address:	Muscat - Al Mawaleh Road No: 2153 - Building No. 4230 Block No: 321 – GSM:., 93201558 - 92217856
Email	tenders@omangrid.com
Website:	www.omangrid.com



Oman Electricity Transmission Company s.a.o.c.
P.O. Box 1389, Al Khoudh, PC 132, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: +968 2428 3000 | Fax: +968 2230 9046
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رؤية عمان
2040

إعلان طرح مناقصات

تعلن الشركة العُمانية لنقل الكهرباء عن طرح المناقصات التالية :

م	رقم المناقصة	عنوان المناقصة	آخر موعد للحصول على مستندات المناقصة	آخر موعد لتقديم العطاءات	الدرجة	نوع الوثيقة
١	٢٠٢١/٦٩	توفير خدمة الصيانة للبيئة الافتراضية وشبكة تخزين البيانات في الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء	٢٠٢٢/٠١/١٠	٢٠٢٢/٠٢/٠٨	الشركات المحلية العاملة في هذا المجال المسجلة لدى مجلس المناقصات وتسجيلها ساري المفعول.	١٠٥.٠٠٠
٢	٢٠٢١/٧٠	توريد وتركيب عدد إثنان من مبردات الهواء في مركز توزيع الاحمال	٢٠٢٢/٠١/١٠	٢٠٢٢/٠٢/٠٨	الشركات المحلية العاملة في هذا المجال المسجلة لدى مجلس المناقصات وتسجيلها ساري المفعول.	١٥٧.٥٠٠

الاشتراك	يمكن للشركات والمؤسسات المتخصصة الحصول على مستندات المناقصة مع ضرورة ارسال شهادة مجلس المناقصات سارية المفعول وفي نفس المجال المطلوب .
طريقة الشراء	يتم إرسال المستندات المطلوبة لشراء المناقصة عن طريق البريد الإلكتروني الى دائرة المناقصات والمشتريات والعقود . وذلك للتأكد من صحة المستندات قبل شراء المناقصة وذلك من خلال أيام العمل الرسمية من الساعة ٨:٠٠ ص - ١:٠٠
الرسم	مقابل دفع المبلغ المحدد أعلاه للنسخة الواحدة - لا ترد (الدفع عن طريق التحويل البنكي)
آخر موعد للإستفسارات	قبل (٢١) يوم من تاريخ آخر موعد لتقديم العطاءات
تقديم العروض	تقدم العروض في مظاريف مغلقة ومعنونة بإسم رئيس لجنة المناقصات مع تحديد رقم وعنوان المناقصة فقط.
الشروط و الضمانات	- عدم تحديد اسم صاحب العطاء أو ما يشير إليه على المظروف. - أن تكون العروض سارية المفعول لمدة لا تقل عن (٩٠) يوماً من تاريخ تقديم العطاء . - إرفاق تأميناً في صورة ضمان مصرفي من أحد البنوك العاملة في البلاد قدره (٪١) من قيمة العطاء ساري لمدة (٩٠) يوماً من تاريخ تقديم العطاء . ومعنونا بإسم الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء . - كل عطاء لا يستوفي التأمين المطلوب لن ينظر فيه . - الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء غير مقيدة بقبول أقل العروض أو أي عطاء آخر.
العروض المقدم	يجب وضع العروض في صندوق المناقصات رقم (١) بمبنى الشركة قبل الساعة ١١ صباحاً من التاريخ المحدد لتقديم العطاءات .
عنوان الشركة	عنوان الشركة: محافظة مسقط - الموالج رقم السكّة ٢١٥٣ - مبني رقم ٤٢٣٠ - هاتف ٩٢٢١٧٨٥٦-٩٣٢٠١٥٥٨
البريد الإلكتروني	tenders@omangrid.com
الموقع الإلكتروني	www.omangrid.com



رؤية عمان
2040

الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء ش. م. ع. م
ص. ب : ١٣٨٩. الفوس الرمز البريدي : ١٣٢. سلطنة عمان
الهاتف : ٩١٨٢٤٣٨٠٠٠ / الفاكس : ٩١٨٢٢٣٠٩٠٤٦
الموقع الإلكتروني : www.omangrid.com



الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء ش. م. ع. م
ص. ب : ١٣٨٩. الفوس الرمز البريدي : ١٣٢. سلطنة عمان
الهاتف : ٩١٨٢٤٣٨٠٠٠ / الفاكس : ٩١٨٢٢٣٠٩٠٤٦
الموقع الإلكتروني : www.omangrid.com

Omantel wins two coveted awards

Omantel, Sultanate’s pioneering integrated telecommunications services provider, bagged top honours at the recently held Alam Al-Iktissad Wal-Amal (AIWA) awards. While Omantel was named the ‘Nation Builder of the Year’, Talal bin Said al Mamari, CEO of Omantel, was honoured with the ‘CEO of the Year in the telecom sector’.

The AIWA awards, organised by *Alam Al-Iktissad Wal-Amal* magazine, felicitates top-performing companies in Oman. The coveted award honours companies that have attained extraordinary achievements and innovations.

The commendation reaffirmed Omantel’s prowess as a leader in network, ICT, operations, new implementations, innovative products and services. The only telecom company to be honoured at the awards, Omantel was recognised for its leadership in building the nation, supporting the society, encouraging the youth and sustaining its business partnerships.

Mamari was honoured for leading Omantel, a world-class telecom company, through a major evolution towards greater sustainability. He was recognised for maneuvering the company by embracing change and



enhancing its focus on innovation, technology, and digitalisation. Under his leadership, Omantel has achieved operational distinction while setting global standards in finding sustainable social solutions benefiting businesses, people, and communities.

He has led and supported

many of the company’s major projects and initiatives such as its initial public offering to divest government’s stake.

He also played an important role in Omantel’s second IPO and in the company’s acquisition of 21.9 per cent stake in Kuwait-based Zain Group.

Mamari said, “We are de-

lighted to receive this prestigious award which recognises the hard work of our team during a period that changed the work and life landscape.”

“Committed to globally benchmarked quality, Omantel believes in constantly innovating to offer the very best for our customers. I am also personally ho-

noured to be named the ‘CEO of the Year’ for which I owe to the team at Omantel,” he said.

“We believe in contributing to the nation’s growth and are committed to taking on bigger challenges in the future. We will strive to continue to offer customers a best-in-class experience to meet and

exceed their needs,” Mamari added.

Omantel has been sustaining the title of a ‘nation builder’ through its various initiatives. The company allocates RO500,000 every year to launch and support CSR projects. It builds the capacities of Omani youth by empowering them in various fields through training programmes.

In addition to providing business opportunities, supporting SMEs through customised solutions and packages is a priority for the company.

The company launched Omantel Innovation Labs and co-founded the OMHUB platform to support entrepreneurship and innovation.

The firm has been investing in the latest telecommunications technologies to achieve the objectives of the National Digital Economy Program in accordance with Oman Vision 2040.

Omantel is the sultanate’s first and leading integrated telecommunications services provider, enabling the digital society to flourish, allowing new ways of doing business and delivering a world of information, news and entertainment.

Ooredoo’s B2B app offers innovative solutions

Helping businesses thrive in a digital world, Ooredoo’s B2B app offers a wide range of functions to keep them connected and in control. With constant upgrades and enhancements, the award-winning digital self-service channel is designed to make business people’s lives easier, providing them with a central online point for real time monitoring, management and administrative tasks, handled quickly and efficiently, at the touch of a button.

Free to all Ooredoo business customers with 24/7 access, the app provides two secured log-in access levels. Employees are able to view their own accounts, pay personal bills, top-up credit and add roaming services. Meanwhile, administrators have access to a vast range of options, including management of bundles and add-ons, the ability to bar/unbar telecom lines and more. With extra speeds, increased data, and a whole host of other benefits, Ooredoo’s range of B2B services are helping businesses ‘Be Digital’, while making their lives easier, no matter the circumstances.

OCS Infotech organises security ecosystem workshop with Infoblox

Oman Computer Services Company - OCS Infotech recently organised a workshop on ‘Simplifying and maximising your security ecosystem’, with Infoblox. This workshop saw the attendance of several members from the public and the private sectors.

Commenting on the importance of conducting the workshop, Anu Cherian Philip, general manager of OCS Infotech, said, “The main aim of this workshop is to learn how integrations and using the right tools can help to empower the security teams of companies. Moreover, by giving a better understanding of the security ecosystem and the benefit of a complementary solution, businesses can detect, contain and remediate threats even quicker through a high-level response integration system.”

The workshop also saw the discussion of automatically sharing indicators of compromise across multi vendor security sys-



tems. This will enhance visibility throughout respective extended networks regardless of infrastructure complexity.

Ali Sleiman, regional presale technical director, Infoblox – Middle East and Africa, said, “As we know the world around us is changing as organisations digitally transform through cloud initiatives. This change requires a modern networking and security architecture. Infoblox addresses DNS security by providing enforcement at the DNS control plane, on which over 90 per cent

of malware activity takes place.”

“Our BloxOne Threat Defence solution is a simple and quick way for customers to detect potential threats. OCS is a partner that we are closely working with in Oman. This collaboration will help us better serve regional customers. Together, we can work towards educating our customer base in Oman, sharing knowledge, and generating awareness of how Infoblox and OCS can benefit them,” he added.

Infoblox provides the world’s leading cloud-first solutions for

simplifying and scaling DNS, DHCP and IPAM (DDI) and security.

OCS Infotech is one of the first Omani establishments in the technical field and one of the Zubair Group companies. It hosts over four decades of experience in developing technology solutions for data storage, virtualisation, network solutions, cybersecurity, data centre and infrastructure management, disaster recovery, business continuity and other related services.

Saudi Pavilion at Expo sheds light on Arabic calligraphy

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai is shedding light on the art of Arabic calligraphy after UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (Unesco) recent decision to add it to its ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity’ list.

The Saudi-led campaign saw the kingdom join forces with 15 other Muslim-majority countries in presenting the nomination to Unesco. The ancient practice of handwriting played a key role in the spread of Islam, and is a cornerstone of pan-Arab identity. While the art form is not necessarily fully understood by the rest of the world, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Pavilion set out to change this through a series of programmes designed to spark visitors’ interest.

There were a number of standout performances from Saudi creatives. Contemporary artist Hind al Ghamdi took Expo visitors on an exciting journey exploring the beauty of Arabic



calligraphy through workshops held in the Open Square. This included a basic introduction to understanding the Arabic alphabet, distinctive shapes, and calligraphy tools. Activities also allowed visitors to learn how to write their own names using Arabic calligraphy.

The Open Square also hosted a unique show with celebrated Jeddah-based artist Shaker Kashgari, known for his unusual use of photography to showcase calligraphy through light, whose performance took audiences on

an uplifting journey.

Another highlight was from Mohammed Alrabea, a calligraphy artist based in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Region who created a unique virtual exhibit showcasing the history of Arabic calligraphy using VR technology.

Hussain Hanbazazah, the commissioner general of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Pavilion, said, “It has been extremely rewarding to share the rich tradition of Arabic calligraphy with visitors to the KSA Pavilion.”

Mercedes-Benz trucks celebrate 125 year anniversary

One hundred and twenty-five years have passed since Mercedes-Benz unveiled the world’s first motorised truck and yet the company’s commitment to market-defining quality and reliability remains as strong today as it ever was.

In what was quickly recognised as a standout moment for the automotive industry, engineer Gottlieb Daimler, one of the two founders of Daimler-Benz AG (the other being Carl Benz), unveiled his invention in 1896. The three-pointed-star is testament of the brand Mercedes-Benz that is the most famous brand of the former Daimler-Benz AG.

A triumph of engineering, the truck known as the Phoenix had a four horse power strong, two-cylinder engine which linked to the rear axle by a belt. Protected by helical springs, this engine was somewhat sensitive to vibrations (not least because the vehicle ran on hard iron wheels). The driver meanwhile was posi-



tioned up front on a bench seat and used a large wheel mounted on a vertical column to steer.

The truck, that would go on to define the global trucking industry was sold weeks later to the British Motor Syndicate, a Lon-

don-based automobile company, and the rest is history.

To add to what is already a landmark year, it is a quarter of a century since the company honoured the centenary of the Phoenix by launching the pio-

neering Mercedes-Benz Actros (the first truck of its kind with components entirely controlled by a CAN-BUS system and electronic brake system).

The vehicle, which was specifically intended for long-distance

and haulage, is now in its fifth generation and continues to be considered the premium, first choice truck for long-haul, heavy-duty distribution.

Significantly, each new Actros model has brought with it

groundbreaking developments in safety, connectivity, driver comfort, optimisation of fuel consumption and profitability. Not only that, the Actros has become well known for debuting engineering world firsts, such as its automatic braking system Active Brake Assist, Sideguard Assist, Predictive Powertrain Control, the revelatory Stop-and-Go system (responsible for regulating the distance between vehicles, even in traffic jams) and the much-celebrated Mirror-Cam, which replaces traditional exterior mirrors. To add to this, 75-years have now passed since the invention of the first Unimog, a vehicle that truly encapsulates the art of Mercedes-Benz engineering. Renowned for its reliability and versatility (thanks in no small part to its vast range of applications), the Unimog is a true all-rounder and remains the vehicle of choice for all manner of terrains and daily operational demands, from agriculture to fire-

fighting, off roading to city-specific work.

Although there is much to celebrate in these historic moments, both globally and in the MENA region Mercedes-Benz remain entirely focused on the future and are determined to lead the automotive industry in delivering unwavering quality, safety and reliability for the next 125 years and beyond.

As Olaf Peterson, general manager Daimler Commercial Vehicles MENA FZE commented, “While we are extremely proud of our history, as ever, we are looking to the future. Our pioneering spirit is part of our DNA and we are very aware of the diverse and changing requirements in this region. We will continue to remain fully connected with our customers and are steadfast in our commitment to providing them with the best solutions, support, vehicles and service possible, across the board and around the clock.”

Bank Muscat wins over 30 awards for offering world-class banking services

In recognition of its outstanding achievements and commitment to offering world-class banking services to its customers, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the sultanate, continued to win multiple awards across its different lines of business and operations. In 2021, the bank won over 30 international, regional and local awards and honours as it demonstrated excellent performance across all aspects of its operations. The bank started the year on a very positive note winning five prestigious awards from *EMEA Finance* including the Best Bank in Oman, Best Private Bank in Oman, Best Local Investment Bank in Oman and the Middle East Sustainability Award. A prolific innovator in the financial sector in the region, Bank Muscat was recognised as one of the 'Top 100 Companies in the Middle East' and as one of the 'Top 50 banks in the Region' by *Forbes Middle East* later during the year.

Energised by the steady number of accolades, the bank continues to work steadily to further improve its excellent portfolio of services and provide greater financial inclusion across the sultanate. In keeping with technological developments, the bank's



digital channels including Mobile and Internet banking have been witnessing tremendous growth over the recent past. With about 2mn customers, Bank Muscat is a clear leader in the banking sector in Oman and has the largest portfolio in the country across the retail, corporate, wholesale and Islamic banking space. Hence, it was not surprising that Bank Muscat won two prestigious awards for digital banking from *Global Finance* – for Best

Consumer Digital Bank (Oman) and Best Corporate / Institutional Digital Bank (Oman) – at the Middle East Digital Bank and Innovators Awards 2021 held in Dubai. The winners for these digital banking awards were selected based on a number of criteria, including their strategy for attracting and servicing digital customers, success in getting clients to use digital offerings, growth of digital customers, breadth of product offerings, ev-

idence of tangible benefits gained from digital initiatives, and Web/mobile site design and functionality. As the leading financial services provider in the sultanate, Bank Muscat has the largest banking network in Oman with 174 branches and over 800 ATMs, CDMs and other devices. The number of customers using digital banking services have increased manifold in recent years to over 1.2mn today.

A strong supporter of public-

private partnership, the bank has been steadily and strongly partnering government institutions and civil society organisations to implement national goals of digital transformation and supporting the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises. In recognition of its pioneering role in the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR), Bank Muscat was honoured by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry at a grand event held re-

cently under the patronage of H H Sayyid Kamil bin Fahd al Said, Assistant Secretary General of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for the Cabinet Affairs.

The bank also won the Bank of the Year (Oman) award from *The Banker* as well as the Best Bank in Oman awards from a number of prestigious international, regional and local publications including *Global Finance*, *Euromoney*, *Asiamoney*, and *Oman Economic Review*. It is important to note that the bank is a repeat winner in the Best Bank in Oman category across these prestigious international publications based on its growth in assets, profitability, geographic reach, strategic relationships, new business development and innovation in products.

Meanwhile, Bank Muscat Private, targeted at ultra-high net-worth individuals (UHNIs), won three Best Private Bank in Oman awards during the year, from *PWM/The Banker*, *Global Finance* and *EMEA Finance*. The bank also won the Best Trade Finance Bank in Oman awards from *Global Trade Review* and *Global Finance*, while strong performance by its asset management division helped garner awards from *Global Investor Group* and *EMEA Finance* during the year.

Recognising its vast range of world class offerings, the bank also won awards for the Best Bank for SMEs in Oman from *Asiamoney* as well as 3 Investment Banking awards from *Asian Banking and Finance*. Bank Muscat also won the Best Retail Bank in Oman from *Retail Banker International*. JP Morgan recognised the bank's operational excellence in processing dollar payments and outstanding error-free rate for remittance transactions with two Quality Recognition awards during the year, validating the bank's commitment to the highest standards for fund transfers. The bank was also honoured as the Best Foreign Exchange Provider in Oman by *Global Finance*.

Going forward, Bank Muscat is focused on strategic initiatives to confront challenges and further increase its market share even as it continues to demonstrate its systemically-important place in Oman with all round support to different sectors. The bank posted a net profit of RO140.16mn for the nine months ended September 30, 2021 compared to RO113.21mn reported during the same period in 2020, an increase of 23.8 per cent.



OPPO unveils new brand proposition 'Inspiration Ahead'

Global technology brand, OPPO, successfully held its annual technology event, OPPO INNO DAY 2021, from December 14-15.

Themed 'Reimagining the Future', the event included a news-filled keynote speech by OPPO founder and CEO Tony Chen, announcing OPPO's new brand proposition 'Inspiration Ahead.'

During the two-day event, OPPO introduced its first Cutting-edge Imaging NPU, MariSilicon X, the revolutionary OPPO Air Glass, and OPPO's first flagship foldable, OPPO Find N.

During his opening keynote speech, Chen reaffirmed OPPO's commitment to developing innovations that revolve around user experience while announcing the company's new brand proposition, 'Inspiration Ahead', which takes optimism and inspiration against the challenges and uncertainties everyone is facing.

"We are living in an unprecedented age, and as a global technology company, we at OPPO feel it is both our duty and our privilege to try and make the world a better place through our technologies, products, and action," said Chen. "Although the journey towards each technological breakthrough is full of challenges, we aim to continue as we have started, step by step, to reach 'Inspiration Ahead' as we have set out in our new brand proposition."

During the event, OPPO unveiled its first Cutting-edge Imaging NPU – MariSilicon X, built on 6nm process technology which is of its first kind in the

world, MariSilicon X features an advanced NPU, ISP, and Multi-tier Memory Architecture that delivers incredible image processing power with ultra-high-power efficiency.

As a dedicated Imaging NPU, MariSilicon X marks a new era in computational photography. MariSilicon X's NPU delivers an unstoppable 18tn operations per second (TOPS) and only 11.6 TOPS per watt power efficiency. It not only achieves a milestone in the energy consumption level of the smartphone NPU, but also claims the top-level computing power in the industry at this stage. With its exponential leap in both performance and power efficiency, it unleashes the power of AI algorithms in making individual video frame looks as rich and defined as a still photo. With MariSilicon X, 4K AI Night Video to be captured in the RAW domain using complete image data is possible for the first time on Android smartphones.

The Cutting-edge Imaging NPU will make its debut on the next Find X Series in the first quarter of 2022 globally, making it one of the most advanced commercialised imaging NPU on a smartphone yet.

OPPO INNO DAY 2021 also saw the official announcement of OPPO Air Glass. The groundbreaking aR (assisted Reality) device features a revolutionary lightweight design, OPPO self-developed compact projection system, and supports various intuitive interactions and practical functions.

AMF releases 24th edition of booklet on using AI in banking

Within its Strategy (2020-2025), the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF) seeks to strengthen the cooperation and communication with all concerned official parties in the Arab countries aiming to achieve the objectives for which it was established and boost the economic knowledge.

Amidst the challenges facing the new generation in a rapidly changing environment that shapes the future of nations and societies, the AMF saw the

importance of publishing a series of introductory booklets to boost the economic and financial awareness among the young generation and empower them to understand the fundamentals of various related topics.

The new series targets the young generation in Arab countries to help them understand the fundamentals and various related aspects such as financial inclusion, basics of funding, fi-

nancial technologies, artificial intelligence, digital currencies, and much more. Through these issues, The AMF hopes to strengthen the role of Arab youth in dealing with diverse topics and to have the knowledge that enables them to contribute effectively to accomplish the future vision for Arab countries.

The release of the twenty-fourth edition of this introductory booklet titled 'Using

Artificial Intelligence in the banking Services' aligns with the AMF's recognition of the importance of expanding educational awareness of the implications of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in banking services, it sheds the light on the impact of using AI and machine learning on developing and increasing levels of efficiency and spreading of financial services, in addition to its importance in lowering the operational cost

and detecting and preventing fraudulent financial activities, it also addresses the opportunities and challenges facing the use of such technologies.

These activities are part of the efforts aiming to achieve the AMF 2040 vision to be the closest partner of the Arab countries in their interaction with recent developments to enhance the economic, financial, monetary stability of the Arab states.

Newly launched Nissan Patrol NISMO satisfies Oman's love for high-performance vehicles



The recently launched Nissan Patrol NISMO has received an overwhelming response from auto enthusiasts in Oman. The new race-inspired version of the legendary Patrol combines striking exteriors with the refinement of a luxury car and the exhilarating performance of a sports car. With the launch of this incredible SUV began a year-long celebration to mark the 70th anniversary of the dawn of the Nissan Patrol in 1951.

A spokesperson for Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) said, "With the 2021 Patrol NISMO, our customers can experience the thrill of handling a car with a racing spirit and turn heads as they glide through the streets. Patrol NISMO, the race-inspired version of the Patrol launched exclusively in Oman earlier this year, has been well received by the consumers. Many exquisitely crafted units of the high-performance SUV have already been sold and the demand continues to grow."

This response underlines the strong demand for the NISMO brand in Oman since its launch in the region in 2016. As Nissan's performance brand, NISMO is responsible for motorsports activities and specialty performance cars – and is committed to delivering thrilling driving experi-

ences. With high-quality craftsmanship, the 2021 Nissan Patrol NISMO joins the 370Z NISMO and the GT-R NISMO to offer motorsports-inspired aerodynamics and styling, superior handling characteristics and unmatched agility.

The latest manifestation of the bold and sporty Nissan Patrol NISMO underlines Nissan's heritage as a motorsport brand, and the region's long-standing love for high-performance vehicles. It has been tailored to meet the needs and expectations of customers looking to stand out from the crowd – those who seek the premium luxury of the iconic Nis-

san Patrol, and simultaneously crave the exhilaration that comes from increased power performance and superb handling.

Abdullah al Adawi who recently bought Patrol NISMO appreciates it for its luxurious experience, and premium design said, "Nissan Patrol NISMO gives me a sense of confidence and pride of owning it. It features a sophisticated aerodynamic form and the size and presence of a premium-class SUV – which when combined with its overwhelming power makes it stand out and establishes its higher grade as a symbol of true performance."

A happy owner Yahya al Sulaiman said, "Nissan Patrol NISMO makes an ultimate mark for performance, luxury and respect, and adds to the strong Patrol proposition. It is a class apart and I am proud to be owner of this eye-catching SUV."

Designing NISMO road cars was both a challenge and a beautiful opportunity for the Nissan team to express Nissan's passion for design on a superlative level.

Hamad al Saadi believes the Nissan Patrol NISMO has been designed with the customer in mind. He says, "It provides the most exciting and authentic experience to fuel the adrenaline

and inspire the imagination of the excitement-seekers."

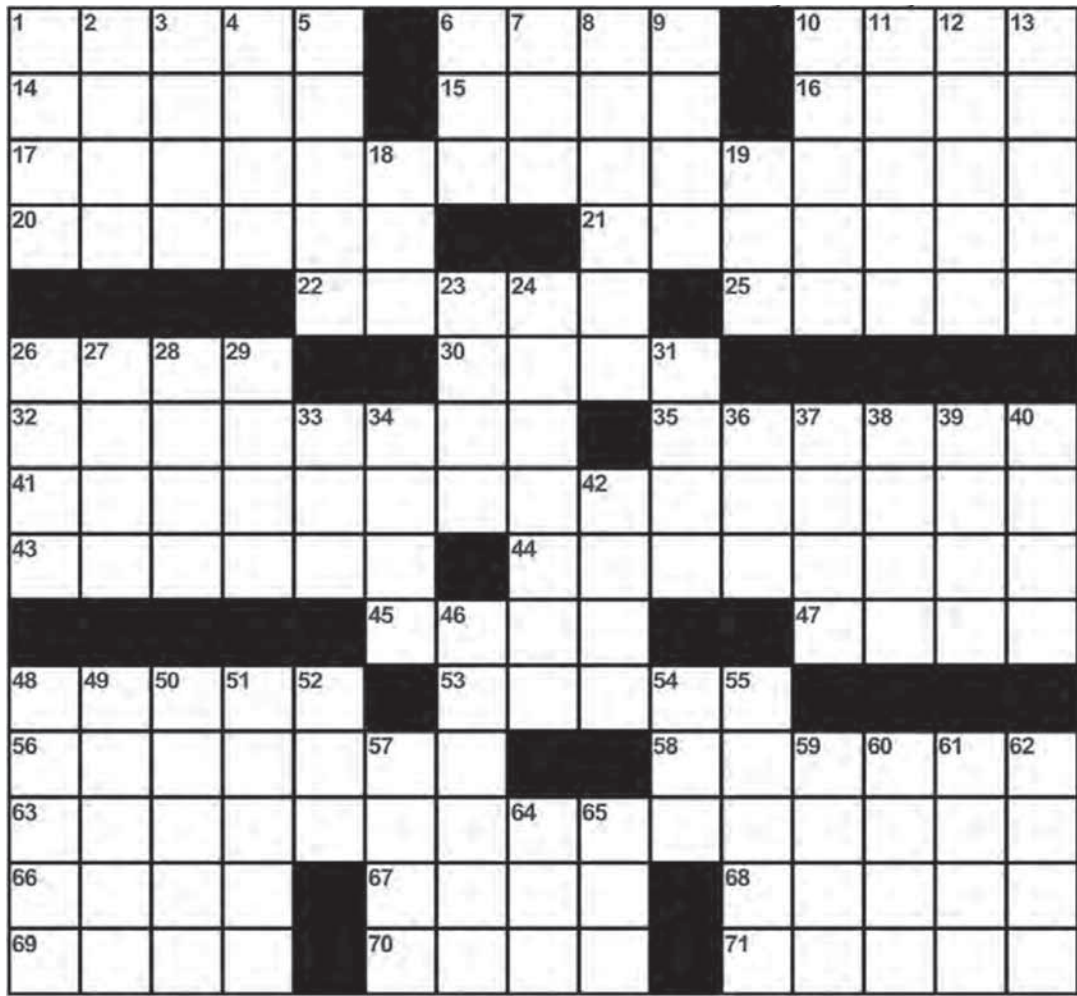
Samir al Wahaibi lauds the model for its durability, reliability, safety, comfort features and unmatched all-terrain performance.

He says, "Patrol NISMO's design is driven by function – to provide drivers with motorsports inspired aerodynamics and styling, enhanced handling capabilities and unmatched agility."

While its exterior has been refined to allow for optimised aerodynamics and suspension, as well as achieving zero lift force, it also features enhanced handling capabilities and race-inspired ergonomic upgrades, along with the latest Nissan Intelligent Mobility (NIM) features.

The 2021 Nissan Patrol NISMO reinforces the build of the Patrol V8 LE Platinum City model, and is aligned with Nissan's new design philosophy of being bold, energising, human and alive. The dynamic design plays a pivotal role in highlighting the character of the Patrol NISMO – exuding aggression and sportiness with an imposing presence. It features a new front fascia, with a honeycomb three-dimensional mesh that emphasises the SUV's front V-Motion grille, along with new front lamps and horizontal chrome lines embellished with the NISMO emblem.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

 - 1) Grads for life
 - 6) Choir recess
 - 10) Wee dogs
 - 14) Main competitor
 - 15) Like a lemon
 - 16) "There's _ day dawningll
 - 17) Wasn't born yesterday
 - 20) Over fast?
 - 21) More eccentric
 - 22) Cranberry product
 - 25) Became white with fright
 - 26) Feels poorly
 - 30) Like a runt
 - 32) One of two writers
 - 35) Ideal place to live
 - 41) What some planes make
 - 43) Is disrespectful verbally
 - 44) Court handout
 - 45) Hearty soup
 - 47) Seven big wet things
 - 48) Genie holders
 - 53) Many-headed mythical monster
- 56) USA part
 - 58) Overrun
 - 63) Comment
 - 66) Functions
 - 67) "Buona _" (Italian welcome)
 - 68) Car window sticker
 - 69) Salon option
 - 70) Touchy and sensitive
 - 71) Alcohol type

DOWN

 - 1) Vessels of biblical proportions?
 - 2) Dryer accumulation
 - 3) Colored eyeball part
 - 4) Bryn_ College
 - 5) Serbs or Croats, e.g.
 - 6) Fire residue
 - 7) Luau dip
 - 8) Like some living rooms
 - 9) "Cogito_ sum"
 - 10) Coat for severe cold
 - 11) "Wait_ Dark"
 - 12) Fly-catching bird
 - 13) Fencing weapon
 - 18) Caddy contents, sometimes
 - 19) Alley_ (NBA pass-shot combo)
- 23) "Once_ a time"
 - 24) Respectful bow
 - 26) Is directed?
 - 27) A Com Belt state
 - 28) Golden Triangle coun-try
 - 29) Has the evening meal
 - 31) China's dollar
 - 33) First thing into the pool, often
 - 34) Snake sound
 - 36) Dynamite stuff
 - 37) Poems of praise
 - 38) Maine tree
 - 39) Andean civilisation
 - 40) Improves, as wine
 - 42) Lecherlike
 - 46) No longer frozen
 - 48) Enjoy immensely
 - 49) Entertain, in a way
 - 50) Parking regulator
 - 51) Light reflector
 - 52) Greed, envy or pride
 - 54) Get _ of (throw away)
 - 55) Battery pole
 - 57) Something to solve
 - 59) Thing on a guitar neck
 - 60) Make impressions?
 - 61) Dance romantically
 - 62) Turnpike tariff
 - 64) Assn. relative
 - 65) Sci-fi gun type
- NOTE PAD**
-

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

The stars are turning up the volume on all emotions, and in your case they're also turning you into a magnet for the attention of admirers, new and old. If you've been trying to get together with someone, it's a given that you'll be able to make that connection now. All you really have to do is show up, smile, and see what happens. Sounds nice, huh?

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

This is one luscious day that you won't forget in a hurry. The bright light of the stars is putting you in a magical spotlight. As a result, you could feel the urge to change something about yourself, either physically or intellectually. Whether it's a workout program, or the urge to enrol in a class, you'll enter into it with your usual unparalleled zest. You will definitely shine at everything you do.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

You're going to be experiencing everything to the nth degree today, and thanks to the stars you'll have plenty of company. Once you express those feelings, you might also feel the need to reward yourself, and why not? If you haven't earned it, no one has. You have done everything right. You've proven yourself to be discreet, diligent, and loyal. Now let your feelings out and get yourself a treat!

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Your family needs you now, and you're going to go all out to help. Even if they don't mention the problem, you'll know about it instinctively. The stars can help illuminate the situation and expose whatever has been going on that they may have been too proud or embarrassed to mention to you. Once the issue is out, you can sit them down, find out what they need, and put together a plan. And who better to plan than sensible, grounded you?

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Just when you thought it was safe to come out, or to at least let your feelings out without fear, someone seems to be plotting against you. If you're genuinely worried about that, consult a good, grounded friend, someone who can give you an unbiased, honest opinion. Make sure he/she can spend time listening to your story in full. What you don't need is someone who will tell you what they think you want to hear.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You've got something to say, and you won't be able to hold it back another second. This has been a long time coming, but with the intense emotional astral energy today, keeping quiet any longer isn't necessary and won't be possible. You're being asked to express yourself, and knowing you, you'll find a gracious, affable way to do it even if what emerges is a good-bye. You have to do this. Now do it.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

The stars are about to expose a tricky situation, possibly involving a sibling or neighbour, and you'll want to help. The good news is that you're very likely the only person who can help, and it isn't a moment too soon that you caught wind of all this. If it's a financial problem, do what you can without putting yourself or your bank account in jeopardy. The next step is to help them put together a budget or make plans to start saving.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You have center stage at the moment, there's no doubt about it. The stars have brought along a full dose of admiring attention for you, most of it from one particular group you have been associating with for some time now. This could be a mixed blessing. While you'll appreciate the good feelings coming your way, you might also be in the mood for some quality time alone. Take your bows graciously and then duck out early.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Relationships take center stage in your life right now. In fact, you could be either on the verge of falling in love or admitting that it's already happened. Either way, rest assured that it's prime time to accept it and discuss it. The stars give you license to fully express yourself, and today's the perfect time to let out all those emotions. You'll have the energy and desire to give just as much as you want to receive.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You may have been feeling very emotional for days, and that's actually going to peak right about now thanks to the stars. You might need to put an end to a particular situation that's gone past the point of being productive or emotionally healthy for all parties concerned. While that won't be easy, you know it has to be done. It really is for the best. Now you can't waste your precious time for emotional drama. Set yourself free.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

The stars are about to illuminate the tug-of-war you've been feeling lately about work vs. personal issues. It might be time to make a decision, but not to worry. You're ready, you're willing, and you have what it takes to get the job done. Don't worry about stepping on anyone's toes either. If you're offered a position because someone else dropped the ball, that's not your problem.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

If you've been spending quite a bit of time alone lately, your friends are beginning to worry. The good news is that it's all about to come to an end. The stars illuminate your newfound urge to get out there and mingle, maybe in some type of class or group. Take advantage of this potent energy. Share yourself with others. It's only fair. You have so much to give.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- 1. The national sport of Canada is**

 - a. tennis and cricket
 - b. lacrosse
 - c. judo
 - d. rugby and football
- 2. The Prize that is awarded every two years to people who have worded for "Freedom of speech", is**

 - a. Plame Prize
 - b. Unesco Prize for Tolerance
 - c. Unesco Peace Award
 - d. Monismanien Swedish
- 3. The origin of modern badminton is attributed to**

 - a. India
 - b. Britain
 - c. France
 - d. Spain

Answers: 1. b 2. d 3. b

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

E	Y	R	E
O	P	O	H
A	L	O	T
H	U	S	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

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Bodies of 16 Iraqi Kurds killed in Channel boat disaster repatriated to hometowns

Arbil, Iraq - The bodies of 16 people killed when their boat sank in the Channel while trying to reach England were repatriated early on Sunday to Iraqi Kurdistan where their families were waiting them, an AFP photographer saw.

The plane carrying them arrived around 2.00am at Arbil, capital of the autonomous region in northern Iraq. The remains were transferred to ambulances to transport them to their hometowns of Darbandikhan, Ranya, Soran and Qadrawa.

At least 27 people perished in the November 24 tragedy, the deadliest disaster since the Channel became a hub for clandestine migrant crossings from France to England.

At the terminal at Arbil airport, emotional families waited for the arrival of the remains of their loved ones, some hugging each other or showing photos of their late relatives.

Originally scheduled for Friday, the repatriation had been postponed twice.

The 27 victims were mostly men but also included seven women, a 16-year-old and a seven-year-old child.

Besides the 16 Iraqi Kurds, the



Relatives of the 16 Kurds, killed when their boat sank in the Channel while trying to reach England, attend their funeral in Raniya, east of Arbil, the capital of Iraq's northern autonomous Kurdish region late on Sunday (AFP)

26 identified included an Iranian Kurd, four Afghan men, three Ethiopians, a Somali and an Egyptian. Only two people were rescued after their inflatable boat capsized, an Iraqi Kurd and a Sudanese national, according to the French interior ministry.

According to the Iraqi survivor there had been a total of 33 people aboard. French investigators are still trying to establish a clearer picture of what happened during the disaster. They have been investigating reports the passengers had telephoned both

French and British emergency services, appealing for help when the vessel began sinking.

The disaster also caused major diplomatic tensions between London and Paris.

Within 48 hours of the accident, French President Em-

manuel Macron accused British Prime Minister Boris Johnson of being 'not serious' in his approach to stopping the crossings.

Paris was irked by Johnson's initial reaction, which was seen as deflecting blame onto France. AFP

28 migrants found dead on Libyan coast

Tripoli, Libya - The bodies of 28 migrants have washed up on Libya's western coast after their boat sunk, a security official said on Sunday, the latest tragedy on the world's deadliest migration route.

"Libyan Red Crescent teams recovered 28 bodies of dead migrants and found three survivors at two different sites on the beaches of Al-Alous," some 90km from Tripoli, the source said.

"The bodies' advanced state of decomposition indicates that the shipwreck happened several days ago," he said, adding the toll could rise in the coming hours.

Images published by Libyan media outlets showed corpses lined up along the shore then placed in body bags.

Libya, wracked by a decade of conflict and lawlessness, has become a key departure point for African and Asian

migrants making desperate attempts to reach Europe.

Migrants often endure horrific conditions in Libya before embarking northwards on overcrowded, often unseaworthy vessels that frequently sink or get into trouble.

The latest tragedy comes just days after 160 migrants died within a week in similar incidents, bringing the total number of lives lost this year to 1,500, according to the International Organization for Migration.

The IOM says more than 30,000 migrants have been intercepted in the same period and returned to Libya.

The European Union has cooperated closely with the Libyan Coast Guard to cut numbers of migrants arriving on European shores.

On their return, many face further horrific abuses in detention centres.

AFP



This handout photo provided by the Saudi Press Agency shows the site where a projectile, fired from Yemen, landed and killed two people in Jazan, a southern region of the kingdom bordering Yemen (AFP)

Yemen's rebel camp hit in counter action: Coalition

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - The Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen said on Sunday it struck a Huthi rebel camp in the capital Sanaa, as it intensified an aerial campaign against the Iran-backed insurgents.

The coalition, which backs Yemen's internationally recognised government against the Huthis in a civil war, said it destroyed weapons storehouses in the rebel-held capital, according to the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA).

"The operation in Sanaa was an immediate response to an attempt to transfer weapons from Al-Tashrifat camp in Sanaa," it said in a statement, adding it 'destroyed weapons warehouses'.

The coalition is scheduled to hold a news conference on Sunday at which it has said it will show evidence of involvement by Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah militia in the Yemeni conflict.

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

Yemen has been wracked by civil war since 2014 pitting the government against the Huthis who control much of the north.

Tens of thousands of people have been killed, in what the United Nations has described as

the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The coalition launched a 'large-scale' military operation against the Huthis on Saturday, the Saudi authorities said, after missiles fired by the rebels killed two people in the kingdom, the first such deaths in three years.

Those air raids left dead three civilians, including a child and a woman, Yemeni medics said.

The coalition maintains its operations are carried out in accordance with international humanitarian law, repeatedly urging the Huthis against using civilians as human shields.

It said it will present during Sunday's news conference 'evidence of involvement of Lebanon's Hezbollah in Yemen and use of (Sanaa) airport to target the kingdom', said SPA.

'Barbaric attack'

The Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed al Jaber, charged that the rebels were using Iranian weapons to target the kingdom, which likens the Huthis to a Hezbollah-like force in its backyard.

'Using an Iranian weapon launched from Yemen, the Huthi militia killed two civilians... another criminal act,' he tweeted on Saturday.

The Huthi attack was also condemned by the French and US embassies in Saudi Arabia, as

well as the kingdom's Gulf Arab allies.

'Huthi attacks are perpetuating the conflict, prolonging the suffering of the Yemeni people, and endangering the Saudi people alongside more than 70,000 US citizens residing in Saudi Arabia,' the US Embassy said in a statement on Saturday.

French Ambassador Ludovic Pouille took to Twitter to offer condolences to the families of the victims of what he called the 'barbaric Huthi attack'.

The coalition has intensified its air strikes on Sanaa, targeting earlier this week the airport, whose operations have largely ceased because of a Saudi-led blockade since August 2016, with exemptions for aid flights.

The insurgents often launch missiles and drones into Saudi Arabia aimed at its airports and oil infrastructure.

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

The UN's World Food Programme said it has been 'forced' to cut aid to Yemen due to lack of funds, and warned of a surge in hunger in the country.

More than 80 per cent of Yemen's population of about 30mn requires humanitarian assistance. AFP

Suspected extremists kill 41 in Burkina Faso

Abidjan, Ivory Coast - Burkina Faso began two days of mourning on Sunday after 41 people died in the latest attack by suspected extremists in the troubled and largely unprotected north.

A bloody six-year-long violent campaign has claimed around 2,000 lives and forced 1.4mn from their homes in the formerly peaceful West African nation and show no signs of easing.

A government statement said following Thursday's attack, 'the search mission in the area of an ambush by armed terrorist groups... has established a toll of 41 bodies'.

"The President decrees national mourning of 48 hours,"

from midnight on Sunday, it added.

The government said the dead included members of an official self-defence force known as the Volunteers for the Defence of the Motherland (VDP), set up to support the army.

Volunteers receive 14 days of training and are then sent out on patrols and surveillance missions, equipped with light arms.

Among the victims was Ladi Yoro, considered a leader of the VDP in Burkina Faso, the statement said.

'The identification of the victims is still underway,' said the government statement. Burkinabe President Roch

Marc Christian Kabore hailed Yoro as a 'brave VDP member who must serve as a model of our determined fight against the enemy'.

The Defence Ministry paid tribute to his 'heroism' and 'supreme sacrifice'.

According to local media, the ambush targeted a convoy of traders escorted by VDP near Ouahigouya, a town not far from the Mali border.

The attack was the deadliest since mid-November when 57 people, including 53 gendarmes, were killed.

Two weeks before they were attacked, the gendarmes had warned headquarters that they

were running short of supplies and were having to trap animals to eat.

The traders had been waiting in vain for several days for a relief force when they came under attack from hundreds of fighters who came on pickups and motorcycles, according to accounts of the battle.

The poorly equipped security forces have struggled against a ruthless and highly mobile foe.

Like its neighbours Mali and Niger, Burkina Faso has been caught up in a spiral of violence since 2015, attributed to armed groups affiliated to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State group. AFP

New chapter for Baghdad's book street

Baghdad, Iraq - The Iraqi capital Baghdad on Saturday celebrated the renovation of the historic heart of its book trade, in the latest sign of an artistic renaissance after decades of conflict and strife.

In a city where explosions once could mean only one thing - violence - colourful fireworks lit up the sky during festivities organised by Baghdad municipality to inaugurate the renovated Al-Mutanabbi Street.

Its new look comes alongside art exhibitions, gallery openings, book fairs and festivals reflecting a fledgling cultural renaissance, and recalling a golden age when Baghdad was considered one of the Arab world's cultural capitals.

Al-Mutanabbi Street was first inaugurated in 1932 by King Faisal I and named after the celebrated 10th century poet Abul Tayeb al Mutanabbi, who was born under the Abbasid dynasty in what would become modern-day Iraq.

A narrow street in the heart of old Baghdad, Al-Mutanabbi has long drawn students and young people, usually on Fridays.

But it is also frequented by intellectuals and older bibliophiles.

Normality still hangs by a thread in the Iraqi capital, where rocket and drone attacks sometimes target its highly fortified



Iraqis walk past the cordoned-off entrance to the landmark street of Al-Mutanabi, which is specialised in book sales and due to reopen soon following extensive renovation, in Baghdad on Friday (AFP)

Green Zone, and where a July suicide attack on a market killed more than 30 people.

There was high security for the costumed performers and musicians who performed along the car-free road of new cobblestones. The road is lined with shops, freshly-painted and sparkling, but most were closed.

Fairy lights garlanded the ornate brick facades and wrought iron balconies.

Private-sector banks financed the work, which began in August this year.

'Islet of beauty'

"Since the 1960s, I would come here every week to look at the books on the stalls and to meet friends," veteran journalist and writer Zoheir al Jazairi told AFP, delighting over the street's latest transformation.

"It's an islet of beauty in the heart of Baghdad. You notice the difference compared to the rest of the city," he said, lamenting the oft-neglected heritage of the capital.

Stretching for just under one kilometre, the street begins with

a statue of its namesake overlooking the Tigris River and ends with an arch adorned with the poet's quotes.

Visitors can find Arabic translations of American best-sellers side-by-side with textbooks.

There are titles in an array of languages, and every once in a while a hidden treasure can be found nestled between the selections. Years of sectarian violence followed the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Iraq's former dictator Saddam Hussein. AFP



Afghan women take part in a demonstration demanding right to education, jobs and political representation from the Taliban government, in Kabul's Shahr-e Naw area on December 16 (AFP)

Close male relative escort must for Afghan women for long ride

Kabul, Afghanistan - Afghanistan's Taliban authorities said on Sunday that women seeking to travel long distances should not be offered road transport unless they are accompanied by a close male relative.

The guidance issued by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice drew condemnation from rights activists and called on vehicle owners to refuse rides to women not wearing headscarves.

The move follows the Taliban barring many women in public-sector roles from returning to work in the wake of their August 15 seizure of power, and as girls

remain largely cut off from state secondary schooling.

It also comes despite the hardline groups seeking to project a moderate image internationally in a bid to restore aid suspended when the previous government imploded during the final stages of a United States military withdrawal.

"Women travelling for more than 72km should not be offered a ride if they are not accompanied by a close family member," ministry spokesman Sadeq Akif Muhajir told AFP on Sunday, specifying that the escort must be a close male relative.

The new guidance, circulated

on social media networks, also asked people to stop playing music in their vehicles.

Weeks ago, the ministry asked Afghanistan's television channels to stop showing dramas and soap operas featuring women actors.

It also called on women TV journalists to wear headscarves while presenting. Muhajir said on Sunday that the hijab would likewise be required for women seeking transport.

The Taliban's interpretation of the hijab - which can range from a hair covering to a face veil or full-body covering - is unclear, and most Afghan women al-

ready wear headscarves.

'Making women prisoners'

Human Rights Watch blasted the guidance.

"This new order essentially moves... further in the direction of making women prisoners," Heather Barr, the group's associate director of women's rights, told AFP.

It 'shuts off opportunities for them to be able to move about freely, to travel to another city, to do business, (or) to be able to flee if they are facing violence in the home', Barr added.

Early this month, the Taliban

issued a decree in the name of their supreme leader instructing the government to enforce women's rights.

But it did not mention girls' access to education.

Women's rights were severely curtailed during the Taliban's previous stint in power in the 1990s. They were forced to wear the face-covering burqa garment, only allowed to leave home with a male chaperone and banned from work and education.

Respect for women's rights has repeatedly been cited by key global donors as a condition for restoring aid.

AFP

Save the Children says 2 Myanmar staff missing



This photo released by the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force on Saturday shows burnt vehicles in Hpruso township in Kayah state (AFP)

Bangkok, Thailand - Save the Children said two of its Myanmar staff were missing on Saturday, after the charred remains of more than 30 people were found, in an attack a monitoring group and local media blamed on junta troops.

Myanmar has been in chaos since the February coup, with more than 1,300 people killed in a crackdown by security forces, according to a local monitoring group.

lence carried out against innocent civilians and our staff, who are dedicated humanitarians, supporting millions of children in need across Myanmar," chief executive Inger Ashing said.

In October the group said its office in the western town of Thantlang was destroyed in junta shelling that also razed dozens of homes following clashes with a local anti-junta group.

'A cruel present'

Myanmar's junta previously said its troops had been attacked in Hpruso on Friday after its troops attempted to stop seven cars driving in a 'suspicious way'.

Troops had killed a number of people in the following clash, spokesman Zaw Min Tun said, without giving details.

The Myanmar Witness monitor said it had confirmed local media reports and witness accounts from local fighters 'that 35 people including children and women were burnt and killed by the military on 24th December Hpruso township'.

Satellite data also showed a fire had occurred around 1.00pm (0630 GMT) on Friday in Hpruso, it added.

AFP was unable to confirm the reports surrounding the clash, but AFP digital verification reporters said the images purporting to show the incident had not appeared online before Friday evening.

PDF groups have surprised the army with their effectiveness, analysts have said, as the military struggles to break resistance to its rule.

Earlier this month the US said it was 'outraged by credible and sickening reports' that Myanmar troops had seized 11 villagers, including children, in the Sagaing region and burned them alive.

Win Myat Aye, a member of a group of ousted lawmakers, condemned the atrocity.

"This is a cruel present from the military to our people on Christmas Day," he said.

AFP

Former Greek president Karolos Papoulias dies at 92

Athens, Greece - Veteran Greek politician Karolos Papoulias, who served as president at the height of the economic crisis of the 2010s, died on Sunday at the age of 92, the presidency said.

'With sadness we address our last greetings to Karolos Papoulias,' President Katerina Sakellaropoulou said in a statement, thanking him for 'vigorously defending social cohesion and national unity'.

Papoulias spent a decade as president after being elected in

2005 and re-elected in 2010, during the crisis that plunged the country into the most grave political and economic turmoil of recent decades.

His popularity suffered a major blow for supporting austerity measures dictated by international lenders in return for a bailout, which sparked violent protests.

In October 2012, demonstrators blocked a national parade in Thessaloniki and chanted 'traitor' at Papoulias.



A file photo of Karolos Papoulias

Before walking out of the parade, Karolos Papoulias told reporters: "We fought for Greece. I was a resistance fighter at 15, fighting against Nazism and the Germans."

However, he gave up his salary in solidarity with 'the sacrifices of the people'.

Born in Ioannina in northwest Greece in 1929, he was a national pole vault champion and member of the national volleyball team in his younger years.

He later studied law in

Athens, Italy and Germany and became a lawyer in 1963.

During the Greece's 1967-1974 dictatorship he went into exile in Germany and became one of the co-founders of the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (Pasek), which became one of the most dominant parties of the post-dictatorship era.

As a member of Parliament from 1977 to 2000, he twice served as foreign minister in socialist governments.

AFP

Israel unveils plan to double settlers in occupied Golan Heights

Golan Heights - Israel on Sunday unveiled a plan to spend more than US\$300mn to double the Jewish settler population in the Golan Heights, 40 years after it annexed the territory captured from Syria.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who held his weekly cabinet meeting at the Mevo Hama community in the Golan on Sunday, vowed this was the 'moment' to boost the number of Jewish Israelis living in the territory.

"Our goal is to double the population in the Golan," the rightwing Bennett said as he presented his one billion shekel (US\$317mn) programme to improve housing, transportation, tourism and medical facilities in



Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett (centre) poses for a photo with members of the government ahead of the weekly Cabinet meeting in Kibbutz Mevo Hama in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights, on Sunday (AFP)

the area.

Around 25,000 Israeli settlers live in the Golan Heights, along with some 23,000 Druze, who remained on the land after it was seized by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War.

Israel annexed the territory on December 14, 1981, in a move not recognised by most of the international community.

Former US president Donald Trump, widely viewed as pro-Israeli, granted US recognition to Israeli sovereignty over the Golan in 2019.

"It goes without saying that the Golan Heights is Israeli," Bennett said on Sunday, noting the Trump recognition and what he described as the 'important' fact that President Joe

This is the moment to boost the number of Jewish Israelis living in the territory. The goal is to double the population

NAFTALI BENNETT

Biden's administration had 'made it clear that there is no change in policy'. Shortly after the Biden administration took office in January, Secretary of State Antony Blinken suggested there were legal questions surrounding Trump's move, which

Syria condemned as a 'flagrant violation' of its sovereignty.

But Blinken indicated there was no thought of reversing course, especially amid the ongoing Syrian civil war.

Israel and Syria, which are still technically at war, are separated by a de facto border at the Golan Heights. Bennett, who leads an ideologically disparate eight-party coalition, needs cabinet approval before his Golan plan can move forward.

Sunday's meeting was temporarily delayed after the premier's 14-year-old daughter tested positive for the coronavirus, sending Bennett into isolation, but a vote on the plan was still expected.

AFP

Anti-apartheid icon Desmond Tutu dies at 90

Johannesburg, South Africa - South African anti-apartheid icon Archbishop Desmond Tutu, described as the country's moral compass, died on Sunday aged 90, sparking an outpouring of tributes for the outspoken Nobel Peace Prize winner.

The small-statured Tutu, who had largely faded from public life in recent years, was remembered for his easy humour and characteristic smile - and above all his tireless fight against injustices of all colours.

South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa honoured this fight in a tribute to Desmond Tutu, announcing the archbishop's death on Sunday.

'The passing of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu is another chapter of bereavement in our nation's farewell to a generation of outstanding South Africans who have bequeathed us a liberated South Africa,' he said in a statement.

'Desmond Tutu was a patriot without equal; a leader of principle and pragmatism who gave meaning to the biblical insight that faith without works is dead,' he said.

'A man of extraordinary intellect, integrity and invincibility against the forces of apartheid, he was also tender and vulnerable in his compassion for those who had suffered oppression, injustice and violence under apartheid, and oppressed and downtrodden people around the world.'

Mourners gathered outside his former parish in Cape Town, St George's Cathedral, while others massed at his home, some holding flower bouquets, according to an AFP journalist.

"It's very very sad he died. He was such a good man," said retired accountant Diane Heard.

The South African cricket team wore black armbands in his honour of the first day of the first Test against India in South Africa.

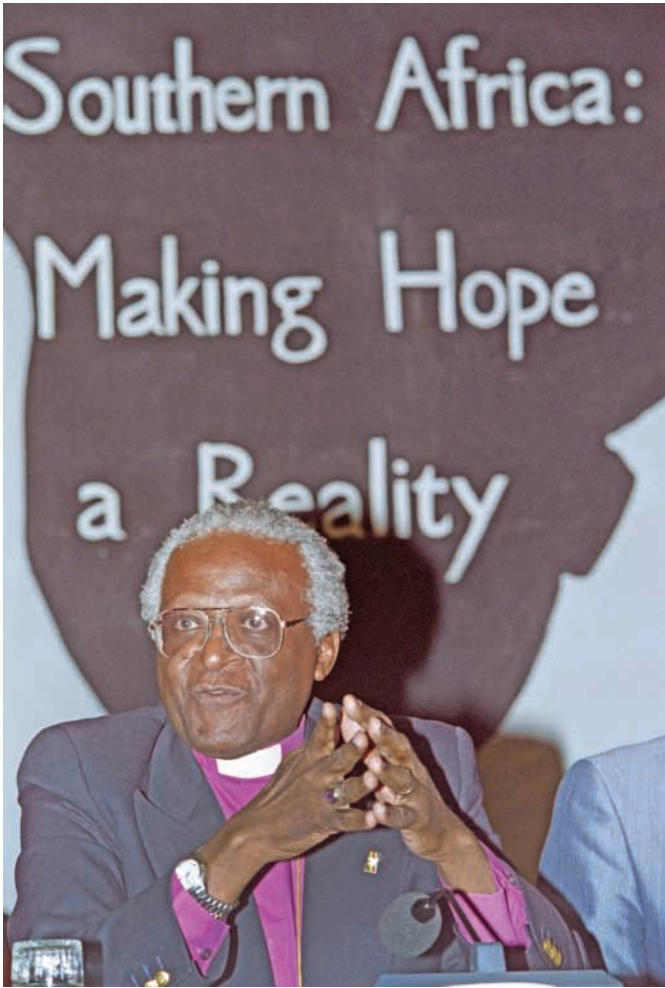
Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta said, "Tutu inspired a generation of African leaders who embraced his non-violent approaches in the liberation struggle."

'Rainbow Nation'

A tireless activist, Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for combating white minority rule in his country.



A couple stands by a temporary memorial of Desmond Tutu in the wake of his death, outside St George's Cathedral in Cape Town on Sunday (AFP)



This file photo shows Desmond Tutu taking part in the International Conference on Southern Africa, in London on June 15, 1993 (AFP)

Famously outspoken, even after the fall of the racist apartheid regime, Tutu never shied away from confronting South Africa's shortcomings or injustices.

It was Desmond Tutu who coined and popularised the term 'Rainbow Nation' to describe South Africa when Nelson Man-

over generous salaries for Cabinet ministers and stridently criticised the corruption that mushroomed under ex-president Jacob Zuma.

Ordained at the age of 30 and appointed archbishop in 1986, he used his position to advocate for international sanctions against apartheid, and later to

Desmond Tutu was a patriot without equal; a leader of principle and pragmatism who gave meaning to the biblical insight that faith without works is dead

CYRIL RAMAPHOSA

delaware became the country's first black president.

However in recent years, Tutu slammed even the ruling African National Congress (ANC) - the vanguard of the fight against white-minority rule - for cronyism and nepotism after apartheid ended in 1994.

In the past, he has confronted homophobia in the Anglican Church, challenged Mandela

lobby for rights globally.

Tutu was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1997 and underwent repeated treatment.

His public appearances became increasingly scarce, and in one of his last this year, he emerged from hospital in a wheelchair to get a COVID-19 vaccine, waving but not offering comment.

He retired in 1996 to lead a

harrowing journey into South Africa's brutal past, as head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

For 30 months, the commission lifted the lid on the horrors of apartheid.

'Larger than life'

Tutu, with his instinctive humanity, broke down and sobbed at one of its first hearings.

"He articulated the universal outrage at the ravages of apartheid and touchingly and profoundly demonstrated the depth of meaning of ubuntu, reconciliation and forgiveness," Ramaphosa said.

The Nelson Mandela Foundation called Tutu 'an extraordinary human being. A thinker. A leader. A shepherd'.

'He was larger than life, and for so many in South Africa and around the world his life has been a blessing,' it said in a statement.

Tutu was born in the small town of Klerksdorp, west of Johannesburg, on October 7, 1931, to a domestic worker and a school teacher.

He trained as a teacher before anger at the inferior education system set up for black children prompted him to become a priest.

He lived for a while in Britain, where, he recalled, he would ask for directions just to be called 'Sir' by a white policeman.

Tutu relentlessly challenged the status quo on issues like race, homosexuality and religious doctrine and gave his pioneering support for the assisted dying movement.

And he didn't shy away from his own end.

"I have prepared for my death and have made it clear that I do not wish to be kept alive at all costs," he said in an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* in 2016.

"I hope I am treated with compassion and allowed to pass on to the next phase of life's journey in the manner of my choice."

Tutu's death came just weeks after F W de Klerk, South Africa's last apartheid-era president passed away on November 11. AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

India to give vaccines to children aged 15 and up from January

New Delhi, India - India will open its COVID-19 vaccination drive for adolescents and start administering booster doses to its at-risk adult population, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on Saturday.

The highly-infectious Omicron variant has gained a foothold in the country, and the country's Health Ministry has raised concerns about its on-ward spread.

"Omicron is a matter of discussion right now," the Prime Minister said.

"After looking at global developments and examining the last 11 months of our COVID-19 vaccination drive, our scientists have taken key decisions today," he said in his national address.

It is time to be 'careful and cautious', he added, announcing that vaccines will be available for children aged 15 and up from January 3.

The country's healthcare and frontline workers, people above 60 years and citizens with underlying conditions will also



This file photo shows ground staff and media persons witnessing the unveiling of a SpiceJet Boeing 737 design celebrating India's achievement of administering its billionth COVID-19 vaccine dose at the Indira Gandhi International Airport, in New Delhi on October 21 this year (AFP)

start receiving their 'precaution dose' a week later, the Prime Minister added.

India's vaccination drive started in January this year and picked up pace after the devas-

tating second wave in May.

New Delhi has since administered more than 1.41bn, mostly domestically produced, COVID-19 vaccine doses.

"We understood the impor-

tance of vaccines early and because of that more than 61 per cent of adults have received both their doses and 90 per cent have received at least one dose," Modi said.

The country's nearly 480,000 COVID-19 deaths are the third-highest, behind the tolls in the United States and Brazil.

AFP

France breaks 100,000 barrier for 24-hour cases

Paris, France - COVID-19 infections in France hit six figures on Saturday, health officials recording 104,611 cases over the previous 24 hours, the third consecutive day the numbers have been record highs.

The latest figures, from France's public health agency, come ahead of a video-conference meeting on Monday in which President Emmanuel Macron and key members of his government will discuss new safety measures. Officials are very much concerned about the effect of the rapid spread of the Omicron variant.

Already on Friday, the health authority recommended adults receive a booster jab three months after their initial vaccination.

Now the government is



A medical staff work in the ICU of a hospital in Clamart, outside Paris (AFP)

moving to make the health pass issued to the vaccinated valid only if people accept the booster jab. The pass is required for access to cafes, restaurants and public spaces, as well as for international travel. Some regions have already enacted their own safety measures.

To date, France has recorded 122,546 deaths from the coronavirus. AFP

Russia ready to ‘fight’ for space tourism supremacy

A slew of newcomers in the sector is forcing Russia to step up its game, and SpaceX is among them

Moscow, Russia - After a decade-long hiatus, Russia is re-launching an ambitious bid for dominion over the world’s budding space tourism industry, jostling with zealous billionaires, the United States, and rising China.

Russia flaunted its comeback this month dispatching two cosmic adventurers - Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa and his assistant - to the International Space Station (ISS) in its first launch of tourists in 12 years.

Buoyed by the success, fire-brand space chief Dmitry Rogozin talked up Russia’s next steps to supremacy:

A special module at the ISS for Russia’s visitors, spacewalks outside the station, and - down the line - trips around the moon.

“We will not give this niche to the Americans.”

“We are ready to fight for it,” he told reporters at a press conference as Maezawa was blasting towards the ISS on a 12-day mission.

Yet Russia’s path to industry dominance is dotted with new obstacles that have emerged since it was last in the game a decade ago.

Back then, the Russian space agency Roscosmos had a monopoly on sending the cash-flushed curious to space.

That changed when US agency NASA retired its own shuttle for astronauts in 2011 and snatched up every seat to the ISS. Roscosmos had on offer for the next decade.

Then, last year, billionaire Elon Musk’s SpaceX barged onto the scene with its first successful ISS mission and NASA dropped Roscosmos. At a reported US\$90mn per seat, this was a huge financial blow to the cash-strapped Russian space agency, hit simultaneously with budget cuts and corruption scandals.

Analysts say Roscosmos has no choice but to turn to tourism to cover the shortfall.

“The Russian space industry is reliant on consistent orders for these launches,” industry analyst Vitaly Yegorov told AFP.

The price tag for one seat - estimated at US\$50mn to US\$60mn - covers the cost of building the three-person Soyuz spacecraft to shuttle the crew, he said, while a second traveller turns a profit.

But space tourism is not just about the money, officials say.

“It’s national prestige. It gets young people interested in manned spaceflight. It’s the future, after all,” says Dmitry Loskutov, head of Glavkosmos - a subsidiary of Roscosmos responsible for commercial projects, including tourism.



In this photo taken on December 05, 2021, a woman is seen walking under snowfall in front of a Soyuz rocket installed as a monument in Baikonur city, near the Russian leased Kazakh Baikonur cosmodrome. (AFP)



This photo taken on December 08, shows Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa (left), his assistant Yozo Hirano (third from left) and Russian cosmonaut Alexander Misurkin reporting to Roscosmos space agency chief Dmitry Rogozin, prior to the launch at the Baikonur cosmodrome (AFP)



We will not give this niche to the Americans. We are ready to fight for it. There’s possibility of new routes.

DMITRY ROGOZIN

Competition ‘heating up’

Russia, China and the United States are the only countries capable of manned flights, but a slew of newcomers are entering the scene and forcing Russia to step up its game, SpaceX among them.

Musk has yet to take tourists to the ISS, but this year his Inspiration4 brought an all-civilian crew into Earth’s orbit on a three-day mission.

Also eager for a cut are Blue Origin of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and Virgin Galactic of billionaire Richard Branson.

Turning point in space travel

The trio returned to Earth Monday, after 12 days on the International Space Station where he made videos about performing mundane tasks including brushing teeth and going to the bathroom.

Maezawa and his assistant Hirano parachuted onto Kazakhstan’s steppe at around the expected landing time of 0313 GMT on December 20, along with Russian cosmonaut Misurkin. Their return from space caps a banner year that many have seen as a turning point for private space travel.

Billionaires Musk, Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson all made breakthrough commercial tourism flights this year, bursting into a market Russia is hoping to dominate.

Russia has a history of sending self-funded tourists to space. In partnership with US-based company Space Adventures, Roscosmos has previously taken seven tourists to the ISS since 2001 - one of them twice.

The last was Canada’s Cirque du Soleil co-founder Guy Laliberte in 2009, who was dubbed the first clown in space. In October, Russia launched its first untrained cosmonauts into space since Laliberte’s trip, delivering a



Yusaku Maezawa

Russian actress and a director to the ISS, where they filmed scenes for the first movie in orbit.

Moscow had stopped sending tourists to space after NASA retired its Space Shuttle in 2011, which left Russia with a monopoly on supplying the ISS.

NASA bought up all Soyuz launch seats for a reported US\$90 mn per spot - effectively ending tourist flights.

That changed last year when a SpaceX spacecraft successfully delivered its first astronaut to the ISS.

NASA began purchasing flights from SpaceX, stripping Russia of its monopoly and costing its cash-strapped space agency millions of dollars in revenue.

While the cost of tickets to space for tourists has not been disclosed, Space Adventures has indicated they are in the range of US\$50-60 mn.

AFP

Both their spacecrafts completed maiden voyages this year, remaining several minutes in zero gravity before returning to Earth.

But Andrei Ionin of the Russian Academy of Cosmonautics says you just can’t compare the billionaires’ brief, low-orbit flights to a days-long mission to the ISS. “It’s like comparing the Ferrari and the Renault market,” he said.

Loskutov echoed the point, saying the trips were more a part of the ‘entertainment industry’ than the space travel. Still, Yegorov said, ‘competition is heating up’, particularly from SpaceX.

“Russia has taken note. It wants to expand offerings, including a spacewalk during an upcoming tourist mission,” Loskutov said.

Moscow has also unveiled plans for its own orbital station with the ISS set to retire in the next decade and Rogozin has said there could be a ‘separate tourist module’ on board.

He raised the possibility of new routes, following, for example, the path of the first human in space Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin.

‘No threat’ to Russia

Rogozin has also said that after 2030 Roscosmos hoped to offer a trip around the moon. But that timeline falls far behind SpaceX ambitions - it has announced a mission to take eight people around the moon as early as 2023. Another complication Roscosmos faces in the sector is assessing and meeting demand.

For one, Soyuz spacecraft are expensive and a mission takes at least two years to organise.

Loskutov said Russia has pre-ordered a rocket for the next launch and Rogozin instructed his agency to boost its Soyuz production. Real demand - not just interest - is hard to assess too. Candidates must be willing to shell out, meet health requirements and commit to months of training and a rehabilitation period after returning to Earth.

“In my opinion, there aren’t a lot of people - but you don’t need many, anyway,” Ionin said.

At least for now, he said, Russia is ahead thanks to the Soviet-designed and time-tested Soyuz.

“For the next five to 10 years, there is no threat to the business of Roscosmos,” Ionin added.

AFP

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Corals & cable cars

Vingroup - a conglomerate - is pushing to make Vietnam’s Phu Quoc ‘a new international destination on the world tourist map’



Our guide Lai Chi Phuc has been counting down the days until travellers return to the white-sand beaches and thick tropical jungle of Vietnam’s Phu Quoc, a once-poor fishing island pushing to be Asia’s next holiday hotspot as pandemic restrictions ease.

On December 20, around 200 South Koreans touched down on the island, which lies a few kilometres off Cambodia in the azure waters of the Gulf of Thailand, after a vaccine passport scheme kicked off this month in Vietnam.

Among the arrivals was Tae Hyeong Lee, who was returning to the island for a third time and keen to make a beeline for the beach.

“It’s wonderful to be here. This is my first time travelling out of South Korea since the pandemic started,” he told AFP.

But others may skip the lazy beach break in favour of action and entertainment as they shuffle between a 12,000-room hotel complex, an amusement park, 18-hole golf course, casino, safari park and miniature Venice.

The US\$2.8bn leisure resort, part of the ‘sleepless city’ model, opened six months ago as COVID-19 ravaged tourism across the world - and as other Asian countries reliant on the industry, like Thailand, were rethinking their mass tourism frameworks.

For 33-year-old Phuc, who remembers a poverty-stricken childhood where ‘everyone wanted to escape Phu Quoc’, the island’s growing popularity gave him a way to return home after years of scratching out a living as a salesman in the nearby cities of the Mekong Delta.

“But it’s a pity also,” he told AFP, lamenting the loss of the island’s palm-fringed beaches to resorts.

Flood of plastic

Ahead of Saturday’s reopening, staff at Vinpearl resort - where the arrivals are staying - swept beaches, arranged cutlery on tables and laid out sunbeds. Others busied themselves painting delicate flowers on conical hats.

“When we heard visitors were coming back, I was

just so excited,” said duty manager Ngo Thi Bich Thuong.

Before the pandemic in 2019, around five million people, including half a million foreigners - mostly from China, South Korea, Japan and Russia - holidayed on Phu Quoc.

Vingroup - the enormously powerful conglomerate behind the new complex - is pushing to make the island: ‘A new international destination on the world tourist map’.

To cater for the tourist boom, 40,000 hotel rooms have been built, planned or are under construction, vice chairman of the Vietnam Tourism Advisory Board Ken Atkinson told AFP - ‘that’s more hotel keys than they have in Sydney, Australia’.

Globally popular vacation spots such as Thailand’s Phuket have given Vietnam something to aim for.

Atkinson took a group of senior Vietnamese government officials there in 2005 - but while Phuket’s vibrant international tourist scene took years to build up? “Vietnam has a tendency of wanting to do everything all at once,” he noted.

“Unfortunately I don’t think there was enough attention given to what would be in the long-term benefit of the island,” he added.

Phu Quoc is a Unesco biosphere reserve - surrounding waters are stuffed with coral reefs and its beaches were once nesting spots for Hawksbill and Green turtles.

But no nesting has taken place in recent years, the UN body said in their last assessment in 2018.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has warned of ‘an almost unimaginable flood of plastic’ that chokes rivers, canals and sea life.

Around 160 tonnes of trash - almost enough to fill 16 trucks - is generated every day, according to WWF, which says the island’s waste management is not fit to cope with the tourism explosion.

“More and more tourists are very conscious of the environment. They don’t want to be going to places where beaches are littered or where effluent is going into the sea,” Atkinson warned.

Pockets of paradise

But alongside the trash, and the garish headline attractions - including the world’s longest non-stop three-rope cable car and Vietnam’s first teddy bear museum - there are still pockets of paradise.

Chu Dinh Duc (26) from mainland Vietnam, first saw Phu Quoc from the back of a motorbike in 2017.

Speeding through dense forests and winding his way to the few remaining sleepy villages where fishermen cast their nets into the ocean as the sun came up, he fell in love.

Two years later, he opened a simple homestay business catering to foreigners.

“My goal here is not to take a lot of their money,” he said.

“But I want as many as possible to come.”

“If Phu Quoc remained undeveloped, it would just be a pearl undiscovered.”

AFP



Staff members wearing traditional costume walk in the Vinpearl leisure complex on Phu Quoc island (AFP)

Palace forced to play as Premier League plays on despite virus surge

London, UK - Crystal Palace's bid to have their Boxing Day trip to Tottenham postponed due to a coronavirus outbreak has been turned down by the Premier League despite manager Patrick Vieira testing positive.

Three games scheduled for the traditional round of matches on December 26 have already been called off due to squads decimated by COVID-19 infections and injuries.

Leeds' clash with Aston Villa, scheduled for December 28, was also called off on Sunday taking the total number of Premier League games postponed over the past two weeks to 14.

However, six Premier League games are due to go ahead in front of full crowds despite Britain battling record coronavirus figures owing to a wave of the Omicron strain of the virus.

Earlier this week Premier League clubs rejected the option of temporarily halting the season to allow a circuit breaker for infections.

At the same meeting on Monday, clubs were warned that games will go ahead if each team has 13 fit outfield players and a goalkeeper.

Vieira revealed on Christmas



Supporters have their information checked by Stewards as they arrive for the English Premier League match between Tottenham Hotspur and Crystal Palace at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London, on Sunday (AFP)

Eve that Palace had suffered a 'couple of cases' but that outbreak has reportedly worsened

over the past 48 hours. However, it has not been deemed sufficient by the Premier

League for the game to be rescheduled.

'We can confirm that Crystal

Palace manager Patrick Vieira is self-isolating after returning a positive test for COVID-19, and

will be absent from the touchline for today's match against Spurs,' Palace said in a statement.

'Assistant manager Osian Roberts will deputise for Vieira for today's match.'

Across the three divisions below the Premier League, 22 matches in the English Football League (EFL) scheduled for Boxing Day have already been postponed.

Gerrard positive

Aston Villa manager Steven Gerrard will also be in isolation for his side's clash with Chelsea.

It is the second time this season Gerrard has been forced to isolate after also testing positive when in charge of Rangers in August.

The Blues could find themselves nine points adrift of leaders Manchester City by the time

We can confirm that Crystal Palace manager Patrick Vieira is self-isolating after returning a positive test for COVID-19... absent from the touchline for today's match against Spurs

CRYSTAL PALACE

No restrictions have yet been put in place for the size of crowds at matches in England, although supporters do have to provide proof of vaccination or a negative test taken in the previous 48 hours.

Sport in Wales will be forced back behind closed doors from today, while in Scotland a restriction of 500 outdoor public events has seen Scottish Premiership clubs bring forward their winter break by a week after Sunday's fixtures.

they kick-off at Villa Park should the champions continue their scintillating form at home to Leicester.

City have won their last eight consecutive league games to open up a three-point lead at the top over Liverpool.

Behind the top three there is a battle for the fourth and final place in next season's Champions League. Arsenal are in pole position ahead of their trip to bottom-of-the-table Norwich. AFP

LOCAL CRICKET ROUND-UP

Khuwair, Amerat secure exciting wins; Zawawi, Al Jadidi triumph in A Division

Muscat - Amazing strokeplay by Oman veterans Amir Kaleem and Zeeshan Siddiqui powered Khuwair Warriors to a sensational 5-wicket victory against Qurum Thunders in an Oman Cricket-organised D20 Cricket League game at Oman Cricket Turf 1 in Amerat on Saturday.

Requiring 183 to win, the duo was involved in a whirlwind opening stand of 74 that came off only 3.3 overs, laying the foundation for a successful chase as Khuwair sealed the win in 18.4 overs thanks to the late onslaught by Sean Novak who smashed an unbeaten 26 off only 16 balls including 3 huge hits over the fence. Zeeshan whacked 39 off 14 including 4 fours and 3 sixes while Amir Kaleem clobbered 56 off 24 including 6 fours and 4 sixes.

Prolific opener Kshyapkumar Prajapati topscored for Qurum with a hurricane 95 off 48 that had 6 fours and an equal number of sixes, leading his side to an imposing 182 for 6. Khuwair pacer Muzahir Raza was quite impressive, picking up 3 for 24.

Brief scores (D20): Qurum Thunders 182 for 6 in 20 overs (Kshyapkumar Prajapati 95 - 6x4, 6x6, Muzahir Raza 3-24) lost to Khuwair Warriors 186 for 5 in 18.4 overs (Aamir Kaleem 56 - 6x4, 4x6, Zeeshan Siddiqui 39 - 4x4, 3x6) by 5 wickets.



L-R: Nishanth Meethalveedu, Shaheer Najeeb, Nidhin P Shankar and Nidhin Mohan of Al Jadidi Stars



Arun Dev and Nishad K S of Zawawi Powertech

Tandel tears Darsait apart

In another D20 League game at the same venue on Saturday, Hemalkumar Tandel's fast and furious spell of 4 for 23 was the highlight of Amerat Royals' 76-run win over Darsait Titans.

Karan Sonavale's 42, Pratik Athavale's 33 and Rafi Ullah's swashbuckling 25 off 11 helped Amerat to 176 for 7 in 20 overs. Sachin Kumar bagged 2 for 31.

Darsait failed to rise to the occasion, scoring only 100 for 9 as

Tandel ended with a devastating spell. Only Khurram Khan (29) and Amanpreet Singh (23) batted with some authority.

Brief scores (D20): Amerat Royals 176 for 7 in 20 overs (Karan Sonavale 42 - 5x4, 2x6, Pratik Athavale 33- 4x4, Rafi Ullah 25 - 1x4, 3x6. Sachin Kumar 2-31) beat Darsait Titans 100 for 9 in 20 overs (Khurram Khan 29 - 2x4, Amanpreet Singh 23 - 1x4, 1x6, Hemalkumar Tandel 4-23, Mehran Khan 2-18) by 76 runs.

Nidhin stars in Al Jadidi win

In another A Division game on Friday, Al Jadidi Stars rode on Nidhin Mohan's magnificent 111 and Parameswaran Shankar's outstanding 5 for 30 to thrash Sunlight by 196 runs.

Nidhin's ton was the highlight of Al Jadidi's 323 all out in 47 overs. Half centuries by Shaheer Najeeb and Nishanth Meethalveedu were the other notable scores. Punit Mehta bagged 3 for 38.

Shankar destroyed Sunlight with his 5-wicket spell and the whole side was bundled out for 127 in the 28th over. Ali Muhammed claimed 3 for 41. Hafiz Irfan (42) and Madhur Bhatnagar (36) were the Sunlight's main scorers.

Brief scores (A Division): Al Jadidi Stars 323 all out in 47 overs beat Sunlight by 196 runs. Sunlight was all out for 127 in 27.4 overs.

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LawConnect (left) and Black Jack compete at the start of the Sydney to Hobart yacht race, on Sydney Harbour on Sunday (AFP)

Early drama in Sydney to Hobart yacht race

Sydney, Australia - Australian super maxi LawConnect snatched the lead in a dramatic start to the annual Sydney to Hobart race on Sunday as a COVID-depleted fleet of 88 yachts embarked on one of the world's toughest ocean events.

Heading into the teeth of brisk southerly winds, LawConnect grabbed the front position from rival 30-metre super maxi SHK Scallywag from Hong Kong, which hit a major technical problem with a jib sail fitting after having led the fleet out of Sydney Harbour.

Some four hours after the race started, LawConnect was in first position ahead of another super maxi, Black Jack.

SHK Scallywag, which had to hoist a less powerful storm jib while the crew tried to effect repairs with waves crashing over them, lay in third place.

Spectator boats had crowded into a cloudy, breezy Sydney Harbour to enjoy the return of the blue-water classic, which was forced by COVID-19 into an outright cancellation last year for the first time since it began in 1945.

The pandemic still cast a shadow, with some of the fastest yachts kept away this year, including the previous line-honours winner super maxi Comanche and nine-time line honours winner Wild Oats XI.

Four yachts withdrew over the past two days because of COVID-19 concerns, including one that was announced less than 10 minutes before the tradi-

For all boats, the challenge after starting and exiting the (Sydney) heads will not only be to settle into their race rhythm and watch systems, but to keep their boats intact in the tough conditions

CRUISING YACHT CLUB OF AUSTRALIA

tional Boxing Day starting cannon.

Another yacht dropped out because of crew injury.

Among those forced out by the virus was Willow, one of the favourites for line honours, which had several crew members test positive.

That left 88 entrants, including 17 two-handed yachts, which are allowed to take part for the

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

Weather, COVID-19

Weather is a critical factor in the 628-nautical-mile (1,200km) race down Australia's east coast to the Tasmanian capital.

Six men died, five boats sank and 55 sailors were rescued during the 1998 spectacle when a

predicted south to southeasterly winds Sunday with a strong wind warning offshore along the New South Wales coast.

The racers face strict health conditions including compulsory PCR coronavirus tests.

Race committee chairman Lee Goddard said Tasmanian police would allow racers to depart even if they were still waiting for their test results.

But if any crew member is informed of a positive result while on the water, their yacht will have to retire 'immediately', he told sailors on Sunday.

'Great adventure'

Depending on the weather, the fastest super maxis are expected to arrive in Hobart sometime on Tuesday.

Though the first yacht to reach the finishing line grabs most public attention, the main prize for sailors is regarded as the handicap honours, which takes account of the size of the yachts. In the last race, in 2019, Ichi Ban was the overall handicap winner.

AFP

Thailand book place in AFF Suzuki Cup final



Vietnam's Nguyen Van Toan (centre) fights for the ball with Thailand's Yusef Elias Dolah (right) during the AFF Suzuki Cup 2020 semi-final match, at the National Stadium in Singapore on Sunday (AFP)

Singapore - Thailand booked their place in the AFF Suzuki Cup final for a ninth time in 13 attempts after they held defending champions Vietnam to a goalless draw on Sunday in the second leg of the semi-finals to complete a 2-0 aggregate victory.

The Vietnamese dominated possession at Singapore's National Stadium but could not break down the resolute defence of the Thais, who have conceded only one goal in six matches on their run to the final.

The War Elephants will attempt to win the Asean football title for an unprecedented sixth time when they face Indonesia in the final. Both legs will take place in Singapore with the first leg on Wednesday and the return game

on New Year's Day.

Vietnam coach Park Hang-seo made five changes to his line-up from the first leg and his team exerted much of the pressure as they sought to turn around the two-goal deficit.

But the Thai defence allowed few clear-cut chances despite suffering a blow in the 31st minute when goalkeeper Chatchai Bootprom had to be replaced after he was injured in a clash with Nguyen Tien Linh.

Siwarak Tedsungnoen came off the bench and made a good save shortly afterwards to keep out Nguyen Quang Hai's free-kick.

As the first half came to a close, Ho Tan Tai headed a corner narrowly wide and Quang

Hai fired wastefully high over the crossbar as Vietnam turned up the pressure.

At the other end, goalkeeper Tran Nguyen Manh was called into action just before half-time as he made a fine save to deny Theerathon Bunmathan.

The Thais continued to frustrate their opponents after the interval with Vietnam's best efforts falling to Quang Hai, who sent a 49th minute free-kick narrowly wide before forcing Siwarak into a diving stop nine minutes later.

The replacement keeper also snuffed out efforts by Phan Van Duc and Nguyen Hoang Duc as the Thais gradually took the sting out of their opponents to seal their passage to the final.

AFP

Nigeria select recuperating Osimhen for Africa Cup

Abuja, Nigeria - Nigeria have selected Napoli striker Victor Osimhen, who is still recovering from a serious injury, as part of its 28-man squad for next month's Africa Cup of Nations in Cameroon.

Osimhen looked certain to miss the tournament, which is scheduled to kick off in Cameroon on January 9, after initially being ruled out for three months following surgery on face fractures suffered against Inter Milan in late November.

He suffered the fractures following a clash of heads with Inter defender Milan Skriniar, and had titanium implants placed in his cheekbone and eye socket. The 22-year-old striker said he would be ready to travel to Cameroon even though his Italian club would prefer he stayed away.

The squad also includes Spain-based midfielder Kelechi Nwakali, who has yet to make his official debut for the Eagles.

AFP

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Pat Cummins celebrates after removing Dawid Malan (AFP)

England's dreams in tatters as Australia pounce

THE ASHES

Melbourne, Australia - England crashed to 185 all out on day one of the third Test on Sunday, leaving their Ashes dreams on the brink of ruin in the face of a relentless Australian attack.

After heavy defeats in Brisbane and Adelaide, the visitors must win in Melbourne to keep the five-Test series alive, with Australia only needing a draw to retain the urn as holders.

But those hopes took a near-fatal blow as Australia ripped through England's flimsy batting, with only captain Joe Root (50) and Jonny Bairstow (35) showing resistance.

Australian skipper Pat Cummins, back after missing the second Adelaide Test because he was in COVID-19 isolation, and spin king Nathan Lyon both took 3-36. Australia then added to England's pain by negotiating 16 overs to be 61 for one at stumps, trailing by only 124 with Marcus Harris not-out 20 despite taking a nasty blow to the finger, and nightwatchman Lyon yet to score. But on another bad day for England they did bag the big wicket of David Warner, who raced to 38 off 42 balls before sending a thick edge off Jimmy Anderson to Zak Crawley at gully.

"As a bowling group we know we are not going to give up any

soft overs. You need to take 20 wickets to win the game and that's our motive," said Australia's Scott Boland, who made his debut and took the wicket of Mark Wood. "It's a great attack to be a part of."

After batting collapses and poor bowling in the first two Tests, Root read his players the riot act - seemingly to little effect. They have failed to score more than 297 in five innings so far.

"Obviously the toss didn't go our way, we'd also have loved to bowl in that first session," said Bairstow.

"Yes, we're still looking for that big score. We've got to get stronger and tougher with our dismissals, we know that.

"But we've seen that the pitch offered plenty (for the bowlers) today and hopefully we turn up in the morning and put pressure on to get some early inroads."

Openers Haseeb Hameed (0) and Crawley (12) fell cheaply to Cummins after he won the toss and put England in to bat, with their hopes resting once more on Root in front of 57,100 fans at the MCG - less than expected due to COVID-19 concerns.

He brought up his 53rd Test half-century in his 112th match, but once more failed to convert it into a maiden ton in Australia after a poor shot on 50 to Mitchell Starc.

SCOREBOARD		
ENGLAND 1 ST INNINGS		
H Hameed	c Carey b Cummins	0
Z Crawley	c Green b Cummins	12
D Malan	c Warner b Cummins	14
J Root	c Carey b Starc	50
B Stokes	c Lyon b Green	25
J Bairstow	c Green b Starc	35
J Buttler	c Boland b Lyon	3
M Wood	lbw b Boland	6
O Robinson	c Boland b Lyon	22
J Leach	c Smith b Lyon	13
J Anderson	not out	0
Extras:	(lb 4, nb 1)	5
TOTAL:	185 all out in 65.1 overs	
Fall of wickets:	1-4, 2-13, 3-61, 4-82, 5-115, 6-128, 7-141, 8-159, 9-176, 10-185	
Bowling:	M Starc 15-3-54-2, P Cummins 15-2-36-3, S Boland 13-2-48-1, C Green 8-4-7-1, N Lyon 14-1-3-36-3	
AUSTRALIA 1 ST INNINGS		
M Harris	not out	20
D Warner	c Crawley b Anderson	38
N Lyon	not out	0
Extras:	(lb 1, nb 2)	3
TOTAL:	61 for one in 16 overs	
Fall of wickets:	1-57	
Bowling:	J Anderson 5-1-14-1, O Robinson 5-0-23-0, M Wood 4-0-15-0, B Stokes 2-0-8-0	

Disaster strikes

The visitors had wielded the axe after their 275-run defeat in Adelaide with Crawley in for Rory Burns and Bairstow replacing Ollie Pope at six.

Wood was recalled after being rested in Adelaide, as was off-spinner Jack Leach.

Wearing black armbands to mourn former England captain Ray Illingworth, who died aged 89, Crawley confidently drove Cummins for three in his opening over.

But Cummins struck three balls later with Hameed's torrid tour continuing, out after nicking to wicketkeeper Alex Carey.

Crawley earned his first Test chance since March, but he failed to grab it, finding an outside edge to a rising Cummins ball that Cameron Green superbly caught at gully.

His dismissal for 12 left England at 13 for two with Dawid Malan and Root, the only two English batsmen to pass 50 this series, again on the back foot.

A cautious Malan took 18 balls to get off the mark, but disaster struck near lunch when he got an edge off Cummins on 14 that carried to Warner at slip.

Root played positively to move past South Africa's Graeme Smith (1,656 in 2008) and into third place for the most runs scored in a calendar year.

But just as he looked set he offered a lazy stroke that took a nick and was taken by Carey, with the England captain livid.

Star all-rounder Ben Stokes departed for 25 to Green, then Jos Buttler lasted only 11 balls.

He hit Lyon to Boland, the first Indigenous man to play Test cricket for Australia since Jason Gillespie. Boland then snared Wood before Bairstow gloved Starc to Green and Australia mopped up the tail.

AFP

It means a lot to join a pretty small club: Boland

Melbourne, Australia - On November 6, Scott Boland sat in the Ponsford stand of an empty MCG with three journalists and was asked about what he thought of his Test prospects.

"I know there are so many good fast bowlers around," Boland said, "it's going to be hard for me to get a crack but all I can do is just keep doing what I've been doing for the last few years. If the opportunity comes I'll be really, really happy."

On Boxing Day, the 32-year-old Victorian received his Baggy Green from Josh Hazlewood and took his first Test wicket in front of 57,100 fans. It was a moment he admitted that he thought might have passed him by a few years ago.

"Definitely," Boland said after play on day one in Melbourne. "I probably felt two or three years ago I wasn't bowling as well as I know I could."

Boland played 14 ODIs and three T20Is for Australia in 2016 but had dropped off the selectors' radar.

Following an excellent 2020-21 Sheffield Shield season, Australia's chairman of selectors, George Bailey, spoke to Boland ahead of the 2021-22 season and told him was doing the right things. But even by the second Shield game in early November, Boland had not been given any indication he would be part of the extended Australia/Australia A squad that needed to quarantine in Queensland.

But after taking 8 for 89 against New South Wales at the MCG Bailey rang again to



Scott Boland celebrates his first Test wicket (AFP)

OTHER INDIGENOUS TRAILBLAZERS



Faith Thomas



Jason Gillespie



Ashleigh Gardner

confirm that Boland would be in the Australia A squad to face the England Lions and that he would be a chance to be called up to the Test squad for the MCG or SCG Tests given his superb record at the grounds.

Then the stars aligned with Pat Cummins being ruled out of Adelaide, which led to both Jhye Richardson and Michael Neser playing while Boland was flown in on short notice to carry the drinks. On day five in Adelaide Boland was told he would be added to the Test squad for Melbourne and the rest is history.

Boland's debut is even more significant given he is just the second Indigenous male behind

Jason Gillespie, and the fourth Indigenous Australian behind women's representatives Faith Thomas and Ash Gardner, to play Test cricket for Australia.

"I'm pretty proud," Boland said. "My family's very proud as well. It means a lot to join a pretty small club and hopefully, it is just the start of something big for the indigenous community in cricket. If I can be a role model for young indigenous kids to want to play cricket, I think the indigenous community in [Australian rules football] and rugby is so big, hopefully, one day, the Aboriginals in cricket can be just as big."

Cricinfo

Rahul hits hundred as India punish wayward South Africa

Agarwal chips in with half-century as visitors take control of the Boxing Day Test

Centurion, South Africa - With his fifth Test century outside Asia, K L Rahul led India to a position of dominance in the first Test of the series.

On an uncharacteristically flat track, South Africa's attack, for some reason missing Duanne Olivier, lacked the menace or the discipline to create indecision from the batters.

A lot of the questions India's batting had over them coming into the series were questions posed by extremely tough conditions they almost always play in. The moment they got a good batting pitch, they ended the day at 272 for 3.

Rahul and Mayank Agarwal - Boxing Day buddies from Bangalore - put together India's first century opening stand in South Africa since 2010 before Rahul added two stands worth 82 each with Virat Kohli and Ajinkya Rahane. South Africa managed to draw just the 60 false responses in the whole day. You expect at least one an over from a good attack on a decent Test surface.

Rahul made a forgettable debut on Boxing Day in 2014, but lost his spot to his friend and Karnataka team-mate Agarwal in the 2018 Boxing Day Test. Three



India's K L Rahul kisses his helmet after scoring a century during the first day of the first Test against South Africa, in Centurion on Sunday (AFP)

years later, they found themselves opening together in this Boxing Day Test, and their captain won the toss to allow them first use of a pitch that tends to be at its most challenging in the first and the fourth innings.

Rahul will be the first one to concede Agarwal's was the more fluent innings, but he also got a few more loose balls to get going. Even as the signs of a flat track were apparent in the early exchanges, left-arm Marco Jansen debuted with a set of half-volleys, going for three boundaries in the 10th over and giving Agarwal a head start.

Rahul might not have had the fluency of Agarwal, but he did most things expert batters do in scoring Test hundreds: Leave well, defend with soft hands,

wasn't pushed back by short balls, took toll of half-volleys and had some luck. The highlight of the innings was the leave, which if you are not looking closely might lead you to believe he has been beaten. When the ball was new and bowled in good areas, Rahul kept playing well inside the line. He only actually played when the bowlers moved to the line under his head.

In the post-lunch session, Lungi Ngidi provided South Africa a look-in with two wickets in two balls. The first one nipped back from short of a length, and took a review that neither the on-field umpires nor the batter could believe. Having sent Agarwal back, though, South Africa looked like they had a plan for the first time since the early few

SCOREBOARD		
INDIA 1 ST INNINGS		
KL Rahul	not out	122
M Agarwal	lbw b Ngidi	
C Pujara	c Petersen b Ngidi	
V Kohli	c Mulder b Ngidi	35
A Rahane	not out	
Extras:	(b 4, lb 4, nb 7)	15
TOTAL:	272 for three in 90 overs	
Fall of wickets:	1-117, 2-117, 3-199	
Bowling:	K Rabada 20-5-51-0, L Ngidi 17-4-45, M Jansen 17-4-61-0, W Mulder 18-3-49-0, K Maharaj 18-2-58-0	

overs. They had a backward short leg and a short square leg for Cheteshwar Pujara, who got out bat-pad for only his second golden duck in Test cricket, the first being a run-out to Ngidi at the same ground.

This was the period when uneven bounce began to trouble Rahul. One short ball stopped on him, and climbed for a top edge to long leg, but fell just short of the fielder. Another jumped up, and sailed over the cordon. Even so, Rahul showed no adventure against the short ball, choosing to wait for the loose ones, which he kept getting. With two quick wickets and Virat Kohli at the wicket, South Africa chose to bowl Kagiso Rabada for only four overs in the middle session.

Kohli looked in excellent touch too. He trusted the pitch enough to pull out the cover drive away from his body, crashing Rabada through the off side in the final session. This was a spell where Rabada went flat out and asked questions of Rahul with short-pitched bowling. Rahul, who had identified tennis-ball bounce as the main threat before the Test, refused to hook and was okay wearing a few if needed.

Cricinfo



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