

Winners of Hospitality Champions 2021

Apex Media and the National Hospitality Institute (NHI) are proud to present the deserving winners of the second edition of ‘Hospitality Champions Awards’

The awards were presented to each winner at their respective properties over the past two weeks with their managers and colleagues in attendance.

The key objectives of the initiative are:

- 1 To raise the overall profile of the hospitality sector in Oman as a career choice for young Omanis.
- 2 To retain the graduates through ongoing training and development to aid their careers.
- 3 To provide a highly trained workforce in a critical sector that supports the government’s economic vision for the Sultanate.

Through the recognition and celebration of people already working in this vibrant sector, it will be clear to potential entrants that an exciting and rewarding future is offered. We thank all the industry leaders who recognised these individuals and look forward to celebrating more talents in the coming years.



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A big thank you

to the industry leaders who actively participated and made this event a grand success

INDUSTRY LEADERS WHO NOMINATED THEIR CHAMPIONS...



Congratulations to all our winners in 2021!



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IT PERSON



SAIF RASHID HUMAID AL SALEHI
KITCHEN ASSISTANT

The Hospitality Champions Team



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Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar



Friday prayers halted, conferences suspended

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A sharp surge in the number of Omicron infections coupled with a spike in hospitalisations has led the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic to announce new restrictions which will last two weeks with effect from Sunday.

The Supreme Committee reviewed reports on the epidemiological situation of the disease and noted a significant rise in the number of patients afflicted with Omicron and resultant hospitalisations in different governorates.

- ▶ Number of employees in government offices limited to 50 per cent
- ▶ Mosques to hold five daily prayers at 50 per cent capacity

‘The current readings point to the probability of a further rise in numbers of patients and hospitalisations, particularly among children who have not yet been vaccinated,’ it said.

New measures

- ▶ Limiting the number of employees in government and public entities to 50 per cent.
- ▶ Suspending all conferences and exhibitions.
- ▶ Suspending congregational

activities and advise to organisers to hold these without audience ensuring that participants abide by the precautionary measures announced earlier, including showing proof of vaccination.

- ▶ Suspension of Friday prayers. However, mosques are allowed to hold the five daily prayers at 50 per cent capacity in line with the procedures announced by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs in coordination

with the Ministry of Health.

The Supreme Committee urged all establishments (restaurants, cafeterias, commercial complexes, trade outlets and public halls) permitted to engage in their activities to adhere to the measures set for such activities, especially operating at 50 per cent capacity, showing proof of vaccination, observing physical distancing and wearing face masks, among other precautions.

36 projects to boost business activities in South Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) held an investment forum in South Batinah governorate recently with the aim of meeting the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 - creating investment projects and developing tourist sites.

The Investment Opportunities Forum shed light on a group of projects that will be implemented to develop tourist sites, heritage monuments, beaches, traditional markets, commercial markets, taxi parking lots and more

According to Sheikh Issa bin Hamad al Azri, Governor of South Batinah, the governorate is exerting all efforts to attract investment and develop public facilities.

“The governorate has started implementing 36 projects to develop many of its landmarks, some of which are in their final stages of completion,” Azri informed.

Hamoud bin Salim al Sa’adi, from OCCI’s South Batinah branch, said, “The chamber provides facilities and procedures for business owners with the aim of promoting economic activities and exploiting investment opportunities available in the governorate. The private sector plays a pivotal role in pushing development to the level aspired to in Oman Vision 2040.”



Twenty sites are open for investment in the governorate, including six plots of land in the wilayat of Rustaq, three in Mussanah, two in Al Awabi, six in Barka, two in Nakhal and one in Wadi al Ma’awil

AHMED AL OWAISI

Ahmed Abdullah al Owaisi, chairman of Real Estate Development Committee of OCCI’s South Batinah branch, informed that 20 sites are open for investment in the governorate, including six plots of land in the wilayat of Rustaq, three in Mussanah, two in Al Awabi, six in Barka, two in Nakhal and one in Wadi al Ma’awil.

Nasser bin Rashid al Abri, a member of the Shura Council

representing Rustaq, said, “South Batinah Municipality will develop the Ain al Kasfa area in Rustaq. The municipality is now studying the proposals submitted to develop the area and assigning work to contractors.

The Ain al Kasfa hot water spring is a popular destination. Swimming is not allowed at the site, but the spring is frequently visited for its therapeutic sulphur content.

\$100MN OMAN-EGYPT INVESTMENT FUND MOOTED



Sameh Hassan Shoukry, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, and an accompanying delegation, arrived in the sultanate on Saturday. The guests were received by H E Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister. An Oman-Egypt Business Council meeting held later in the day concluded with a proposal to establish a joint investment fund valued at US\$100mn to provide investment facilities and financial support (ONA)

Oman explores investing in Zanzibar

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Investment Authority (OIA) is exploring investment options in Zanzibar with the authority signing a memorandum of understanding with the Zanzibar government on Thursday.

According to OIA, the authority and its subsidiaries will study the feasibility of a project to rehabilitate, develop and operate the Malindi Tourist Port and develop the waterfront, as well as transfer commercial activities from the current port to the new Manga Pwani port.

Sami bin Abdullah al Sinani, senior director of logistics and infrastructure services at OIA, said in a statement that the memorandum of understanding (MoU)



aims to maximise Oman’s benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative, which passes through a group of ports in Asia and Africa. “The MoU also aims to build on the

historical Omani relations with East Africa, one of the economically promising regions.”

Sinani added that the MoU holds investment opportunities

that will contribute to the transfer of expertise available in order to expand the management of international projects and to enter into partnerships with investors.

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Austrian minister lauds Oman Vision 2040

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2022 budget deficit seen to be smallest in 11 years

With cases of COVID-19 rising, fears of a lockdown linger

Shaddad al Musalmey
Muscat

With the COVID-19 daily case count rising in Oman, will we go back into lockdown again? It may be a new year full of hope but the concerns over the Omicron variant of the virus and its high transmissibility have many people wondering about further measures in 2022.

Muscat Daily spoke with a cross-section of people who are still recovering from the impact of lockdowns and do not want a return of restrictions. The rising numbers everyday has most worried.

“I am finding 2022 to be a dif-

ficult time because of the confusion over what we should be doing as cases rise again. The thought of another lockdown is making me anxious. I don’t want that to happen,” said Bader al Harthy, a businessman based in Seeb.

The Ministry of Health (MoH) announced 1,800 new infections, one death and 39 new hospitalisations in a 24-hour period on Thursday. The total number of COVID-19 cases registered in the country has now risen to 318,272. ‘The total number of COVID-19 related deaths reported in the sultanate is 4,125,’ an MoH statement said. With 532 COVID-19 patients recovering on Thursday,



the total number of recoveries has increased to 303,644.

However, unlike Harthi, there are those who feel safer in a lockdown. “I acknowledge the fact that lockdowns are bad and a lot of people have suffered due

to these. But people are also alive now because of lockdowns. We will respect whatever the authorities decide,” said Rashid al Jabri, a retired private sector employee.

Last month, H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa’eedi, Minister of Health and Supreme Committee member, said, “We do not make decisions based on predictions. Many expected us to close and tighten the measures but the decisions of the Supreme Committee look at all the data and the local, regional and international epidemiological situation.”

Another matter of concern voiced in the current situation is the rising number of hospitalisations. “More people are going to get ill. We are seeing an increase in hospitalisations. It feels like we are going back to square one but at the same time, I believe vaccinations will make a differ-

ence in hospitalisation figures, and God forbid, deaths,” said Munira al Musallami, a retired government hospital nurse.

On Thursday, a total of 125 COVID-19 patients were in health institutions, including 39 new hospitalisations and 12 in intensive care units.

Meanwhile, the Directorate General of Health Services in North Batinah Governorate has announced that expatriates aged 18 years and older, who have completed three months since the second dose, can take the booster dose at the Rehabilitation Centre in Sohar from Sunday till February 3, 2022.

@shaddadm

First brain tumour operation using CyberKnifeS7 performed

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The radiology team of Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Centre has carried out the first operation using CyberKnifeS7 apparatus successfully in the sultanate. This high accuracy system is used for diagnoses of tumours of brain and lungs. The procedure was conducted over five sessions.

In a statement to Oman News Agency, Dr Zahid Abdullah al Mantheri, head of the radiology department, informed that the new system is equipped with a motion syncing technology that allows tracking of tumour locations with high efficiency while the patient is breathing.

"The robot moves along the tumour, giving full access to ra-



(Supplied photo)

diological therapy that preserves the maximum number of healthy tissues surrounding the tumour without compromising the basic

functions of the organ affected with cancer," Dr Mantheri said.

"Three brain tumour operations have been done since the

introduction of the new apparatus. It will provide treatment to a large number of cancer patients," he added.

The robot moves along the tumour, giving full access to radiological therapy that preserves the maximum number of healthy tissues surrounding the tumour

DR ZAHID AL MANTHERI

Dr Iqbal al Amri, a radiotherapy physician at the Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Centre, informed that some staff members of the centre were sent to the United States for training, while other personnel are attending online courses on the use of this new apparatus.

First national conference on organ transplant to be held in 2023

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, held a meeting with members of Oman Transplantation Society (OTS) on Wednesday with an aim to develop the national programme for organ transplantation.

According to a Ministry of Health (MoH) official, the meeting discussed holding the first national conference on organ transplantation in the sultanate, which OTS plans to hold in early 2023.

The official added that the meeting also discussed the significance of activating an organ donation programme in order to start the procedures of transplant operations for organs that cannot be donated during life, such as the heart, lungs and pancreas. "The number of patients waiting for transplantation of such organs is increasing," the official said.

He also noted that localisation of organ transplantation is a

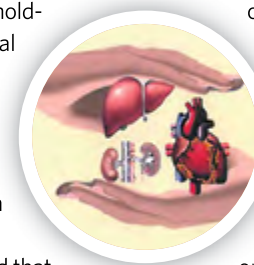
basic priority and that organ donation is the responsibility of every individual in society.

According to [MoH] statistics, the total number of organ transplants carried out within the national organ transplantation programme is 323, of which 310 were kidney transplants and 13 liver transplants.

There are more than 2,260 patients on dialysis in the sultanate, who often visit dialysis centres in the morning and then leave for work. 'These patients face psychological and physical suffering. The sultanate is equipped to perform organ transplantations, especially kidney transplants,' the ministry has stated.

In March 2021, H E Dr Sa'eedi issued a ministerial decision to develop a national programme to regulate human organ and tissue donation. The decision aimed to establish guidelines in the field of transplantation.

MoH recently announced a decision to set up the National Centre for Organ Transplantation.



2021-2022 squid-fishing season ends on Jan 31: MAFWR

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has announced that the squid-fishing season for

2021-2022 will end on January 31 in Dhofar, Al Wusta and South Sharqiyah. The season is important for many fishermen in these governorates.

The six-month season commenced in August 2021.

Owing to high nutritional value, squid demand high prices in local and international markets.

Locally called 'Al ghatro', squid are soft-bodied molluscs that live in a variety of environ-

ment - at the bottom, semi-bottom (mesopelagic zone) or on the sea surface (epipelagic zone). In Oman, squid are found along the coastal strip of the sultanate, especially in the Arabian Sea, which extends from the

coast of Ras al Hadd to the coast of the Governorate of Dhofar.

According to MAFWR statistics, the sultanate's production of squid in 2018 was 16,154 tonnes, compared to 9,504 tonnes in 2017.

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3 arrested for human trafficking

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Directorate General of Inquiries and Criminal Investigations of Royal Oman Police (ROP) has arrested three Arab nationals on charges of human trafficking of women.

'The women, who are also Arab nationals, were deceived by being offered job opportunities in Oman. They were forced to sign cheques by the perpetrators and exploited to conduct immoral acts,' a statement from ROP said.

ROP informed that legal measures have been taken against the perpetrators.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	21	14
Doha	20	10
Kuwait City	15	9
Manama	18	11
Muscat	23	14
Riyadh	20	8

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.32am
Sunrise	6.50am
Duhr	12.24pm
Asr	3.30pm
Maghrib	5.52pm
Isha	7.05pm

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Oman Vision 2040 lauded by Austrian minister

Muscat - Dr Margarete Schrambock, Federal Minister for Digital and Economic Affairs of Austria, has expressed her admiration for Oman Vision 2040 and its pillars, which reflect keenness of the Omani government to make the future more bright for Omani citizens.

In an interview with ONA and Oman TV, she said that the four main pillars of Oman Vision 2040 - People and Society, Economy and Development, Governance and Institutional Performance, and Environment Sustainability - constitute a comprehensive roadmap for the future. She pointed out that her country has a similar vision, Austria 2040, which is almost in line with the Omani vision, particularly in the theme of environment.

As for bilateral relations, Minister Margarete affirmed that these relations are deep and long lasting. She pointed out that the relations are growing, particularly after the reopening of the Austrian Embassy in Muscat two years ago. "We are focusing now on setting up new projects in the economic areas that will contribute to augmenting the volume of trade exchange between Oman and Austria," said the minister.

She explained that her visit to Oman aimed at promoting bilateral relations and cooperation towards wider horizons, noting that she discussed with the Omani side various topics of mutual interest, such as cooperation in renewable energy and green hydrogen technologies.

Minister Margarete said, "Despite the challenges posed by the



We are focusing now on setting up new projects in the economic areas that will contribute to augmenting the volume of trade exchange between Oman and Austria

DR MARGARETE SCHRAMBOCK

pandemic, Oman and Austria are determined to promote their relations. There are many promising sectors in which we can

cooperate. Austria needs green energy and it looks for new resources and partners. We have discussed with the Omani side

the possibility of signing a memorandum of understanding in this field."

As for the National Programme of Digital Economy, which was approved by the Council of Ministers last October, the minister said: "I am very pleased that the digital economy tops the priorities of the Omani government. This field is the key for a prosperous economic future and we look forward to cooperating with Oman in this area to adopt the best practices."

She added that during her visit, she presented the Austrian experience in honing skills of students in school and then in university to prepare them for the labour market. Austria adopts a dual-learning system, the minister informed, pointing out that this system enables students to study a particular subject and at the same time work in a specialised company to sharpen their skills in that profession.

Her talks with Omani officials also touched on artificial intelligence. Minister Margarete said, "My country has devised a strategy in this field with the participation of many companies and institutions. This strategy is in the process of implementation and we are keen to present it for the Omani side so we can cooperate in this area."

Minister Margarete pointed out that the two sides have agreed to devise a mechanism to boost bilateral relations. This mechanism will be through the formation of specialised working groups and intensifying joint visits and communication between officials of the two countries.

ONA



(Supplied photo)

EA to develop Al Saleel National Park

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to develop nature reserves and increase national income, the Environment Authority (EA) has floated a tender to develop Al Saleel National Park.

An official at EA, said, "Nature reserves are a national treasure and contribute greatly to the national economy. The reserves are distinguished by their unique biological diversity. There are 25 reserves in the sultanate, and the average number of visitors is about 15,000 annually.

"The authority calls for bids for the maintenance of the Arabian deer breeding pens in the Al Saleel National Park in wilayat Al Kamil W'al Wafi in South Sharqiyah. The deadline for submitting bids is February 27, 2022," the EA official said.

Zahra Khalaf al Shuraiqi, a specialist in EA, said, "The authority has presented investment opportunities for companies,

EA has presented investment opportunities for companies, specialised institutions and investors wishing to invest and manage some eco-tourism projects

ZAHRA KHALAF AL SHURAIQI

specialised institutions and investors wishing to invest and manage some eco-tourism projects."

She added that the authority had earlier floated a tender for investment opportunities in three reserves in Dhofar governorate, (Souli, Dahariz and Khor Al Qurum al Kabeer), and is working on a safari project in Al Saleel National Park, which is about to be completed.

Work is currently underway to develop Qurum Natural Reserve. The authority is also working on offering the Starlight Reserve in Al Hajar al Gharbi in Dakhliyah for investment.

Talking about EA's efforts to invest in reserves, Zahra said, "The authority seeks investments in nature reserves to encourage environmental and domestic tourism and provide financial returns that contribute to increasing the country's national income.

"Eco-tourism projects provide an opportunity to invest in productive projects for the local community while protecting the environment and biological diversity of the protected tourist areas in a sustainable way."

On promoting these reserves, she confirmed that EA is working on producing promotional films and print and electronic media inserts that will be shown on Oman TV channels and social media.

Oman Post launches frankincense-themed stamp collection for Expo 2020

Muscat - To commemorate Oman's participation in Expo 2020 Dubai, Oman Post, a member of Asyad Group, has launched a new set of stamps.

The Expo 2020 stamp collection features four unique artworks depicting the growth, harvest, trade and use of frankincense, which is the key theme of the Oman Pavilion, Oman Post stated.

Representing millennia of Omani trade and culture, frankincense has played a vital and varied role in the nation's development from ancient times to the present day.

Mohammed al Raisi, senior manager of stamps and collectibles at Oman Post, said, "We are delighted to create this special collection, paying tribute to frankincense, which is Oman's 'gift to the world' and an integral part of our rich cul-



(Supplied photo)

ture, heritage and history. In addition to promoting our country as a must-visit destination, our goal at Oman Post is to showcase what makes Oman unique and infuse it into commemorative stamps that can be appreciated by all."

In addition to Oman Post's aspirations for global expansion of operations in postal and logistics services, as well as

e-commerce, the company is committed to delivering stamps that reflect on key domestic and international topics.

The Expo 2020 stamp collection was available for sale during the World Stamp Exhibition at the Dubai Exhibition Centre, where visitors were able to purchase a selection of other stamps and philatelic accessories.

Over 10,000 date palms treated against Red Palm Weevil in 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As many as 10,715 date palm trees were treated against Red Palm Weevil in North Batinah governorate in 2021, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR).

An official at MAFWR said, "As part of its efforts to implement a programme to combat the Red Palm Weevil, the ministry's specialists succeeded in treating 10,715 trees against the pest in North Batinah in 2021."

He explained, "Some palm trees were treated and severely infested trees were removed and dealt with by the technical methods recommended by the ministry. The ministry's specialists removed 2,243 infected trees."

Talking about MAFWR's efforts to support farmers, he said, "The ministry has set up many workshops for farmers and ran several campaigns to distribute pesticides to combat the insect. The ministry also distributed



(Supplied photo)

2,289 seedlings of Fardh dates among farmers whose palm trees were affected by the Red Palm Weevil in 2021 in North Batinah."

The ministry, in cooperation with the concerned authorities, arrested some violators of the Agricultural Quarantine Law on January 12. "The agricultural control team in South Batinah was able to seize a truck that violated the Agricultural Quarantine Law for transporting palm trees without obtaining a permit, as transporting palm shoots and palm trees from affected areas to healthy areas is one of the main reasons for the spread of the Red Palm Weevil," the official said.



Sultanate's 2022 budget deficit seen to be smallest in 11 years

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As the average oil price is likely to be higher than the levels estimated in Oman's 2022 budget and gas and non-oil revenues are expected to record further increases this year, the sultanate is expected to record the smallest budget deficit in 11 years, according to Emirates NBD, one of the leading banks in the Middle East region.

Oman's budget deficit dropped sharply to RO1.22bn (or 4 per cent of GDP) in 2021, according to preliminary estimates, compared to the RO4.4bn (or 15.8 per cent of GDP) shortfall recorded in 2020.

The main driver for reduction in deficit was the improvement in oil and gas revenues last year.

Oil prices and production increased in 2021, while Oman's gas revenues jumped 41 per cent year-on-year on the back of higher LNG export volumes and gas prices.

Oman's 2022 budget projects a modest widening of the budget deficit to RO1.55bn this year (4.9 per cent of estimated GDP). However, the budget is based on an average oil price forecast of just US\$50 per barrel.

"We expect Brent oil to average US\$68 per barrel in 2022, and as a result our oil revenue forecast [for Oman] is almost 40 per cent higher than budgeted. Non-oil revenues are also expected to rise this year, with the budget projecting a 20 per cent increase on actual 2021 non-hydrocarbon revenues. Our forecast is for a more modest increase in non-oil income, but we still expect Oman's total revenue in 2022 to be 9 per cent higher year-on-year," Khatija Haque, head of research and chief economist of Emirates



Emirates NBD expects Oman's real GDP growth to accelerate to 4 per cent in 2022 due to higher oil production and improved economic activity this year

NBD, wrote in a research note.

The sultanate's 2022 budget assumes total spending of RO12.13bn, similar to actual 2021 spending. "We expect expenditure to come in higher than planned at RO12.5bn. Despite our higher expenditure estimate, we expect the budget deficit to narrow to just RO0.6bn (1.8 per cent of GDP) this year, a better outcome than the govern-

ment's own projections which are based on the much more conservative oil price assumptions," Khatija said.

While the headline deficit has narrowed, almost 70 per cent of Oman government's revenue will come from oil and gas this year, leaving the budget vulnerable to negative oil price shocks in the future, she warned.

"Debt service costs have in-

creased sharply over the last five years, and are set to rise another 20 per cent in 2022. The budget for electricity and other subsidies is higher in 2022 than in 2021, and defence and security still accounts for 25 per cent of total spending although this share has declined from 35 per cent ten years ago," Khatija added.

In late December, global ratings agency Fitch Ratings upgraded its outlook on Oman's long-term foreign currency debt rating to 'stable' from 'negative', citing the improved budget and debt dynamics and the prospect of further reform.

Earlier Moody's and S&P Global Ratings had also

upgraded their outlooks on Oman's ratings.

With higher oil prices and increased production, Emirates NBD estimates Oman's real GDP growth to be at 4.0 per cent for 2022.

"With no new GDP data for 2021, we retain our estimate of 2.2 per cent GDP growth for last year, and expect growth to accelerate to 4.0 per cent in 2022, largely on faster hydrocarbon sector growth. The Finance Ministry indicated that oil production would rise to over 1mn barrels per day in 2022, which implies growth of around 5 per cent from average 2021 oil output," Khatija noted.



CMA explores Saudi experience in global indices, governance

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Abdullah bin Salim al Salmi, executive president of the Capital Market Authority (CMA), recently presided over an official delegation representing the capital market institutions in Oman in a visit to Saudi Arabia to acquaint with the Saudi experience in global indices and enhancing governance.

During the visit, the Omani delegation met with Mohammed Abdullah Elkuwaize, chairman of the Saudi Capital Market Authority, at the premises of the Saudi CMA in Riyadh.

The CEO of the Muscat Stock Exchange, general manager of Muscat Clearing and Depository Company and other CMA officials were also part of the Omani delegation.

The visit comes within the co-operation between the Saudi and Omani capital market regulators for the exchange of expertise and proposals about the capital markets in the region. The meeting discussed cross-border registration of financial services between the two countries and Saudi Arabia's experience related to Central Counter Party as well as

The Omani delegation also reviewed the Saudi CMA's initiatives related to enhancing governance in the listed companies in general as well as institutionalisation of investors' relations in the listed companies

enhancing trading via the Internet through the services offered by the financial institutions licensed by the CMA.

The Omani delegation also reviewed the Saudi CMA's initiatives related to enhancing governance in the listed companies in general as well as institutionalisation of investors' relations in the listed companies.

The Omani officials also reviewed the Saudi CMA's experience in joining a number of global indices which enhanced foreign investments and helped attracting liquidity to the Saudi market.

MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSX posts weekly loss as industrial stocks fall

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) ended the previous week lower by 0.73 per cent. All the sectoral indices closed in red territories for the week. Industrial index ended the lowest and was down by 2.2 per cent, while services and financial indices decreased 0.85 per cent and 0.50 per cent, respectively. MSX Shariah index closed down by 1.59 per cent.

According to the chairman of the MSX's board of directors, a number of state-owned companies will be listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange this year. The proposed listing of new companies, he said, will support the levels of liquidity, increase the depth of the stock exchange and its investment attractiveness. This is in addition to initiatives related to improving the infrastructural underpinnings of the stock market, the rollout of new investment tools, and upgrading the technological features, among other projects, to improve the market's performance in all aspects ahead of the transformation of the MSX into a public joint stock company.

A key goal, as per the chairman of the MSX, is to upgrade the stock exchange into a leading player that garners

favourable ratings from international rating agencies. To achieve this goal, work will be done to raise the liquidity of listed shares, raise market values and focus on facilitating the entry of foreign investments and activating some trading features such as short selling, lending and borrowing of securities, and other initiatives that enable the Muscat Stock Exchange to be featured on global indices.

Local news

►Sohar International Bank signed an agreement with Al Hadeetha Resources to extend RO19mn worth of financing to the Wash-hi Majazah mining project. Al Hadeetha Resources, a joint venture between Alara Resources, Al Hadeetha and Al Tasnim, is the first international joint venture company that has been awarded a copper mining licence in Oman for the Wash-hi Majazah project. Located in the Governorate of North Sharqiyah, the Wash-hi Majazah copper deposit has been evaluated under JORC standards for over 16mn tonnes of copper resources and 10mn tonnes of reserves. With equity contribution of RO8mn bringing up the total valuation of the project at



approximately RO27mn, Wash-hi Majazah project will generate cash flows of RO200mn for a period of ten years.

►Sohar International Bank has received the approval from the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) to commence due diligence for a proposed merger with Bank Nizwa.

►Gross electricity production in Oman decreased to 3,495

GWh in October 2021 compared to 4,130 GWh in the previous month. Overall, for the first ten months of 2021, electricity production was higher by 8 per cent to 35,906 GWh in 2021 compared to 33,241 GWh in 2020. Most of the electricity production came from the region of Batinah and Dhahira which stood at 22,256 GWh in 2021 compared to 20,688 GWh in 2020. The production

of Batinah and Dhahira amounted to 62 per cent of the total production in 2021.

►Oman's production of natural gas (including imports) by the end of November 2021 reached 46.05bn cubic metres compared to 42.186bn cubic metres in November 2020, comprising a rise of 9.2 per cent, according to the latest data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information. The in-

crease is attributed mainly to the rise of associated gas by 26.2 per cent to 8.499bn cubic metres compared to 6.736bn cubic metres by the end of November 2020 and the increase of non-associated gas (including imports) by 5.9 per cent to 37.550bn cubic meters compared to 35.449bn cubic meters by the end of the same period in 2020.

Global news

Oil production of OPEC countries averaged 27.88mn barrels per day (bpd) in December 2021, higher by 0.17mn bpd. Crude oil output increased mainly in Angola, Saudi, Iraq and the UAE, while production in Libya and Nigeria declined. The share of OPEC crude oil in total global production remains unchanged at 28.3 per cent in December compared with the previous month. Non-OPEC liquids production is estimated to have increased in December by 0.48mn bpd compared with the previous month to average 70.63mn bpd.

Inflation in UK increased to 5.4 per cent in December from 5.1 per cent in November. It is the highest reading since March 1992 as inflationary pressures persist, namely from rising en-

ergy prices, supply chain disruptions and a low base effect from last year.

Recommendation

Global markets remained volatile during last week. US ten-year bond yield skirted with the level of 1.8-1.9 per cent which made investors very edgy. On the flip side positive news of interest rate and mortgage rate cut in China were welcomed by the investors.

Oil continued to stay above the level of US\$85 per barrel throughout the week. The International Energy Agency raised its demand growth estimates by 200,000 bpd for both 2021 and 2022.

Regionally, market performance remained better compared to the global level as high oil prices and expectation of increase in interest rates kept banking and petrochemical stocks as favourites amongst investors.

In Oman, earnings season is over and we advise investors to carefully check the financial results and wait for detailed financials before taking a long-term position. Upcoming dividend announcements season will aid in higher investors interest in the market.

Bank Nizwa highlights 2021 achievements at special event

Oman's most trusted Islamic bank, Bank Nizwa continues to hold the top spot amongst the country's Islamic financial institutions. With a rich legacy of robust growth and expansion, Bank Nizwa caters the end-to-end financial requirements of individuals as well as corporates under two major business divisions, namely, retail and wholesale banking.

Continuing to stay connected, and cater to its prestigious clientele of the -Wholesale Banking Group, Bank Nizwa hosted an event to engage, and thank them for their continued support, trust and confidence in the bank. The event witnessed the attendance of senior executives, business leaders, and business owners, from Oman's corporate world. Khaled al Kayed, chief executive officer; R Narasimhan, general manager - Wholesale Banking; and Khalid al Barwani, DGM - Wholesale Banking Group, along with other members of Bank Nizwa's team were present for this significant event.

The event was attended by key industry leaders and clients from across the sultanate and the UAE including corporate clients from Sohar, Salalah, Duqm. It served as a networking platform and gave Bank Nizwa the opportunity to share knowledge on the evolution of Islamic finance in the country, with a special focus on wholesale banking, and the roadmap for sustainable financing.



In his speech, Kayed, pointed out that the Islamic banking sector in Oman has seen phenomenal progress in the last few years and that it will continue to thrive on the back of continuous innovation in products and services, a keen focus on digitalisation and excellence in customer service levels. Elaborating on this, he said, "There has been a high degree of activity in the Islamic banking sector and the progress the entire sector has achieved is something we should all be proud of. Bank Nizwa has served this growth, successfully pioneering products, services, and a futuristic business plan, attesting to our capabilities. The reason for this stellar growth is the relationship that we have been able to cultivate with our customers and partners that continue to play a key role in expanding our market

share while encouraging Islamic banking in the community. As a Sharia'a-compliant bank, Bank Nizwa goes beyond just facilitating transactions - it serves as a benchmark of industry best practices, best in class services and a pillar of trust in the modern economy. Showing remarkable progress year-after-year, Bank Nizwa has always acknowledged the efforts of its Wholesale Banking Group, recognising it as a vital contributor to its success. The bank's Wholesale Banking Division comprises ten units that facilitate services to major business segments in SME, mid-corporate, large corporate, and project financing, in addition to dedicated support units with skill sets under treasury, transaction banking, advisory and investment banking, and Financial Institutions Group. The group also

focuses on government businesses both for financing as well as for resources support. Bank Nizwa's Wholesale Banking Group also organises seminars in major business locations in order to enhance the knowledge of clients in Islamic products and structuring. Speaking on the occasion, Narasimhan, said, "In the last five years the bank's Wholesale Banking Unit has achieved average growth of 36 per cent per annum in both asset and liabilities with portfolio growing exponentially from US\$650mn in 2015 to US\$4.25bn by the end of November 21. The growing, multi-industry portfolio is a testament of the trust clients place in our Sharia'a compliant products and services. Wholesale Banking Group has established itself to address all the require-

ments and provide 360°-degree solutions to its customers. It offers a comprehensive array of Sharia'a-compliant financing solutions to cater to the working capital finance, import, export finance, long-term finance, documentary credit requirements, and project-based financing."

In line with Bank Nizwa's growth strategy and contribution to the sultanate's economic diversification goals, the Wholesale Banking Group concluded several unique financing structures including green financing, food security projects, public private partnership model, infrastructure related project, tourism projects, projects of the aviation industry and core manufacturing industries like steel, cement, plastics, chemicals, oil and gas amongst other key sectors.

Bank Nizwa also offers tailor-made solutions to SMEs in the sultanate. The trust placed in the bank's services is evident through a notable increase in its SME customer-base and business volume. The bank is further upgrading its technology in state-of-the-art transaction banking platforms, including supply chain finance, which will compliment SME customers by leveraging large and mid-corporate customers.

Bank Nizwa has an entire suite of Sharia'a-compliant financing, savings and investment products for individual customers as well as SMEs, corporate and commercial clients.



Omani student teams win big in Shell NXplorers

Omani student teams, who rose to the challenge of Shell NXplorers 2021 and made home with wins in three categories through innovative solutions to environmental concerns, received the prestigious Global Recognition Awards at a virtual ceremony held recently.

NXplorers is a Shell educational programme that introduces young people to complex and creative thinking that can lead to positive global change. Omani participants won one gold, one silver and one bronze awards in three distinct categories: Fakhriya al Shaibani won the Silver Award as the 'Most Inspiring NXplorers Mentor'; Team Awaser from Dakhliya governorate won Golden under the 'Outstanding NXplorers Student Team'; and 'My Palm Green Legacy' from Al Amal School won the Merit for 'Best NXplorers Project by a School Team'.

The virtual award ceremony, held on Thursday, recognised and celebrated participants of Shell NXplorers from more than 20 countries, who came up with inspiring concepts and ideas to tackle global challenges related to food, water and energy. It was a world-wide celebration of NXplorers participants, facilitators and mentors, who, over the course of the year, availed opportunities to develop skills, tools and techniques to become agents of change.

Speaking on the occasion, Jasim al Ajmi, social investment and performance manager at Oman Shell, stated, "For the 2021 edition of Shell NXplorers, we at Oman Shell worked together with the Ministry of Education and Engineering Village, our delivery partner, to implement the programme in 22 solar schools across the country. While we were amazed by the

increase in the number of participants this year, despite the pandemic, we were also impressed by the diversity of ideas that the Omani student teams came up with. Over the years, our carefully developed educational programme has grown in strength and stature to touch the lives of so many young students. Since its launch in Oman, NXplorers has benefitted more than 1,400 students, and has equipped more than 60 science teachers and career advisors with the necessary information and methods to nurture STEM thinking skills amongst students."

Expressing delight over the win from the Omani teams, Dr Mayya al Azri, Director of the Department of Innovation and Scientific Olympics, Ministry of Education, said, "On behalf of the Ministry of Education, I would like to salute all the participants for their tremendous efforts in the field of STEM and congratulate our winners for validating Oman's caliber in the global arena."

Fakhriya, who won the distinguished silver award, is a NX facilitator from the Ministry of Education (Al Amal School). This award is a recognition of her inspiring credentials as a Shell mentor who went that extra mile to motivate and empower young students on their NXplorers journey.

As Golden winners of the 'Outstanding NXplorers Student Team', Awaser from Um Al Fadhel School at Al Dakhliya governorate won kudos for their hard work in restoring the heritage of banana tree plantation in their town, Birkat Al Mouz.

Merit award to 'My Palm Green Legacy' team from Al Amal School worked around the scourge of palm weevils in Oman.

Say 'Hello Milan' with Ooredoo's football-themed draw

Ooredoo is kicking off 2022 by giving customers a chance to win tickets to major matches around Europe.

All Home Internet, Hala prepaid and Shahry postpaid customers can be in to win a once-in-a-lifetime trip to watch a major European club game, which includes match tickets, air travel and accommodation for them and a friend, simply by upgrading, subscribing to plans or recharging.

As the official middle east & africa telecommunications partner for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, Ooredoo is getting



into the spirit of the game with a series of raffle draws under its 'Hello World' campaign, offering tickets to some of the biggest matches around the world!

This week the first of the raffle draws 'Hello Milan' was held for tickets to the Milan Derby at Mall of Oman.

The lucky winners each received tickets for them and a friend to travel to Italy to watch the derby between AC Milan and Inter Milan.

Keep watching this space for the up-coming 'Hello Manchester' raffle draw, which has been launched!

All Home Internet customers have to do to enter the draw is activate a new connection or upgrade their existing plan.

Hala customers simply need to activate a new SIM or recharge. Plus, more recharges mean more chances of winning.

Meanwhile, Shahry customers, both new subscribers or those upgrading their plans, will automatically be entered into the draw. Winners are being announced on Ooredoo's social media channels.

So don't miss out, grab the chance today to be part of the game!

Nissan X-Terra empowers owners to go beyond boundaries

Nissan X-Terra, the vehicle especially designed for adventure and the outdoors has received a terrific response from customers in Oman. The model, which empowers owners to go anywhere has impressed customers with its robust yet sophisticated look. They have defined the vehicle as an ideal partner for customers seeking exciting outdoor adventures. Customers of X-Terra can now avail low EMI, starting from RO206. EMIs are calculated on the basis of 20 per cent down payment and 3.25 per cent rate of interest for six years loan tenure.

A spokesperson for Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) said, "This is a good time for potential buyers to check out the Nissan X-Terra which is available with on low EMI. The X-Terra is a catalyst for new experiences, allowing owners to connect with the people in their lives. The vehicle delivers a robust four-wheel drive system, including a four-wheel lock, brake limited slip differential and electronic locking rear differential - while leading the class in interior

room and comfort."

He added, "Designed for adventure and the outdoors with a roomy interior and advanced technologies Nissan X-Terra ensures safety and comfort. It is equipped with an active safety suite, which comprises blind-spot warning, lane departure warning, intelligent driver alert, and intelligent forward collision warning. The SUV also has multiple airbags and a digital rear-view mirror."

Nissan X-Terra: Exciting drive

Powering the X-Terra is a 2.5ltr four-cylinder petrol engine with a seven-speed automatic transmission. The petrol engines deliver 124kW /165 hp and 241Nm of torque that ensures an exciting drive of speed and acceleration.

The X-Terra delivers a robust four-wheel

drive system, including a four-wheel lock, brake limited slip differential and electronic locking rear differential - while leading the class in interior room and comfort."

Built on 70 years of unmatched Nissan SUV expertise, the Nissan X-Terra reflects the evolution of four-wheel adventure travel and a growing consumer desire for connection. It effortlessly combines impressive strength with bold new design

and built-for-comfort roominess. Underlining this is breakthrough engineering and a suite of cutting-edge Nissan Intelligent Mobility (NIM) technologies to offer a superior driving experience and adventure-ready confidence for drivers to explore new places.

The SUV's rugged frame facilitates its durability and practicality, while the future-forward aesthetics are exhibited in the quad LED projector lamps and a bold new V-motion grille. The revised rear

and new LED taillights add to the X-Terra's athletic look, reflecting the Nissan Design team's dynamic and modern philosophy.

The styling of the X-Terra was developed at the Global Design studio in Japan. At 4.9m in length, 1.9m in height and just over 2.1m in width - with a ground clearance of 243 mm - the X-Terra looks right at home next to its bigger sibling, the Patrol, and borrows some design elements.

The front face resembles the Patrol with the powerful new V-motion grill, with its thick frame contrasting with the refined horizontal chrome bars within.



The proportions of the X-Terra are strong and bold. The hood is tall and horizontal, the body is muscular, and the driver sits up high for a commanding road presence. The overall image is imposing and rugged, but designers have also added expressions of sophistication and technology. This is underlined by the unique C-shaped LED signature headlamps, similar to those of the Patrol, but evolved and interpreted in a new way for the X-Terra. The quad LED projector lamps, like ice-cubes, have a high-tech vibe. Each one is intricately framed in its own bezel, showing off an attention to detail.

The front bumper with its unique layers overlapping each other creates an overall protected, yet sophisticated feeling. Combined with sleek, high tech headlamps and a powerful grill creates a distinctive front face that looks tough, modern and upscale. In the rear, the width of the vehicle is highlighted by the strong horizontal movement of the tail lamps.

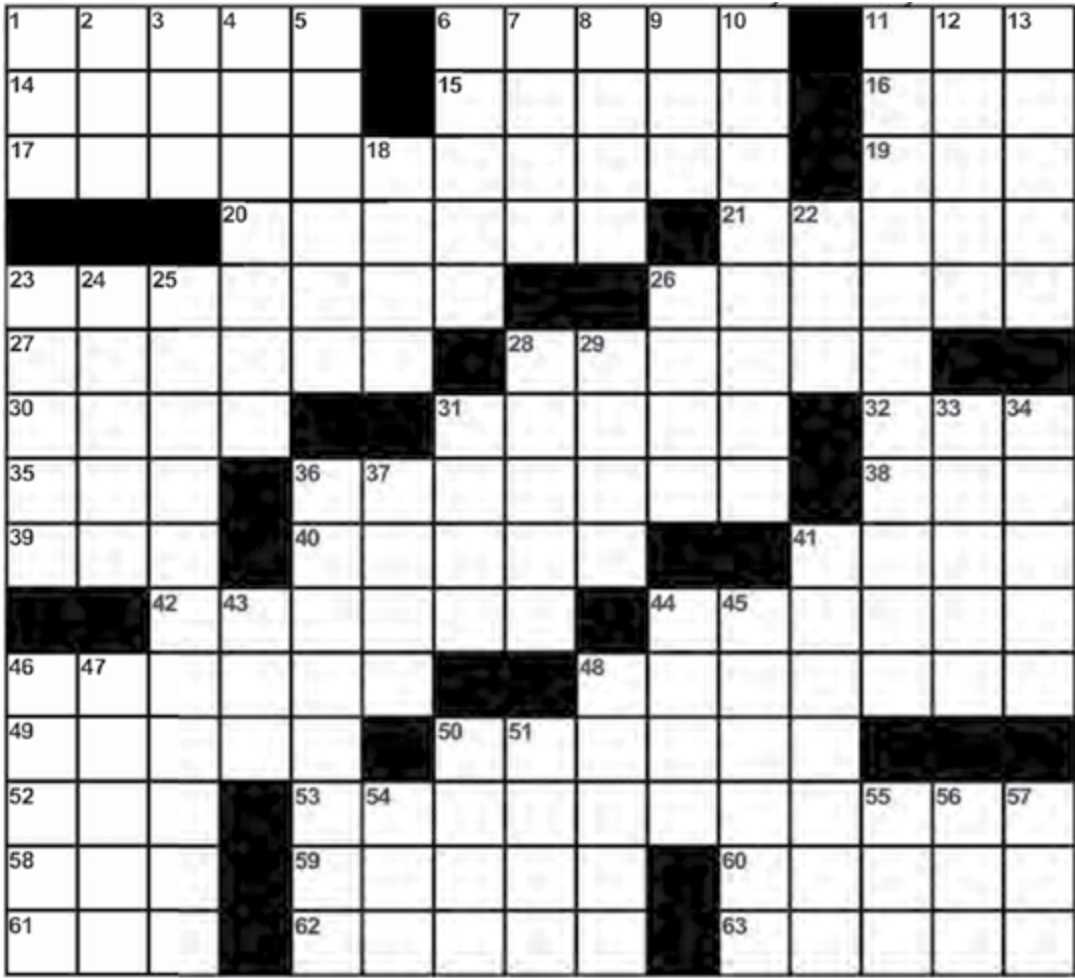
The wide LED signature rear lamps and the characteristic chrome centre finisher further emphasize its strength and width. Like its Patrol sibling, the rear bumper uses squared-off shapes to show that the X-Terra is well protected.

Taking a closer look at the wheels, the titanium grade models will come equipped with 17-inch alloy wheels, while the platinum grade will come with a set of 18-inch machine cut alloys. Chrome side steps and a chrome auto folding mirrors complement the overall look, alongside the fender vent and smart roof rail.

The X-Terra is available in seven exterior colours, including bright brown and burgundy. The upscale exterior is matched by premium black and light grey interior colours that add to the richness of the vehicle, along with a choice of cloth or leather seat fabrics, depending on the grade.

The X-Terra is equipped with a versatile ladder-frame chassis, reinforced to give it greater rigidity for an authentic off-road drive.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) It's good if you don't strike
6) In spite of the fact that, briefly
11) Fox rival
14) Brown, Yale, etc.
15) Cylindrical fastener
16) Statute
17) Quick winnings provider, sometimes
19) Cinnabar, for one
20) Exuberant-sounding mackerels?
21) Small sample
23) What hiring your son is
26) NYPD descriptor
27) React to an effective alarm
28) Barnard College grad, for one
30) Monopoly requirement
31) Whimsical garden figurine
32) One-customer link
35) Squid's weapon
36) Smaller and rounder, as eyes
38) Infamous horde member
39) Title of respect,

abroad
40) Air freshener targets
41) Breathe rapidly
42) Fountain sound
44) Quick look
46) Not sympathetic
48) Hopped on, as a train
49) Battlefield healer
50) Forty winks, in Mexico
52) "We_ not amused"
53) Heeds "heads up!"
58) William McKinley's wife
59) Blue eyes or baldness, e.g.
60) _ date (makes wedding plans)
61) Zero, in soccer
62) Have a funny feeling
63) Halloween trick alternative

DOWN

1) Bro's sib
2) Plumber's pipe material (Abbr.)
3) Expose to public view
4) Did 27-Across again?
5) Landed property
6) Committee type
7) Plumb crazy

8) "Jabberwocky" beginning
9) Female pronoun
10) Veteran
11) Nearby
12) Conner and Starr
13) Sugary
18) Face part
22) Landers who offers advice
23) Comaneci of Olympics fame
24) "Dallas" family name
25) Flight, hotel and rental car together, e.g.
26) Act incensed
28) "The Giant" of wrestling fame
29) Superman's Lane
31) London hoosegow
33) 1/16 of a pound
34) Helped a pot, in a way
36) Russian soups
37) Borderline
41) St. Patrick's Day celebrant
43) William Tell's canton
44) "Gee whillikers!"
45) Most recent
46) With masts fully extended

47) "Rigoletto" composer
48) Midler or Davis
50) Laurel or Musial
51) Wife of Osiris
54) Great fury

55) Summer on the Riviera
56) Jefferson Davis' gov.
57) Kit_ (candy bar brand)

NOTE PAD

TRADE ABACI PUP
ACRES RAYON ANA
PACESETTERS ICY
PEASE SUBDUE
ASPENS CELESTE
SEANCE BOTTLE
SIC ELGIN SIRE
ANKH SAKIS EVER
MESAS MECCA ARE
ARTIER HERNIA
SADDENS WRITER
UNDYED ISAAC
NIL PURSESTRING
UTE ECOLE EATEN
PAS DETER SCOOP

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

It's been tougher than you thought it would be to get things taken care of, especially with recent surprises. Still, you need to finish a certain project. The problem is that you won't be able to get it done when you want it done if you don't ask for help. Go ahead. Asking for help falls neatly under the heading of delegating duties, and that's what authority figures do.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Everyone's emotions are running on high, and just this once yours aren't any exception. Okay, so you're usually calm, cool, and collected, as well as unbiased, unprejudiced, and eminently fair. That's what you're usually like. At the moment, however, you'll back away from anything that doesn't allow you to tell it like it is. Go ahead. How often do you get this way? You're so very entitled.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Intensity is the name of the game at the moment. You're in the mood for it and more than willing to participate. That could be great fun if you're with the right person, but if you happen to be involved with someone who's just a little too intense, or if you've ever worried about their being more than just dangerous in a sexy way, well, leave it alone. You can find that same intensity without worrying about your safety.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Stop worrying about the neighbour's reaction, or anyone else's, for that matter, to the people you've been associating with lately. If you enjoy them and the feeling is mutual, what's the problem? At some point, you'll need to stop defending your choices in favour of just letting everyone know that these are the friends you've chosen. Period. This might be one of those times. Don't be held back for any reason other than your own.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

It's high time you made some plans. Consider, for example, that new friend you've been dying to spend some time with. The one who's been hinting around that they might be interested in more from you than just a platonic relationship. Why not give this a trial run? See if there's something there. Just be sure you can go back to being friends if it doesn't work out.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You usually don't have time to mess around with long, involved explanations, detailed descriptions, or drawn-out instant replays of who said what to whom. But at the moment, you just can't get enough of all of it. So if someone tries to blow you off with just a couple of quick quips, you won't stand for it. Don't take no for an answer. Get the information you need and don't settle for less.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Much as you really want to laugh off a recent conversation you had with a higher-up, you know darned well you can't. You're taking this far more seriously than you ordinarily would, but you're absolutely right. If you don't pay attention to subtle signals, you'll be wishing you had tomorrow or next month. The good news is that no matter what you say right now will end up being the perfect thing to say. Congrats in advance.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

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

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Just because your companion is trying hard to keep things calm doesn't mean you should deliberately stir the pot. You know that, but keeping quiet is still going to be difficult, especially if you have something on your mind that's itching to come out. Does it need to be verbalised? That's up to you. Whatever you decide, your loved ones will still adore you either way, but your popularity among the ranks might slide just a tad.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Just because your new buds are different doesn't mean there's anything wrong with them. You know that, but you're already choosing jury members and rehearsing your closing statements. But think about this: Is it possible you're so ambivalent about them because you know they're rebels and you're just now realising you are too? Your true colours finally shine! Don't be afraid.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You might not have anywhere special to be today, which is a really good thing. In fact, even if you do have somewhere to be, bet you won't be there. You'll be far more in the mood to use all the delightfully passionate energy the universe is passing out in a far more private place. And you'll have absolutely no problem finding someone to join you. Maybe you both will enjoy some sun shine and would like to relax by the beach.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Someone who's introduced to you by either a family member or a co-worker could end up being a part of your life for a very long time, but you two might not be able to take your show on the road just yet. If you can't see each other publicly right now, it might be best to wait until you can. You know how you are about honesty and integrity. Why get this off to a bad start? A little bit of waiting won't have any effects on your relationship.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Garampani sanctuary is located at

a Junagarh, Gujarat
b Diphu, Assam
c Kohima, Nagaland
d Gangtok, Sikkim
2. For which of the following disciplines is Nobel Prize awarded?

a Physics and Chemistry
b Physiology or Medicine
c Literature, Peace and Economics
d All of the above
3. Hitler party which came into power in 1933 is known as

a Labour Party
b Nazi Party
c Ku-Klux-Klan
d Democratic Party

Answers: 1. b 2. d 3. b

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

S	O	T	J
A	E	I	M
O	U	L	A
D	K	A	R

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Airstrike on Yemen prison leaves at least 70 dead

The strikes came after a drone and missile attack on Abu Dhabi that killed three people last Monday

Saada, Yemen - At least 70 people were killed in an airstrike on a prison as Yemen's long-running conflict suffered a dramatic escalation on Friday that drew condemnation from UN chief Antonio Guterres.

The Huthi rebels released gruesome video footage showing bodies in the rubble and mangled corpses from the attack, which levelled buildings at the prison in their northern heartland of Saada.

The Saudi-led coalition, which has been fighting the rebels since 2015, released a statement on Saturday denying it carried out the strike.

Reports of the targeting of the rebel-held facility are 'baseless and unfounded', said coalition spokesman Turki al Malki, who was quoted by the official Saudi Press Agency.

The coalition official said the prison was not placed on a 'No Strike List in accordance with the agreed upon mechanism' with the United Nations' humanitarian affairs office in Yemen and had 'not been reported by the International Committee of the Red Cross'.

Malki said the coalition would share with both agencies 'the facts and details, as well as the media misinformation' by the Huthis about the facility.

Further south in the port city of Hodeida, at least three children died when airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition hit a telecommunications facility as they played nearby, Save the Children said. Yemen also suffered a country-wide internet blackout.

"The children were reportedly playing on a nearby football field when missiles struck," Save the Children said.

Eight aid agencies operating in Yemen said in a joint statement they were 'horrified by the news



Supporters of Yemen's rebel movement protest against the airstrike on a prison, in the capital Sanaa on Friday (AFP)

We are horrified by the news that more than 70 people including migrants, women and children have been killed in a blatant disregard for civilian lives

AID AGENCIES

that more than 70 people, including migrants, women and children, have been killed... in a blatant disregard for civilian lives'.

They said the prison in Saada was used as a holding centre for migrants, who made up many of the casualties.

The strikes came after the Huthis took the seven-year war into a new phase by claiming a drone and missile attack on Abu

Dhabi that killed three people last Monday.

They came as the UN Security Council met to discuss that attack at the UAE's request.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a statement on Friday called for 'all parties to the conflict to de-escalate' and 'abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law' after the Yemen strike and the attack on the Emirati capital.

'Proportionate response'

The United Arab Emirates insisted that it and other coalition members remained committed to 'proportionate' responses to Huthi attacks.

"The coalition undertakes to abide by international law and proportionate response in all its military operations," UAE Ambassador to the United Nations Lana Nusseibeh said.

The Security Council unanimously condemned the 'heinous terrorist attacks' by the Yemeni rebels, but in a statement before the meeting the council's Norwegian presidency also strongly condemned the latest violence.

In a later statement, the UN

said Guterres 'reminds all parties that attacks directed against civilians and civilian infrastructure are prohibited by international humanitarian law'.

Aid workers said hospitals in Saada were overwhelmed after the prison attack, with one receiving 70 dead and 138 wounded, according to Doctors Without Borders.

Two other hospitals have received 'many wounded' and as night fell, the rubble was still being searched, the aid agency said.

'Horrific act'

Ahmed Mahat, Doctors Without Borders' head of mission in Yemen, said: "There are many bodies still at the scene of the air

'Continued attacks make achieving peace difficult'

Tehran, Iran - Iran on Saturday said that the recent airstrikes on rebel-held areas of Yemen 'make achieving peace in the war-torn country more difficult'.

The Saudi-led coalition has denied as 'groundless' reports it carried out an airstrike on a prison in Yemen's rebel-held north that aid groups said killed at least 70 people, including migrants, women and children.

Saudi Arabia accuses regional rival Iran of providing military support to Yemen's Huthi rebels, especially missiles and rockets, claims that Tehran denies.

"The continuation of the coalition's military attacks on Yemen with the silence and indifference of the interna-

tional community and the uncontrolled sale of weapons to the aggressors... has made the path to achieve a just peace in the country even more difficult," Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said in a statement on Saturday.

The latest violence in Yemen's seven-year war came after Huthi forces on Monday claimed their first deadly attack on Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates, a member of the coalition.

The attack, which coincided with a coalition strike on Hodeida that killed three children and knocked out Yemen's Internet, was condemned by the United Nations Secretary-General.

AFP

strike, many missing people."

"It is impossible to know how many people have been killed. It seems to have been a horrific act of violence."

The coalition claimed the attack in Hodeida, a lifeline port for the shattered country, but did not say it had carried out any strikes on Saada.

Global Internet watchdog NetBlocks reported a 'nation-scale collapse of Internet connectivity'. AFP correspondents in Hodeida and Sanaa confirmed the outage.

Yemen's civil war began in 2014 when the Huthis descended from their base in Saada to overrun the capital Sanaa, prompting Saudi-led forces to intervene to prop up the govern-

ment the following year.

Tensions have soared in recent weeks after the UAE-backed Giants Brigade drove the rebels out of Shabwa province, undermining their months-long campaign to take the key city of Marib further north.

On January 3, the Huthis hijacked a United Arab Emirates-flagged ship in the Red Sea.

And on Monday, they claimed a long-range attack that struck oil facilities and the airport in Abu Dhabi, killing two Indians and a Pakistani, and wounding six other people.

The attack was the first deadly assault acknowledged by the UAE inside its borders and claimed by the Huthis.

AFP

Sudan's Hemeti meets Ethiopia's Defence Minister on a rare visit



Abraham Belay



Mohamed Hamdan Daglo

Khartoum, Sudan - Sudan's second most powerful leader met with Ethiopia's Defence Minister on Saturday on a rare visit to Addis Ababa by an official from Khartoum, that comes amid border tensions, officials said.

Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, widely known as Hemeti, who is number two in Sudan's ruling council, will be in Ethiopia for two days to meet 'several Ethiopian officials', Sudan's state news agency SUNA reported.

He was met at Addis Ababa airport by Ethiopian Defence Minister Abraham Belay, a statement from Sudan's ruling council said. He was also welcomed by senior officials from Ethiopia's government and intelligence services, it added.

Daglo is head of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a much feared and powerful paramilitary unit that is accused of atrocities in the western region of Darfur.

Relations between Khartoum and Addis Ababa deteriorated due to a territorial conflict over the disputed Al-Fashaqa border

region, where Ethiopian farmers cultivate fertile land claimed by Sudan. There have been sporadic deadly clashes between the two sides in recent years.

Al-Fashaqa also borders Ethiopia's troubled Tigray region, and tens of thousands of Ethiopian refugees have crossed into Sudan fleeing fighting.

In November, Sudan's armed forces said six soldiers were killed in an attack by armed groups and militias linked to the Ethiopian military, a report denied by Addis Ababa, who blamed rebels from Tigray.

Sudan, along with Egypt, is also locked in a bitter dispute over Ethiopia's mega-dam on the Blue Nile. The two downstream countries, dependent on the river for most of their water, see Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam as an existential threat.

Sudan has been rocked by weeks of mass demonstrations since an October 25 military takeover that derailed the country's transition to civilian rule.

AFP

Malaysian protesters demand resignation of anti-graft chief

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia - Hundreds of Malaysians rallied in the capital on Saturday, demanding the country's powerful anti-graft chief resign over a stock trading controversy where he owned millions of shares.

Wearing masks and shouting 'reject corruption', the mostly black-clad crowd of about two hundred called for immediate action against Azam Baki, the Malaysian Anti Corruption Commission's (MACC) top official.

Protests in the Southeast Asian nation have been rare since the beginning of the pandemic due to virus curbs and fears of infection.

But public anger over corrup-



A man holds a photo of Azam Baki during an 'Arrest Azam Baki' rally over his alleged improper proxy trading, in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday (AFP)

tion has previously led to mass demonstrations and election upsets, with the multi-billion-dollar

1MDB scandal contributing to the longest-governing coalition's downfall in 2018.

New York mayor Adams calls for national action on guns after death of police officer

New York, US - New York's mayor called on the federal government to help 'stop the flow of weapons' in the city after a police officer was killed and another wounded in a shooting on Friday.

America's largest city has been rocked by a spate of shootings in recent days with Mayor Eric Adams - a former police officer who was elected on a pledge to fight crime - vowing to tighten gun control.

"We have witnessed the failure on a federal level to stop the flow of guns to this city," Adams said at a briefing after the third incident this week in which an officer has been shot in New York.

"We need Washington to join us and act now to stop the flow



Mayor Eric Adams addresses media in New York City on Friday (AFP)

of guns in New York City and cities like New York."

Friday's shooting took place after three officers responded to a call from a mother who was confronted by her son in a

Harlem district apartment, police said.

When police arrived at the scene, the 47-year-old man opened fire on them 'without warning', New York Police De-

partment Chief Keechant Sewell said in the press briefing.

"In a moment, a young 22-year-old life was ended and another forever altered," Sewell said of the two officers shot in the incident.

Adams questioned how the suspect got hold of a firearm.

"We don't make guns here. How are we removing thousands of guns off the street and they still find their way into New York City, in the hands of people who are killers?" said Adams, a Democrat who took office on January 1.

"We're going to find these guns and we're going to find those who carry them and use them," he told reporters.

New York is still reeling from two other violent deaths last

week.

On Saturday, Michelle Go, a 40-year-old Asian American woman, died after a homeless man dealing with mental health issues pushed her onto an underground track as a train pulled into Times Square station.

The day before, a 19-year-old Puerto Rican woman, Kristal Bayron-Nieves, was fatally shot during a robbery in the East Harlem Burger King where she worked. The assailant took about US\$100 from the till and shot her as he fled.

Police say that last year 488 homicides were recorded in the city of 9mn, 4.3 per cent more than in 2020. They are up sharply compared to the level five years ago.

AFP

Fighting between IS, Kurd forces in Syria kills 90

Beirut, Lebanon - Fighting raged for a third day on Saturday between the Islamic State group and Kurdish forces in Syria after IS attacked a prison housing fighters, in violence that has claimed nearly 90 lives, a monitor said.

The assault on the Ghwayran prison in the northern city of Hasakeh is one of IS's most significant since its 'caliphate' was declared defeated in Syria nearly three years ago.

"At least 28 members of the Kurdish security forces, five civilians and 45 members of IS have been killed' in the violence, said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

IS launched the attack on Thursday night against the prison housing some 3,500 suspected members of the group, including some of its leaders, said the Observatory.

The fighters 'seized weapons they found' in the detention centre and freed several fellow IS fighters, said the Britain-based monitor, which relies on sources inside war-torn Syria for its information. Hundreds of inmates had since been recaptured but dozens were still believed to be on the loose, the Observatory said.

With the backing of US-led coalition aircraft, Kurdish security forces have encircled the prison and are battling to retake full control of surrounding neighbourhoods, which IS fighters have used as a launching pad for their attacks.

The Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on Saturday said it was continuing 'operations to keep security in Hasakeh city and the perimeter of the Ghwayran prison', with the help of coalition allies and Kurdish internal security forces.



Syrians flee their homes in the Ghwayran neighbourhood in the northern city of Hasakeh on Saturday (AFP)

It said Saturday's clashes centred mostly in neighbourhoods north of Ghwayran, where it carried out raids and 'killed a number of IS fighters that had attacked the jail'.

The group said in a statement released on Friday by its Amaq news agency that its attack on the jail aimed to 'free the prisoners'.

'Fat target'

IS has carried out regular attacks against Kurdish and government targets in Syria since the rump of its once-sprawling proto-state was overrun in March 2019.

Most of their guerrilla attacks have been against military targets and oil installations in re-

mote areas, but the Hasakeh prison break could mark a new phase in the group's resurgence.

It was not immediately clear whether the prison break was part of a centrally coordinated operation - timed to coincide with an attack on a military base in neighbouring Iraq - or the action of a local IS cell.

Analyst Nicholas Heras of the Newlines Institute in Washington said the group targeted the prison to bolster its numbers.

The Islamic State group 'wants to move beyond being the terrorist and criminal network that it has devolved into, and to do that it needs more fighters', he told AFP.

"Prison breaks represent the

best opportunity for ISIS to regain its strength in arms, and Ghwayran prison is a nice fat target for ISIS because its overcrowded," he said, using another acronym for IS.

The prospect of a repeat of the attack remains very real, said Colin Clarke, research director at the New York-based Soufan Center think-tank.

"The SDF needs a comprehensive strategy to deal with this threat," he said.

The Kurdish authorities have long warned they do not have the capacity to hold, let alone put on trial, the thousands of IS fighters captured in years of operations.

According to Kurdish authorities, more than 50 nationalities

are represented in a number of Kurdish-run prisons, where more than 12,000 IS suspects are now held.

Many of the IS prisoners' countries of origins have been reluctant to repatriate them, fearing a public backlash at home.

Abdulkarim Omar, the semi-autonomous administration's top foreign policy official, blamed the IS prison attack on the 'international community's failure to shoulder its responsibilities'.

The war in Syria broke out in 2011 and has since killed close to half a million people and spurred the largest conflict-induced displacement since World War II.

AFP



Taliban fighters patrol along a street in Kabul on Friday (AFP)

Taliban say talks in Oslo with West will help to 'transform atmosphere of war'

Kabul, Afghanistan - The Taliban's first official talks with the West on European soil since seizing power in Afghanistan will help to 'transform the atmosphere of war' after a two-decade insurgency against NATO forces, the group's top spokesman told AFP on Saturday.

The Taliban stormed back to power in August as US and foreign troops began their final withdrawal from the country following a stalemate on the battlefield.

No country has yet recognised the Taliban's government - notorious for human rights abuses during a first stint in power between 1996 and 2001 when they were ousted by a US-led invasion.

"The Islamic Emirate has taken steps for meeting the demands of the Western world and we hope to strengthen our relations through diplomacy with all the countries, including European countries and the West in general," Zabihullah Mujahid told AFP on Saturday.

The Taliban want to 'transform the atmosphere of war... into a peaceful situation'.

Talks between the Taliban and Western officials will open in Oslo on Sunday on human rights and humanitarian aid as a poverty crisis deepens.

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated drastically since the Taliban's takeover. International aid came to a sudden halt and the United States has frozen US\$9.5bn in Afghan central bank assets held overseas.

Hunger now threatens 23mn Afghans, or 55 per cent of the population, according to the United Nations, which says it needs US\$5bn from donor countries this year to address the humanitarian crisis in the country.

The visit from Sunday to Tuesday will see meetings between the Taliban, Norwegian authorities and officials from a number of allied countries including Britain, the European Union, France, Germany, Italy and the United States, the Norwegian foreign ministry statement said.

The Taliban delegation is also expected to meet Afghans from civil society, including women leaders and journalists, at a time when the freedoms of those living in Afghanistan are being increasingly curtailed.

"These meetings do not represent a legitimisation or recognition of the Taliban," Norwegian Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt said on Friday.

AFP

Germany to send field hospital to Ukraine as war fears grow

Berlin, Germany - Germany will send a field hospital to Ukraine, Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht said on Saturday, while once again rejecting Kiev's calls for weapons delivery as fears of a Russian invasion grow.

Berlin has already delivered respirators to Ukraine and severely injured Ukrainian soldiers are currently being treated in Bundeswehr hospitals, the minister told *Welt am Sonntag* newspaper.

"In February, a complete field hospital will be handed over, including the necessary training, all co-financed by Germany with €5.3mn (US\$6mn approx)," Lambrecht said.

"We are standing on Kiev's side. We must do everything to de-escalate the situation.

"Weapons deliveries would not be helpful at the moment - that is the consensus within the government," she added.

Russia has massed tens of thousands of troops on the Ukrainian border, denying it plans to invade but demanding security guarantees, including a permanent ban on the country joining NATO.

Echoing Western allies, Lambrecht said Moscow's demand to decide which state joins NATO was a 'red line' for the alliance.

"There is no Russian veto-right for membership to NATO. Every sovereign nation that shares our values is free to apply for membership. But beyond this



German Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht (left) speaks to Chancellor Olaf Scholz prior to a meeting of the Cabinet, in Berlin on Friday (AFP)

red line, there is readiness from the West to speak with Russia and to take its interests into account," she said.

Turning to Mali, another theatre of conflict involving Russia, Lambrecht said Moscow will not achieve its aims simply by deploying mercenaries to the West African countries.

Mali is the epicentre of an insurgency that began in the north of the country in 2012 and spread three years later to neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso.

Germany has around a thousand troops stationed in Mali as part of the United Nations' MINUSMA mission.

The West believes that several hundred Russian mercenaries from the Wagner group had been deployed in the centre and

north of the country.

"Moscow will not succeed in getting the West to carry out a quasi retreat automatically wherever it doesn't want to see us by sending mercenaries," said Lambrecht.

"We will not give way, we will not make it that easy for the Russians."

The Wagner Group has caused controversy through its involvement in Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic as well as the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Russia denies any government link with the Wagner Group but the unit has been linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman close to President Vladimir Putin.

AFP

Twitter suspends hundreds of accounts promoting Marcos Jr of Philippines

Manila, Philippines - Twitter has suspended hundreds of accounts reportedly linked to supporters of Philippine presidential frontrunner Ferdinand Marcos Jr, which the social media giant said had violated its rules on manipulation and spam.

The son and namesake of the country's former dictator is drawing support from a massive social media campaign seeking to get him elected in May, which critics say is attempting to rewrite the family's history.

Twitter said it had reviewed the accounts and hashtags identified in a recent article by Philippine news site Rappler.

More than 300 accounts had been removed 'for violating our platform manipulation and spam policy', Twitter said in a statement sent to AFP on Saturday.

Most of them had been taken down before the Rappler article was published on Tuesday and an investigation was ongoing, it said.

Filipinos are among the world's heaviest users of social media and the country has become a key battleground for fake news.

"With the Philippine elections taking place this May, we remain vigilant about identifying and eliminating suspected information campaigns targeting election conversations," Twitter said.

Marcos Jr's spokesman Vic Rodriguez said there was 'no certainty' that all the suspended ac-



This file photo shows Ferdinand Marcos Jr being greeted by his supporters in Manila on April 17, 2017 (AFP)

counts belonged to supporters of the presidential hopeful.

Election victory for Marcos Jr would mark the ultimate political comeback for the family, which was chased into exile in the United States after its patriarch's humiliating downfall in 1986.

Marcos Sr and his wife Imelda were accused of massive corruption while in power.

Recent voter surveys show Marcos Jr holding a huge lead over his nearest rival and nem-

esis Leni Robredo, who is the incumbent vice president.

Rappler said Marcos Jr supporters were 'looking to dominate Twitter' and that many of the accounts it investigated were created around the time he announced his bid for the presidency in October.

The accounts pushed the narrative that the Marcoses were 'victims' of the 1986 revolt and their return to Malacanang presidential palace is 'long overdue',

it added.

Twitter said sharing political content on an account or rallying people do so via hashtags was allowed, 'unless the accounts are inauthentic, compensated or automated, which we see no clear evidence of in this case'.

Last Monday, the social media giant said it was expanding a test feature that will allow users in Brazil, Spain and the Philippines to report misleading content.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Misinformation adds risk to kids in US

Washington, US - The COVID-19 pandemic took a deadly toll on adults in the United States for two years while largely sparing children from adding to the dire statistics.

But the rapid spread of the Omicron variant led to record pediatric infections and hospitalisations in the country, and anti-vaccination misinformation that tells parents the shots are dangerous is adding to the risk.

The chances of young people dying from COVID-19 remain low. The shots greatly reduce the odds of severe illness, and vaccinated mothers may pass protection to their babies, but vaccine hesitancy pushed online leaves both parents and children vulnerable.

From worries that the shots were developed too quickly, to false claims that the jabs can impact future fertility, physician Wassim Ballan of Phoenix Children's Hospital said combating misinformation has become part of his job.

"Unfortunately, a lot of times when we're having this time with a family to discuss these things is when the child is already in hospital," he said of the problem.

Parents need to understand that the vaccines are 'the most important tool for protection', especially to avoid multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children, a rare and dangerous complication that can follow a mild COVID-19 infection.

Only 27 per cent of children aged five to 11 have received a first dose of the vaccine in the United States. Hospitalisations reached a pandemic high of 914



Environmental Services workers deep clean a non-COVID room with disinfectant in the acute care unit at the Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, Washington on Friday (AFP)



A packet of nutrition beverage for children lies on a shelf (AFP)

children per day this month, up dramatically from the previous peak of 342 in September 2021.

Protection from the womb

The first week of January 2022 saw Texas Children's Hospital in Houston report 12 babies in intensive care with COVID-19.

Babies are too young for the COVID-19 shot, but Kathryn Gray, attending physician of maternal-fetal medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital, said research increasingly shows that vaccination during pregnancy leads to antibodies safely being transferred to the baby, offering limited protection.

Expectant mothers have also shown hesitancy to get the shot after they were excluded from initial clinical trials.

Gray is among those who are monitoring the situation. 'To date there have been no safety signals' in the data, she said, adding that she has 'a lot of confidence' in telling patients the shot is safe during pregnancy for mother and baby.

"If they truly want to protect their infants, getting vaccinated is the thing that will protect them the most at this time."

Health agencies across the globe say the same, but the initial lack of data continues to be exploited in vaccine-opposed messaging on social media.

Posts on Facebook and Twitter claimed that stillbirths rose following the push to vaccinate pregnant people, even though going unprotected against the disease is the greater risk.

Epidemiologists Carla DeSisto and Sascha Ellington from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said data from 1.2mn US births showed 'no evidence the rate of stillbirths is higher overall dur-

Russia sees record virus cases second day running

Moscow, Russia - The Russian government on Saturday reported a record number of new coronavirus cases after the Kremlin warned of a looming surge in cases driven by the Omicron variant.

An online portal dedicated to the coronavirus outbreak registered 57,212 new daily cases, surging past the previous record set on Friday of 49,513. Following a strict but brief national lockdown at the beginning of the pandemic, Russia has held back on curbs hoping instead to protect its struggling economy.

Russian President Vladimir Putin warned last week that the country needed to ready



A woman wearing mask leaves a subway station in Moscow (AFP)

for an Omicron-driven surge, calling for more testing and vaccinations.

Several vaccines developed in Russia have been freely available for months but still only around half of the country is fully inoculated due to widespread vaccine scepticism.

AFP

Samoa, Kiribati enter lockdown

Sydney, Australia - Kiribati and Samoa entered lockdowns on Saturday after overseas arrivals brought COVID-19 to the Pacific island nations that had avoided the worst of the pandemic for two years.

Until this month, Kiribati hadn't reported a single virus case, while Samoa had only recorded two since the pandemic began, according to the WHO.

AFP

ing the pandemic'.

But their research did reveal the risks of contracting the virus while pregnant.

'Compared to pregnant people without COVID-19, pregnant people with COVID-19 are at increased risk of adverse pregnancy outcomes including preterm birth and stillbirth,' the researchers said by email.

'Unvaccinated milk'

Breastfeeding has also been the target of misinformation, with posts claiming that babies suffered rashes or even death upon nursing from a vaccinated mother.

The Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine recommends vaccination for those who are

lactating and says there is no reason to stop breastfeeding upon receiving the vaccine.

Misinformation became increasingly common in private Facebook groups where parents connect to share and sell breast milk, group moderators told AFP. In one of the largest such groups, Bethany Bristow said she was concerned by requests for 'unvaccinated milk'.

The New York mother, along with her fellow moderators, decided to ban such requests, and the rules for her group of more than 10,500 parents now state: "Advertising or requesting vaccine free milk puts you, your children and community at risk."

Studies are finding specific

benefits of milk from a vaccinated mother, according to Laura Ward, co-director of the Center for Breastfeeding Medicine at Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

"Antibodies have been detected in the breast milk of vaccinated lactating women. This means that breastfed infants may have some protection against COVID-19 if their mothers receive the vaccine," she said.

Gray agreed. 'Breast milk is full of antibodies based on a person's prior exposures both to vaccines and infection'. "Those things don't pose a risk to infants, they're actually helpful at protecting them," she said.

AFP



Malaysia's former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad was admitted to a specialist heart hospital for the third time in just weeks (AFP)

Malaysian ex-PM Mahathir stable after admission in heart hospital

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia - Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad is in a stable condition after being admitted to a specialist heart hospital for the third time in just weeks, his daughter said on Saturday.

The 96-year-old has been receiving treatment at the National Heart Institute in Kuala Lumpur for the past two days, Marina Mahathir said.

Media descended on the hospital as news spread that Mahathir had been admitted again, and current Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob also paid him a visit.

In a statement, his daughter said he was receiving follow-up treatment after a procedure at the same facility about a fortnight ago. "His condition is now stable and he has been responding well to treatment," she said. His family 'requests that people pray for him to make a full recovery', she added.

Mahathir also spent several days at the hospital in December

His condition is stable and he has been responding well to treatment. We request people to pray for him

MARINA MAHATHIR

for a check-up. He has had numerous heart problems over the years, suffering several heart attacks and undergoing bypass surgery.

Mahathir is one of Malaysia's most dominant political figures, having served twice as prime minister for a total of 24 years.

He was leader from 1981 to 2003, then returned to power in 2018 at the age of 92, heading a reformist coalition in the wake of the huge 1MDB corruption scandal. But that administration collapsed in 2020 due to infighting.

AFP

'Proud' Tongans determined to rebuild battered homeland after eruption

Nuku'alofa, Tonga - Tongans said they were determined to rebuild their battered homeland in the wake of last week's devastating eruption and tsunami as a massive clean up continued on Saturday in the Pacific kingdom.

The powerful eruption of the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano last Saturday triggered a tsunami that crashed across the Tongan archipelago, affecting more than 80 per cent of the population, according to the United Nations.

Toxic ash polluted drinking water supplies, crops were destroyed and at least two villages have been completely wiped out. Delivering humanitarian supplies remains a challenge after the undersea cables connecting Tonga to the rest of the world were severed.

But Tongan journalist Marian Kupu said most locals are adamant on remaining as the huge recovery efforts began.

"We want to stay here in our country because this is what identifies us as Tongans. We want to rebuild our country and unite and move on," Kupu said.

An estimated one cubic kilometre of material blasted from the volcano, and experts expect Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai to remain active 'for weeks to months'.

"Tonga's people are going to need sustained support responding to a disaster of this scale," Sione Hufanga, the United Nations Coordination Specialist in Tonga said.

"The people of Tonga are still overwhelmed with the magnitude of the disaster."

Tonga ranks third on the World Risk Report, which measures countries on their suscepti-



Members of the Australian Defence Force embark on the HMAS Adelaide at the Port of Brisbane on Thursday before departure to help out Tonga (AFP)

bility to experiencing natural disasters.

Despite the risk, Kupu said most Tongans wanted to stay.

"It's this feeling of pride that we have here, that we don't want to leave the country we were born and raised in," she said.

One survivor from the island of Atata, which was flattened by the tsunami, told her he would return to the island even after the devastation, she added.

"He explained he wished to go back because his parents are buried there, he was born there and his life is there. He wished the government or anybody would help rebuild his little island so he could go back."

'Unprecedented disaster'

Japanese, New Zealand and Australian defence forces have started delivering urgent relief supplies, particularly water, to Tonga but an Australian minister said fears of unleashing a 'COVID crisis' were complicating aid efforts.

Tonga is COVID-free and has strict border control policies, requiring contactless delivery of aid, and a three week quarantine period for any humanitarian personnel who wish to enter the country.

"It's a very, very difficult time for the people of Tonga," Australia's International Develop-

ment Minister Zed Seselja said, but added: "We respect absolutely the desire of the Tongan government not to add a COVID crisis to a humanitarian crisis caused by a tsunami."

On Saturday, a Japanese plane brought potable water to the kingdom, Kyodo News reported, with three other aircraft and a transport vessel carrying high-pressure cleaners expected soon.

Meanwhile, a third New Zealand navy vessel carrying helicopters, water, tarpaulins, milk powder and engineering equipment is on its way to Tonga and is expected early next week.

Defence Minister Peeni

Henare said all deliveries will be contactless in accordance with Tonga's COVID-19 protocols.

The Tongan government has called the dual eruption-tsunami 'an unprecedented disaster' and declared a nearly one-month national emergency.

The eruption broke a vital undersea communications cable, and it is expected to be at least a month before all communication services are fully restored.

In the meantime, partial communications has been established, although mobile network provider Digicel said the high number of calls to the island was producing delays.

AFP

Scripture and script



Hubert Vaz

Al Rahman - a solo exhibition of *Nastaliq* calligraphy by visiting Iranian artist Ali Pasandedih - is currently underway at the Art & Soul gallery, in Water Front mall, Shatti Qurm. The exhibition, which opened on January 16, will be on till January 25.

Pasandedih, who travelled from Iran to Oman for his 16th solo exhibition, has created unique Persian calligraphy works, in a style known as *Nastaliq* which is considered the most popular of calligraphy styles. His artworks include phrases from the Holy Quran as well as verses from some meaningful Iranian poems.

Nastaliq is an Arabic script which was developed around the 15th century and is characterised mainly by a tendency for the script to slope downward from right to left. It was used largely for Persian poetical writings as well as in Urdu and Malay manuscripts.

Having started out his journey in art during his school days, Pasandedih had always dreamt about becoming a professional artist. In 1999, at the age of 21, he chose to move to Mashhad to embark on a professional career in art and eventually became a member of the Iran Calligraphers Association. Currently, he is considered one of the best teachers of calligraphy in Iran.

Exhibiting his work since 2002, Pasandedih also has the distinction of achieving the first place for *Nastaliq* calligraphy art in Mashhad in



All the works in this exhibition represent my personal experience, and in addition to beauty, you can see a part of the meaning of words in the works”

ALI PASANDEDIH

2005.

Over the past 18 years of his professional career, he has held numerous exhibitions and conducted instructional art courses in Iran as well as other countries. His work has been popular mostly in Turkey, Tajikistan, United Arab Emirates and Pakistan, besides Iran.

“*Nastaliq* calligraphy is known as the ‘bride of Islamic calligraphy’. All the works in this exhibition represent my personal experience, and in addition to beauty, you can see a part of the meaning of words in the works,” Pasandedih told Muscat Daily.

“I’m very interested in poetry, and poetry acts as my driving force,” he further said, adding, “In this exhibition, poems by Hafez, Akhavan Sales and Ahmad Shamlou are displayed. I am very interested in mystical poems and I try to share this spirituality with art lovers.”



You Can't Be Here

Hubert Vaz

Each door opened up into a mystical realm, cut away from reality yet inspired by reality itself... And as one walked out of each room, insights from every installation rang a bell in some way, connecting with one's own life and situation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The past two weeks saw a beeline of visitors at Fikra gallery, in old Muscat, wherein a thought-provoking exhibition - *You Can't Be Here* - displayed five intriguing installations by a group of female, Omani artists, curated by Zawraq Collective. For the first time, the focus of the exhibition was totally on three-dimensional installations where every artwork appealed to the senses - you could see, hear, smell, and touch all that was on display.

The exhibition was generated as a cross-disciplinary artistic effort to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the creation, display, and consumption of art. However, you can't be there now as the exhibition, which saw over 5000 visitors, concluded last evening.

Zawraq Collective comprises three artists - Noor al Mahruqi, Zaima al Adawi, and Ankita Sadarjoshi - who began working together in the summer of 2021 in an attempt to articulate a new way of curating budding, local artists.

Their shared backgrounds in arts education and theatre formed the basis of their collaboration. Zawraq Collective's self-proclaimed objectives are to foster rich partnerships between artists and curators, to propose a radical shift in what can be considered 'art' in gallery contexts, and to provide a bustling community of artists with platforms to display new

From visual media to a mini mart, every exhibit had its own appeal



works, a statement said.

You Can't Be Here was conceptualised as a response to the draining of senses collectively felt by all those who experienced COVID-19 as ‘an evacuation of art and bodies’ in public spaces. Inspired by ideas of interactivity between audiences and artworks, the artists on display at this exhibition have rendered their versions of the theme in the form of installations, video art, scent-based work, and more, Maya al Barwani, Fikra spokesperson, disclosed.

“The whole exhibition was inspired by

how COVID-19 affected our senses. During the pandemic, we all went through a lot, and people suffered trauma or lost their sense of taste/smell, or had emotional upheavals. In this exhibition the artists were told, ‘if you had to give form to artwork which can be touched, felt or smelt, what would it be?’ And they came up with really meaningful installations,” Maya said.

The artists who worked on the installations included Tanya Shamil, Samah al Ansari, Bashayer al Nuaimi, Fatma Abdulaziz, Amnah al Ghailani, Umayma al Hinai, Razan al Humaidi, Reem Falaknaz,



Scent Diary is an installation that engages the sense of smell and it was quite an interesting process. We came up with an idea and an initial plan but it changed and evolved as we went about the installation

UMAYMA AL HINAI

Farah al Adawy and Marwa al Bahrani. Zaima al Adawi, one of the three curators told Muscat Daily, “Our role in this exhibition was mainly to support the par-

ticipating artists which, we believe, can reach an international standard some day. The whole idea was to create a theme that any visitor that enters can relate to. That's why we picked what the artists can do with their five senses during COVID-19 and we are very happy with the outcome.”

Umayma, a co-artist who worked on *Scent Diary* - which comprised a room lined with mirrors, encircling a set of lamps over a podium that bore aromatic cloves, oil, coffee and salt and a candle - said the experience was quite interesting and fulfilling. Every participating artist added collaborative value to the result.

“*Scent Diary* is an installation that engages the sense of smell and it was quite an interesting process. We came up with an idea and an initial plan but it changed and evolved as we went about the installation, with a few challenges. The initial idea of using battery-powered lamps was replaced with an electrical connection,” she disclosed. Umayma was joined by Razan al Humaidi in creating this artwork.

I Exist Where You Stand was another installation created by Tanya Shamil, featuring Aisha Bakry in a video that highlighted harrowing currents of isolation and social detachment. *Wasted Youth Shopping* by Samaah al Ansari and Bashayer al Naaimi indicated a mini mart as the only source of outing during the lockdowns when people could only venture outdoors to buy groceries.

On the other hand, *Teryaq* by Fatma Abdulaziz and Amna Khalid, was inspired by a Jamaican traditional medicine and the chaos that the pandemic inflicted on the world, while *Talisman*, by Reem Falaknaz and Moylin Yuan drew attention to ‘talismans’ (good-luck charms) which were believed to have magical powers to protect the bearer against harm.



Medvedev, Tsitsipas march into last 16 as Halep fires warning

Melbourne, Australia - World number two and title favourite Daniil Medvedev won over the Australian Open crowd on Saturday as he eased into the last 16 along with Stefanos Tsitsipas.

After the drama of Friday, when defending champion Naomi Osaka exited Melbourne in the third round, the women's seeds were also mostly untroubled on day six.

Second seed Aryna Sabalenka overcame the serving yips and Simona Halep was an emphatic winner, the former number one now playing self-described 'dinosaur' Alize Cornet on Monday for a place in the quarter-finals.

Russia's Medvedev, the de facto men's top seed after the deportation of defending champion Novak Djokovic on the eve of the Grand Slam, said some fans at Melbourne Park had a 'low IQ' after they booed him in his second-round victory over Australian showman Nick Kyrgios.

The reigning US Open champion needed four sets and a large dose of composure to see off Kyrgios and silence Rod Laver Arena, but it was altogether more comfortable as he dismissed unseeded Dutchman Botic van de Zandschulp.

The 25-year-old Medvedev



Russia's Daniil Medvedev hits a return against Netherlands' Botic Van de Zandschulp on Saturday (AFP)

kept his cool in sweltering conditions on Margaret Court Arena to roll through 6-4, 6-4, 6-2 in 1hr 55min and faces American Maxime Cressy in the fourth round.

"I'll put it this way, it's easier to play a guy from the Netherlands than a guy from Australia in Australia in Melbourne," said Medvedev, who has a similar love-hate dynamic with the crowd in New York.



"Every good relationship must have its ups and downs so I think it's good, it's entertaining and it's real, there is some relationship

going on."

Greek fourth seed Tsitsipas, who is chasing a maiden major, was also largely untroubled in a 6-3, 7-5, 6-7 (2/7), 6-4 win over unseeded Frenchman Benoit Paire and plays American Taylor Fritz next. Tsitsipas' serve was the foundation. He did not drop a service game despite losing a set and sent down 21 aces.

Medvedev and Tsitsipas, two of the generation coming up fast



Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates after victory against Benoit Paire (AFP)

behind the 'Big Three' of Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer, could meet in the semi-finals.

Felix Auger-Aliassime sent home the last Briton left standing in singles, the 21-year-old Canadian thrashing Dan Evans 6-4, 6-1, 6-1.

Auger-Aliassime is regarded as a serious upcoming talent in men's tennis and warned his rivals that he was beginning to feel

at home at the business end of majors. "Now of course playing more and more Grand Slams and I have gone to semi-finals (US Open last year), I feel more in my place," he said.

Another burgeoning talent, the 20-year-old Italian Jannik Sinner, defeated Japanese qualifier Taro Daniel in four sets and will play Australia's Alex de Minaur.

AFP

What else can I ask for?: Halep

In the women's draw, Halep swatted aside Danka Kovinic - conqueror of US Open champion Emma Raducanu - 6-2, 6-1 in just 64 minutes to set up a date with Cornet of France.

The fit-again Halep came into the tournament full of confidence after her first title in 16 months earlier this month at a Melbourne warm-up event and was always in charge.

The 14th seed next meets unseeded Cornet, who celebrated her 32nd birthday by slugging it out with Slovenia's Tamara Zidansek for a 4-6, 6-4, 6-2 victory.

The crowd serenaded her by singing happy birthday.

"It's definitely a very, very special victory being back in the second week 13 years after my first (time). It's quite special," she said.

AFP

Swiatek battles into Open fourth round with gutsy win

Melbourne, Australia - A pumped-up Iga Swiatek burned her Australian Open credentials with a hard-fought straight-sets win over in-form Daria Kasatkina on Saturday to battle into the fourth round.

The Polish seventh seed, who won the 2020 French Open as a 19-year-old, needed 94 minutes to dismantle the 25th-ranked Russian 6-2, 6-3 on Margaret Court Arena.

But it was an impressive performance of power and precision from Swiatek against a player who opened her season with back-to-back semi-finals in Melbourne and Sydney.

Swiatek, who won titles in Adelaide and Rome last year, will next play either 10th seed Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova or unseeded Romanian Sorana Cirstea for the berth in the quarter-finals.

"The match was really intense," said the Pole, who admitted she was 'pumped-up' by the win. "It was hard to run for every ball and finish Daria. She plays really cool top spin ... I tried to play my balls low so she couldn't play her top spin, but it was hard.

"At the end all that mattered was who was going to put that last ball over the net because the rallies were pretty long," she added.

Swiatek and Kasatkina played once last year, in the round of 16 at Eastbourne, and it was the Russian who prevailed in three sets.

But Swiatek always looked on top at Melbourne Park.

She pounced first in game four, applying pressure to work three break points and converted when the Russian slapped a forehand long.

Both players were returning well and long rallies ensued but Swiatek repelled Kasatkina's baseline threat to hold on and broke again as the Russian served to stay in the set.

AFP



Iga Swiatek reacts after winning against Daria Kasatkina (AFP)

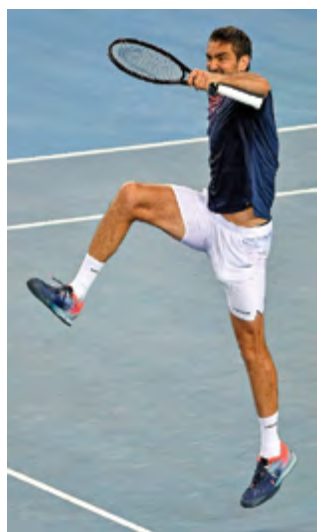
Cilic stuns fifth seed Rublev to reach Open fourth round

Melbourne, Australia - Former finalist Marin Cilic ended fifth seed Andrey Rublev's Australian Open hopes with an upset four-set victory to reach the fourth round on Saturday.

The experienced Croatian, seeded 27, knocked out the Russian 7-5, 7-6 (7/3), 3-6, 6-3 in 2hr 36min on Margaret Court Arena to book a place in the last 16.

It will be 33-year-old Cilic's eighth time in the fourth round at the Australian Open, where he was a beaten finalist to Roger Federer in 2018 after overcoming Rafael Nadal in the quarters.

Cilic will face Canada's ninth seed Felix Auger-Aliassime for a



Croatia's Marin Cilic celebrates the winning moment (AFP)

place in the quarter-finals.

"I've had a good start to the season, played two weeks of tennis in Adelaide, and I've had two good matches here before this one," Cilic said.

"The conditions in the evening were a bit cooler and allowed me to go more for my shots and I was really lining up a lot of them, especially the returns, it was really going well for me today.

"I'm feeling really excited, I'm playing amazing and just looking forward to the next match, which gets tougher and tougher with the opponents, but I will try to give it my best."

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Stokes, Archer, Gayle missing from lucrative IPL auction: Reports

New Delhi, India - England's Ben Stokes, Australia's Mitchell Starc and veteran West Indies big-hitter Chris Gayle are among the stars missing from the upcoming auction for the Indian Premier League, media reports said on Saturday.

More than 1,200 cricketers from India and 18 countries across the world have registered to go under the hammer in Bangalore on February 12 and 13 for the 15th edition of the world's most lucrative cricket tournament.

Other notable absentees from the long list of players in the bidding pool for the IPL - expected to begin in April depending on the COVID-19 situation in India - are the English trio of Jofra Archer, Chris Woakes and Sam Curran, the reports said.

Stokes and Woakes both participated in England's recent disastrous Ashes tour of Australia. Captain Joe Root - who has never played in the IPL - is also sitting out the auction although fast bowler Mark Wood is on the list along with Australian stars David Warner and Pat Cummins, the reports said.

Ten teams will bid and participate in this year's IPL after the addition of two new franchises, Ahmedabad and Lucknow.

India's opening batter K L



Ben Stokes



Jofra Archer



Chris Gayle

India's opening batter KL Rahul will captain Lucknow after he was signed as the joint-highest-paid player, for R170mn (US\$2.3mn approx), in the history of the tournament

Rahul will captain Lucknow after he was signed as the joint-highest-paid player, for ₹170mn (US\$2.3mn approx), in the history of the tournament.

Former Indian captain Virat Kohli was signed for the same

amount in 2018 by the Royal Challengers Bangalore franchise. "I have been very impressed by KL's not only batting and wicketkeeping abilities, but his leadership skills," Lucknow team owner Sanjiv Goenka told Star

Sports.

Ahmedabad, which was purchased by global private equity giants CVC capital, announced Indian all-rounder Hardik Pandya as the new team's skipper.

The franchise also signed Afghanistan's star leg-spinner Rashid Khan for ₹150mn (US\$2.1mn approx) and young Indian batter Shubman Gill for ₹80mn.

Gary Kirsten, former South African batter and mentor for the Ahmedabad franchise, said that it was an opportunity for Hardik as 'a young and new captain'.

"I think he will be really motivated to come in and make a plan and show what he is capable of at this level of the game as a leader," Kirsten said.

With COVID cases rising, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) is yet to give dates for the IPL or to confirm it will take place in India. The last edition began in India but was suspended in May 2021 as cases soared and was completed later in the year in the United Arab Emirates, with Chennai Super Kings emerging as champions.

AFP



Dave Ryding celebrates with the trophy after the slalom competition of the FIS Ski World Cup in Kitzbühel, Austria on Saturday (AFP)

Dave Ryding makes British history with Kitzbühel win

Kitzbühel, Austria - Dave Ryding pulled off a massive shock on Saturday when he won Britain's first World Cup race with victory in the men's slalom in Kitzbühel.

Ryding clocked a combined total of 1min 41.26sec, finishing 0.38sec ahead of Norway's Lucas Braathen, with his teammate Henrik Kristoffersen in third (+0.65).

"This place is a special place for me," said Ryding, whose second-placed finish on the same Ganslern course in 2017 had matched Britain's previous best alpine skiing result achieved by Konrad Bartelski in the 1981 Val Gardena downhill.

"I had so much emotion when I finished and now I just don't know what to say. I'm normally not lost for words but now I am!"

Ryding didn't start ski race training on snow until he was 21,

honing his technique instead on dry slopes in the north of England and content with the family's annual ski holiday.

He is a hugely popular fixture on the World Cup circuit and was last week named in the British team for the upcoming Beijing Olympics, which will be his fourth.

"I'm 35 now but I never stopped believing, I never stopped trying," he said.

"To bring the first victory for Great Britain in a World Cup in Kitzbühel, I don't know if dreams are made better but you know, it's some place."

For his journey, Ryding has commanded utmost respect and the Lancastrian was mobbed by rivals after he came to terms with the fact he had won on one of the circuit's most mythical courses.

AFP

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French driver Sebastian Ogier gets into his car for the event (AFP)

Ogier back in Monte Carlo lead as rivals crash out

Monte Carlo, Principality of Monaco - Sebastian Ogier avoided any mishaps to edge back in front of Sebastian Loeb at the Monte Carlo Rally on Saturday with black ice making driving conditions hazardous.

Fans who braved the freezing weather in the hills behind Monte Carlo saw Welshman Elfyn Evans fly round a corner wide and then slip backwards down an embankment in his Toyota Yaris in the morning's most dramatic moment. There was no damage to Evans' car but try as he might he couldn't get the traction to remount the hill

and pulled out for the day.

Loeb led by almost 10 seconds overnight Friday but regretted his mixed tyre strategy as he slipped to 5.4sec adrift of Ogier with 11 of the special stages completed.

"It's not easy to drive with two studs and two slicks. It's difficult to keep the car straight. I tried to push, but Ogier was much faster," Loeb said.

Ogier drew level with Loeb on the tenth special and then drew ahead of the 11th.

Reigning champion Ogier lives in the region and knows the course well.

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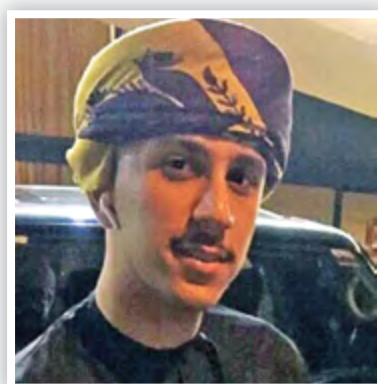
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