

FOREIGN MINISTER RECEIVES CREDENTIALS OF JAPANESE, RUSSIAN ENVOYS



H E Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, received a copy of the credentials of H E Jota Yamamoto, appointed Ambassador of Japan to Oman. H E Sayyid Badr welcomed the ambassador, wishing him success in carrying out his duties, and further progress and growth in the relations between the two countries. H E Sayyid Badr also received a copy of the credentials of H E Ilya Morgunov, appointed Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Oman. H E Sayyid Badr welcomed the ambassador, wishing him success in carrying out his duties, and further progress and growth in the relations between the two countries (ONA)

Over 80 infiltrators arrested by ROP in January 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

More than 80 foreign nationals were arrested by Royal Oman Police (ROP) for illegal entry into the sultanate in January 2022. ROP statistics indicate that the Police Command of South Batinah governorate arrested nine Asian nationals for entering the country illegally on January 30. On January 27, Coast Guard Police in the governorate of Dhofar thwarted two attempts to smuggle khat into the country. Police boats seized two boats, one in which four infiltrators tried to smuggle 2,224 packs of khat and the second with four more infiltrators and 1,522 packs of khat. Also on January 27, the Police Command of Dhofar governorate arrested two people on charges of smuggling illegal foreign nationals out of the country; three African nationals were found in the trunk of a vehicle. 'On January 25, the Police Command of South Batinah governorate arrested four infiltrators of African nationalities attempting to enter the country illegally,'



(Supplied photo)

ROP urged citizens and residents to report any violations to prevent the entry of infiltrators into the country

a statement said. 'On January 24, the Directorate General of Combating Drugs and Psychotropic Substances arrested an infiltrator who illegally entered the country via the sea with more than 12kg of morphine and 10kg of crystal meth.'

Also on January 24, the Police Command of South Batinah governorate arrested four infiltrators of Asian nationalities for entering the country illegally and seized more than 7,000 tablets of psychotropic substances and 34 rolls of crystal meth. On January 17, the Coast

Guard Police in North Batinah governorate seized a boat carrying 49 Asians as they attempted to enter the country illegally. According to a statement, in cooperation with security and military authorities, ROP continues its efforts to stop infiltration by intensifying marine, air and land patrols in coordination with neighbouring countries, exchanging information and raising awareness in the community about the dangers of sheltering violators. ROP also confirmed that Muscat ROP Command was able to seize a boat carrying five expatriates, including an infiltrator, as they attempted to smuggle more than 35kg of crystal meth and a quantity of marijuana in connivance with an international gang. On January 11, the Coast Guard Police in Dhofar governorate seized a boat carrying four infiltrators of Arab nationalities as they tried to enter the country illegally with 1,522 packs of khat. ROP urged citizens and residents to report any violations to prevent the entry of infiltrators into the country.



(Muscat Daily)

Burjeel Hospital signs partnership with Dr Maskari

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Burjeel Hospital has signed a strategic partnership with senior orthopedic consultant and trauma surgeon Dr Sultan al Maskari (FRCSEd Tr & Orth, UK) to launch Maskari Burjeel Orthopedic (MBO). Located in the ground floor of Burjeel Hospital, Al Khuwayr, MBO was launched at a special ceremony held on Tuesday at Muscat Holiday under the auspices of Dr Shamsheer Vayalil, founder and managing director of VPS Healthcare. The launch ceremony was attended by Dr Maskari, head of the new orthopedic centre, Dr Rohil Raghavan, regional CEO of VPS Group, Oman, Dr Abdulhameed al Kitani, PhD in sports physiotherapy and rehabilitation from UK and head of physiotherapy, Burjeel Hospital, and several dignitaries. On the occasion, Dr Vayalil said, "We are pleased to partner with Dr Maskari and look forward to bringing our combined expertise to the sultanate in the form of the Maskari Burjeel Orthopedic centre. At Burjeel Hospital, we have a commitment to bring to Oman and the GCC the best healthcare solutions, along with excellence in care that ensures the highest standard of treatment. We are confident this

We are confident this partnership will go a long way in sealing Oman's future as a world-class destination for orthopedic care and expertise

DR SHAMSHEER VAYALIL

partnership will go a long way in sealing Oman's future as a world-class destination for orthopedic care and expertise." MBO will provide optimum care, state-of-the-art diagnosis and treatment to people of all ages - children to the aged - for arthritis of all types, chronic joint pain, foot and ankle problems, fractures, hand and wrist problems, and sports and work injuries. Dr Raghavan described the partnership as an "exemplary" one between "a consultant who is a master in his field and a hospital which maintains the highest standards". "Through a holistic approach, every patient will receive a bespoke surgical and/or rehabilitation plan and have access to specialist care from a team that will be there to aid every step of the recovery process," Dr Maskari informed.

3-5 star hotel guests rose by 43.2% in 2021: NCSI

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The total number of 3-5 star hotel guests in the sultanate increased by 43.2 per cent till the end of December 2021. There were 1,219,303 guests in this category of hotels, compared to 851,757 in the same period in 2020. Hotel occupancy rate grew by

44.9 per cent compared to 26.5 per cent for the same period in 2020, according to the latest statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). The total revenue of these hotels grew by 19.2 per cent to RO101.668mn till the end of December 2021, compared to RO85.292mn in the corresponding period of 2020.



(Supplied photo)

The number of Arab guests during this period recorded the biggest growth - 97.3 per cent - from 24,154 guests at the end of December 2020 to 47,644 in the end of December 2021. Omani guests constituted the highest percentage of visitors - 67 per cent or 814,518, guests - followed by Asian guests (141,136) and European guests (176,820).



(Supplied photo)

Citizen dies in house fire in Bahla

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A citizen died in a house fire in Dakhliyah governorate, according to the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA). In a tweet, CDAA stated

that a firefighting team of the authority in Dakhliyah dealt with the fire that broke out in a house in the wilayat of Bahla, which resulted in the death of a citizen. An investigation is underway to determine the cause of the fire.

Research studies efficiency of greenhouse farming

Muscat - Among the many research projects submitted for the National Research Award is one titled 'Investigating the efficiency of greenhouse production in Oman: A two-stage approach based on Data Envelopment Analysis and double bootstrapping'. Conducted by principal investigator Dr Nawal al Mezeini, it is among the 13 winning projects of the eighth edition of the award organised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation. Winning in the Environmental and Biological Resources field of the PhD category, Nawal elaborated that Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) of greenhouse (GH) production is the first step to objectively assess the situation

and build reliable tools to support stakeholders' decisions and achieve more rational resource consumption, which is a key factor for sustainable GH production. The study investigated efficiency measures, set benchmarks for GH production in Oman and examined the impact of contextual factors on GH efficiency using a double bootstrapping approach. DEA revealed a high level of inefficiency among GH farms, with an average technical efficiency of 73 per cent, which is below the findings of similar studies where scores ranged between 82 per cent and 93 per cent. Furthermore, efficiency analysis showed that water and electricity were overused, with



Dr Nawal al Mezeini

excesses of more than 54 per cent and 46 per cent, respectively. For further identification of potential sources of inefficiency and to support policymakers in setting regulations and developing future strategies, the impact of

contextual factors, which are neither inputs nor outputs but which indirectly influence the efficiency of GH, have been studied using double bootstrapping approach, Nawal informed. She further stated that results of her research indicate that GH farmers in the government agricultural sector are likely to be the most efficient. Water salinity appeared to be the most detrimental factor in GH efficiency. She maintained that increased salinity of irrigation water is a direct consequence of seawater intrusion, caused primarily by over pumping of groundwater. The combined effect of the latter factors has been enhanced in the slack analysis. Water and electricity were found to be the most de-

pleted resources. To enhance the efficiency of GH farms, Dr Nawal recommended more training programmes for farmers regarding rational consumption of resources in order to achieve more sustainable GH production. For policies and regulations, she suggested that a regulated water framework is essential, as well as an appropriate revision of the government's subsidy policies. This research project was conducted at Sultan Qaboos University by a team comprising Dr Amar Oukil and Dr Abdulrahim al Ismaili, besides Nawal. The study was published in the scientific journal The Journal of Cleaner Production with high impact factor of 9.297.

619 SMEs benefit from ASMED's emergency finance programme



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED), in cooperation with Oman Development Bank (ODB), on Tuesday shed light on strategic directions for developing small and medium enterprises (SMEs), the Jahiziah programme, other financing programmes, and the role of ODB in managing lending portfolios and receiving funding requests.

Abdulaziz bin Saeed al Raisi, vice president of ASMED, pointed out that this meeting comes after His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq's recent emphasis on the vital role of SMEs, and the entrepreneurship sector, in supporting the national economy.

"ASMED conducted a study to monitor the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs last year. The study identified many measures to support own-

ers of SMEs," Raisi disclosed.

He further explained, "Despite the challenges faced by SMEs, the number of new enterprises registered with the authority increased to about 10,000 in 2021. We started displaying the products of SMEs in large shopping centres to develop Omani products in ways that are attractive to the consumer. The authority will also display these products on international platforms, and a tender has been launched for this purpose."

The total number of SMEs registered with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion reached 175,000 at the end of October 2021, he said.

According to Raisi, the number of Omanis working in SMEs, who registered with the authority until December 2021, reached 69,594, and the contributions of SMEs in exports until the end of September 2020 had amounted to around RO2.15mn.

"The authority is working on developing SMEs during this year and launching many features, such as incubating about 50 new institutions, launching 60 new Sanad service centres, adding about 40 new services, and launching seven new financing programmes," he said.

"We launched the second phase of the Jahiziah programme today which will last for two weeks. The second phase aims to incubate 150 SMEs to support them to obtain financing."

He also disclosed that 619 projects benefited from the emergency financing programme. These comprised institutions that were the most affected in 2021.

About bin Amer al Omari, vice president of ASMED for Finance and Investment, and director general of planning, said, "The ceiling for financing individuals and SMEs is RO250,000, with the possibility of additional financing for existing projects

that are committed to paying the installments."

Hamad bin Salem al Harthy, chairman of Finance for Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises and Portfolio Management at ODB, said, "The lending portfolio of the authority managed by the bank amounted to about RO73mn which was pumped into all SME projects during the last period." He also indicated that the default rate in the lending portfolio of ASMED amounted to approximately 8 per cent.

In May 2021, with a financing ceiling of RO10,000, ASMED launched the emergency financing programme for 'Entrepreneur Card' holders in implementation of the high level directives to adopt the Social Protection Initiatives Package, a statement said. This was to enhance the activities and sustainability of SMEs in all sectors, as well as economic activities affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Deals worth RO24mn inked for projects in North Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sheikh Saif bin Hamyar al Shehi, Governor of North Batinah governorate, on Tuesday signed a number of agreements worth RO24mn to implement service and development projects in the governorate.

Sheikh Shehi, in the presence of Eng Salim al Kindi, director general of Sohar Municipality, and Eng Sulaiman bin Hamad al Sunaidi, director general of North Batinah Municipality, signed the agreements for the new projects.

The agreements include the

The agreements include the construction of commercial and residential layouts and completion of a road paving project in mountainous areas

construction of commercial and residential layouts, completion of a road paving project in mountainous areas, rehabilitation of

service roads in Falaj al Qabail area, maintenance and rehabilitation of Nozha Road (Phase I) and rehabilitation of the service road in Turaif and Sohar Bridge.

The agreements include the design and construction of internal roads for industrial and commercial areas in the governorate. The development of industrial areas was planned through paving roads and lighting, supply and installation of some facilities in public parks, and implementation of a waterfront project, in addition to a number of service projects in the governorate's wilayats.

COVID-19 UPDATE

Muscat - The Ministry of Health (MoH) announced 2,828 new infections registered within a 24-hour period on Tuesday, taking the total number of COVID-19 cases registered in Oman to 341,708. Two more deaths were reported in this period.

'The total number of COVID-19 related deaths reported in the country now stands at 4,148,' an MoH statement said. The ministry added that 1,134 new cases have recovered, taking the total number of recoveries to 316,284. 'There were 97 new hospitalisations in the past 24 hours. The total number of COVID-19 patients currently in health institutions is 326, including 52 in Intensive Care Units,' it stated.

2,828
NEW CASES

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	23	14
Doha	22	12
Kuwait City	18	9
Manama	19	12
Muscat	27	16
Riyadh	20	8

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.30am
Sunrise	6.47am
Duhr	12.26pm
Asr	3.36pm
Maghrib	5.59pm
Isha	7.11pm

CPA shuts down store in South Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A commercial store was temporarily shut down in South Batinah governorate by the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) for violation of Article 37 of the Consumer Protection Law issued by Royal Decree No (66/2014).

A statement issued by CPA said, 'The Consumer Protection Department in the Governorate of South Batinah, in Rustaq, in coordination with the Public Prosecution, closed a commercial store in the wilayat of Musannah specialised in selling granite, marble and aluminium kitchens temporarily.'

'The directorate undertook necessary legal measures in this regard, after it was found that the institution was delaying responding to customer complaints. It found that a large number of complaints had been filed against the institution because of its lack of commitment to provide proper service to customers,' the CPA statement added.



Foreign Ministry signs agreement with Oman Post & Asyad Express

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Foreign Ministry of Oman has signed a strategic agreement with Oman Post & Asyad Express, member of Asyad Group.

The agreement, under which Oman Post & Asyad Express will provide the ministry with local and international postal and logistics services, including clearance and delivery for incoming diplomatic as well as regular shipments, was signed by H E Mohammed al Wahaibi Undersecretary for Administrative and Financial Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, and Nasser al Sharji, chief executive officer of Oman Post and Asyad Express.

H E Wahaibi said, "In addition to fulfilling Oman Vision 2040 for a smart government, the agreement with Oman Post comes within the framework of the ministry's endeavours to

streamline its communications' systems, and parcel and shipment requirements at the local and international level. It is always paramount for us as well as the diplomatic community to boost productivity, maximise efficiency, and optimise security. We are glad to draw on Oman Post & Asyad Express' experience and established network and look forward to a fruitful partnership."

Sharji said, "As we continue to diversify and develop our services and drive innovation and excellence, Oman Post & Asyad Express is nurturing an expanding number of public and private sector partnerships. Our agreement with the Foreign Ministry boosts our standing as a logistics service provider not only at the local level but also the international level and showcases their confidence and trust in our services and capabilities as we con-

tribute to streamlining logistics across and beyond Oman."

Oman Post & Asyad Express continues to innovate and expand its product portfolio, while offering the best customer experience solutions. With its domestic and international Courier Express Parcel (CEP) services' expansion, and diversification of the traditional postal business to retail, e-commerce and digitalisation, the company caters to its growing B2C and B2B customer base across Oman, the region and internationally.

Among its most recent accomplishments are the Asyad Fulfilment Centre, a new in-house Warehouse Management System, the Asyad Express client portal, and a new International Carriage Engine to support International CEP network expansion growth, as well as adding 55 domestic retail touchpoints in partnership with ONEIC and OIFC.

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MARKET WATCH

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BSE Sensex

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FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs

194.08

Pakistani Rs

458.43

Bangladeshi Taka

223.34

Philippine Peso

132.71

Sri Lankan Rs

526.03

*Rates as on February 01

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Sri Lanka food inflation hits record 25%

Food inflation in crisis-hit Sri Lanka hit a record 25 per cent in January, the statistics office said on Tuesday, with crop failures and difficulties in financing imports leading to widespread shortages.

The island nation's economy has tanked since the onset of the pandemic, with the collapse in tourism revenue leaving traders unable to finance purchases of essential goods from abroad.

The government last year banned the import of agricultural chemicals in a desperate attempt to shore up foreign currency reserves, drastically lowering crop yields and prompting many farmers to leave their fields bare.

Supermarkets have rationed rice, lentils and other essentials, while power companies unable to pay for imported fuel have been forced to impose rolling blackouts.

CMA selects American medical code set for health insurance

Our Correspondent

Muscat

The sultanate's Capital Market Authority (CMA) and the American Medical Association (AMA) have announced the selection of the Current Procedural Terminology (CPT) code for the Dhamani health insurance platform aimed to support health data exchange, claims settlement and fund transfer between insurance companies, healthcare organizations, and supervisory and regulatory institutions in Oman.

In line with Oman's Vision 2040 goals to create an inclusive and equitable healthcare system, the CPT code set will help serve the needs of Oman's data-driven healthcare system by allowing clinicians, hospitals, health insurers, regulators, and researchers to electronically exchange standardized information on the medical services and procedures provided to patients within the Dhamani platform.

This seamless flow of information across Oman's healthcare system facilitates reimbursements, reporting, predictive analysis and benchmarking of medical services delivered by all medical specialties, which will enable better patient care, more operational efficiency and lower costs, the AMA said in a press statement.

The CPT content is a compre-



The adoption of American Medical Association's CPT medical code set for Dhamani health insurance platform will increase accuracy and boost efficiency in Oman's healthcare system

hensive medical terminology with a standardised code set that identifies and describes over 10,000 medical services and procedures, offering physicians and health care professionals a uniform language for coding medical services and procedures. The uniform language, updated by the AMA to keep pace with modern medicine, streamlines reporting and increases accuracy and efficiency in the management of the insurance claims process.

For more than 50 years, CPT content has standardised proce-

dural medical language used to communicate between governments, healthcare providers, and insurance organisations around the globe and throughout the Gulf region.

Commenting on the announcement, H E Abdullah bin Salim al Salmi, executive president of the CMA, said, "Aligning with Oman's Vision 2040, the Dhamani health insurance program will promote an efficient, high quality health insurance ecosystem which provides proper funding of the healthcare industry in Oman in efforts to fa-

cilitate a decent and sustainable life for all, as we prioritise the well-being and social protection of the people across the sultanate."

H E Salmi said, "The adoption of AMA's internationally-recognised CPT standards will increase the accuracy and efficiency of medical services in Oman and enhance the Dhamani platform's performance."

On AMA's behalf, president Gerald E Harmon said, "For over fifty years, CPT content has served the needs of integrated health delivery systems which require efficient and effective data exchange to help improve cost, quality, and access to care. We look forward to a great outcome on the back of the CMA's selection of CPT, a uniform and rigorous code set, widely trusted as medicine's universal language for reporting medical services and procedures provided to patients."

AMA said, in the efforts of ongoing improvement, an extensive annual process with broad input is applied to enhance the CPT codes set to meet the coding demands of a modern health care system. This rigorous process ensures keeping the CPT code set up-to-date with constant advances in medical knowledge, science, and technology to ultimately fulfill its vital role as the language of medicine today and the code to its future.

MoF issues RO234mn treasury bills

Our Correspondent

Muscat

A tender of the government treasury bills (issue number 133) was issued this week by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) on behalf of the Ministry of Finance (MoF).

As per the tender results, total value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO234mn, for a maturity period of 28 days, from Tuesday until March 2. Average accepted price reached RO99.951 for every RO100 bill, and the minimum accepted price arrived at RO99.950.

Average discount rate and average yield reached 0.6378 per cent and 0.6381 per cent, respectively.

The interest rate on the repo operations with the CBO is 0.5 per cent while the discount rate on the treasury bills discounting facility with the central bank is 0.75 per cent.

The government treasury bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the opportunity to invest their surplus funds.

The Central Bank of Oman acts as the issue manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (repo).

India to launch state-backed 'digital rupee'

Mumbai, India - India will introduce a state-backed 'digital rupee' and impose a 30 per cent tax on profits from virtual currencies, the government announced on Tuesday while unveiling the next financial year's budget.

The plans are a blow to one of the world's fastest-growing cryptocurrency markets, which has remained unregulated despite burgeoning local trading platforms and glitzy celebrity endorsements.

They make India the latest major emerging economy to rein in the sector, after China went even further in outlawing all cryptocurrency transactions last September.

"There has been a phenomenal increase in transactions in virtual digital assets," Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman told parliament, adding that the growth necessitated a proper tax framework.

Profits made trading cryptocurrencies and other digital assets will be taxed at 30 per cent from April, while any losses from digital transactions will not be granted offsets against other income.

A 1 per cent tax will be deducted at the source for all digital asset transactions, in-



cluding cryptocurrencies and NFTs, a move that the finance minister said would help the government track each trade.

Sitharaman also said the central bank would introduce a 'digital rupee', based on blockchain technology, by the end of March 2023.

"Introduction of central bank digital currency will give a big boost to (the) digital economy. Digital currency will also lead to a more efficient and cheaper currency management system," she said.

Cryptocurrencies have been under scrutiny by Indian regu-

lators since first entering the local market nearly a decade ago, with a surge in fraudulent transactions leading to a central bank ban in 2018.

India's Supreme Court lifted the restrictions two years later and the market has surged since, growing by nearly 650 per cent in the year to June 2021 - second only to Vietnam, according to research by Chainalysis.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi last year warned that Bitcoin presented a risk to younger generations and could 'spoil our youth' if it ended up 'in the wrong hands'.

The government last year proposed banning 'all private cryptocurrencies', but ultimately held back.

"It's good to finally have some clarity on the taxation aspect," said Sathvik Vishwanath, the co-founder of Unocoin, one of India's oldest crypto trading platforms.

"Now we can infer that if they are introducing taxation it's because they know that the ban (on trading cryptocurrencies) is not happening."

'More growth and more jobs'

Tuesday's budget also in-

cluded plans to ramp up infrastructure spending to support the economy's post-pandemic bounce back as officials grapple with rising inflation and unemployment.

Spending of ₹7.50tn (US\$100bn) will be directed to roads, railways, defence, housing and energy in the coming financial year, as the government eyes important state polls in the coming weeks.

"This budget is filled with possibilities for more infrastructure, more investments, more growth and more jobs," Modi said.

India is forecasting world-beating economic growth of up to 8.5 per cent in the coming financial year, according to estimates released on Monday.

The budget was 'short on big-bang proposals' but had struck a balance between recovery and improving the country's fiscal position, said Rudra Sensarma, an economics professor at the Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode.

India is nonetheless running a large budget deficit, which is forecast to fall slightly to 6.4 per cent of GDP in 2022-23.

AFF

MSX index edges down on weak trading

Our Correspondent

Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) decreased 0.13 per cent on Tuesday to close at 4,110.71 points. Trading activity at the Muscat bourse remained weak for the day.

All sub-indices, except MSX Sharia index, inched up compared to the previous session. Financial and Industrial indices increased 0.04 per cent and 0.60 per cent, respectively. Services index also increased by 0.12 per cent. MSX Sharia index decreased 0.04 per cent to close at 501.68 points.

Total trading volume fell by 25.7 per cent to 15.9mn shares on Tuesday compared with 21.4mn shares traded on Monday. Market turnover dropped 31.6 per cent to RO2.62mn against RO3.84mn recorded in the previous trading session.

Market breadth of the MSX remained slightly posi-



tive with 13 advancing stocks to nine decliners. As many as 17 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Top gainers of the day were United Finance (6.25 per cent), Phoenix Power (4.35 per cent), Al Jazeera Steel (4.12 per cent), Ominvest (3.29 per cent) and Renaissance Services (2.8 per cent).

Top losers were Muscat Desalination Company (-5.44 per cent), Sohar International (-2.7 per cent), Oman Investment and Finance Company (-2.5 per cent), Omantel (-1.5 per cent) and Al Anwar Investment (-1.2 per cent).

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Boeing seals deals with Qatar Airways, launches new plane

Washington, US - Boeing launched a new freighter jet on Monday while announcing a pair of major agreements with Qatar Airways, in a boost to the still-struggling US aviation giant.

The deal with the Middle Eastern carrier was unveiled at a White House ceremony attended by top US and Qatari officials, and includes the sale of 34 777X freighters, plus options for 16 more planes in the latest incarnation of Boeing's storied dual-aisle 777 line.

Boeing said the US\$20bn value of the Qatar Airways deal constitutes the largest freighter commitment in Boeing history.

The airline also reached an agreement worth nearly US\$7bn for a firm order of 25 737 MAX planes plus purchase rights for another 25 planes, Boeing said.

The agreements gives a lift to Boeing, which continues to struggle with quality control problems as commercial aviation experiences a mixed recovery from the depths of the coronavirus downturn.

The announcements show that Boeing 'serves a global need that in a post-Covid world will be coming back, and coming back in a significant way', Boeing chief executive David Calhoun said at the signing.

For Qatar Airways, the deals with Boeing follow an unusual



Boeing Commercial Airplanes CEO Stan Deal (left) and Akbar al Baker hold up their signed documents in the Eisenhower Executive Office building in Washington, DC on Monday (AFP)

public fight with European plane maker Airbus.

Earlier this month, Airbus cancelled the carrier's multi-billion-dollar order of 50 new single-aisle planes in an escalating feud over Qatar Airways' decision to ground its A350 wide-body aircraft.

"Today marks a great day in the ever-building and strong relationship between Qatar Airways and Boeing," said Qatar Airways chief executive Akbar al Baker.

"We certainly push Boeing hard to deliver upon our expect-

tations, and the team at Boeing consistently strives to meet and exceed our expectations, giving the opportunity for us to be here today to launch the most significant new freighter aircraft for a generation."

The signing ceremony came as Qatar's Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani visited the White House, where President Joe Biden was expected to shore up the energy back-up for European allies as Washington pressures Russia over the Ukraine crisis.

Qatar is a major natural gas

exporter.

Hot cargo market

Boeing last week reported a US\$4.1bn quarterly loss connected to problems with its 787 Dreamliner plane that resulted in US\$3.8bn in one-time expenses. The company has suspended deliveries on the model due to a series of production problems.

The 787's woes have dampened Boeing's comeback despite a surge in deliveries of the Max last year, which was cleared for service in late 2020

following a 20-month grounding after two fatal crashes.

On the 777X, Boeing had initially launched the program in 2013 with a plan to bring the jet into service in 2020. But the timeframe has been repeatedly pushed back. Boeing now expects the first jets for commercial service to be delivered in 2023.

The 777x cargo planes jets connected to Monday's Qatar Airways deal will be delivered starting in 2027, Boeing said.

Richard Aboulafia, an aviation expert at AeroDynamic Advisory, said cargo demand 'is about the only bright spot' in the dual-aisle plane market, where activity has remained more depressed compared with single-aisle plains.

The 777X jets will be assembled at Boeing's Everett, Washington complex and will employ engines produced by General Electric, which will also be assembled in the United States, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said.

She described the agreement as testament to 'the thriving trade relationship between the United States and Qatar'.

Boeing said the 777X Freighter order will sustain 35,000 US jobs and bolster suppliers across 38 states. AFP



ExxonMobil posts \$23bn in 2021 profits

New York, US - ExxonMobil reported a profitable fourth-quarter on Tuesday to conclude a strong comeback year in 2021 on higher oil prices amid recovering energy demand.

The oil giant reported annual profits of US\$23bn last year compared with a loss of US\$22.4bn in 2020 when demand was dented by the COVID-19 lockdowns. High oil prices helped boost results again during the quarter, although increased costs cut into gains in some operations.

"Our effective pandemic response, focused investments during the down-cycle, and structural cost savings positioned us to realize the full benefits of the market recovery in 2021," said chief executive Darren Woods.

In the fourth quarter, ExxonMobil's upstream business benefited from higher prices in oil

and natural gas, which surged 63 per cent compared with the third quarter.

The company also benefited from a profitable run in its downstream business in a reversal from last year's fourth quarter, as well as increased earnings in chemicals.

However, ExxonMobil said profits in its European refining operations were limited somewhat by higher energy prices. The company also flagged higher feed and energy costs as a drag in its chemical business.

On Monday, ExxonMobil announced it was combining its chemical and downstream businesses as it enacts US\$6bn in cost savings through 2023. The company is also shifting its corporate headquarters to Houston from Irving, Texas near Dallas.

Shares rose 1.5 per cent to US\$77.07 in pre-market trading. AFP

Chinese and French oil majors ink \$10bn deal for Uganda mega project

Kampala, Uganda - Chinese and French oil giants sealed a landmark US\$10bn deal on Tuesday to develop Uganda's energy resources and build a vast regional oil pipeline, a mega project that has incensed environmental groups.

The so-called Final Investment Decision was announced at a ceremony in Kampala by the heads of France's TotalEnergies and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC).

"Today is the day we commit to invest US\$10bn in the Tilenga and Kingfisher projects and the 1,443-km long pipeline," TotalEnergies chairman and CEO Patrick Pouyanne said in a statement. The project aims to exploit the huge crude oil reserves at Lake Albert, a 160km natural border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The oil will be pumped



from landlocked Uganda through a 1,443km heated pipeline - said to become the longest of its type when completed - through Tanzania to the Indian Ocean port of Tanga.

Pouyanne described the controversial pipeline as a 'masterpiece' of a project, although critics charge that it threatens livelihoods and fragile ecosystems in the heart of Africa.

"From today with the FID, the project will fully enter

into the construction phase," he said.

CNOOC Uganda president Chen Zhuobiao said, "Achieving FID is a first step towards achieving first oil and unlocking opportunities for investment and development of Uganda and the whole region."

The ceremony was also attended by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and Tanzania's Vice President Philip Mpango.

Lake Albert lies atop an esti-

mated 6.5bn barrels of crude, of which about 1.4bn barrels are currently considered recoverable. In Uganda, the drilling is located in several natural reserves, one of which extends to Murchison Falls, the country's largest national park.

TotalEnergies, formerly Total, said last year it had taken steps to reduce the project's impact on people and the environment, but conservation groups charge it will be devastating.

The pipeline project would be 'displacing thousands of households, endangering water resources for millions of Ugandans and Tanzanians, devastating vulnerable ecosystems and pushing the world further into climate chaos,' campaign group 350Africa.org's regional director Landry Ninteretse said in a statement. AFP

Global gold demand soars on economic rebound, inflation

London, UK - Global gold demand soared in the fourth quarter of 2021 as inflation rocketed, helping to recoup much of the drop triggered by the pandemic, industry data showed.

Viewed as a haven investment in times of economic unrest, gold saw demand surge 50 per cent in the final three months of last year compared with the October-December period in 2020, the World Gold Council (WGC) said in a report.

Overall last year, 'demand recouped much of the COVID-related losses sustained during 2020', the WGC said, adding that total physical purchases jumped 10 per cent to 4,021

tonnes.

Gold demand 'in the consumer-driven jewellery and technology sectors recovered throughout the year in line with economic growth and sentiment, while central bank buying also far outpaced that of 2020', the Council added.

Looking ahead, it said expansion of 5G telecoms infrastructure should help support demand for gold in the sector.

'But demand faces some risks from a slowdown in China as well as COVID-related restrictions,' the WGC warned.

Gold jewellery demand jumped by more than half in 2021 on strong buying in India

and China, as celebrations including marriages postponed by COVID-19 finally took place.

In India, 'millions of people get married, and that involves a certain amount of gold', WGC spokesman John Mulligan told AFP. Elsewhere, global bar and coin investment reached an eight-year high.

'Inflation concerns were a key driver, especially in the US and Germany, which both saw record annual demand', the report said.

However global holdings of gold exchange-traded funds - that allow investment outside of futures market - fell by US\$9bn, or 5 per cent, last year. AFP

Eurozone jobless rate hits historic low of 7%

Brussels, Belgium - The eurozone's unemployment rate fell to a historic low in December, official figures showed on Tuesday.

The seasonally adjusted jobless rate stood at 7 per cent in December, the lowest level since the official Eurostat statistics agency began compiling data in April 1998. In the 27-member European Union unemployment fell to 6.4 per cent in December, also a low since records began.

Previously, the lowest unemployment rates for both the 19 countries sharing the single currency and the EU-27 - of 7.2 per cent and 6.5 per cent respectively - had been recorded in March 2020.

AFP

Halliburton Worldwide Limited
Advertisement: HWL/RES/01/Jan 2022

Commercial Land for Sale
Rusayl Industrial Area, Muscat
Plot Size: 20,000 Square Meter

Halliburton Worldwide Limited would like to dispose (sell the development) a land plot in the Rusayl Industrial area. Plot is levelled (no mountains), close to all types of utilities and located on 30 feet wide black top road. All interested parties must send a non-binding 'letter of intent' on the address below by 8th Feb 2022. Proposals after this date may not be entertained.

Attention: Real Estate Services
Building#353, Way#5003, PO.Box#2721, Ghala

JOB VACANCY



Oman Electricity Transmission Company SAOG (OETC) has a vital role in the Oman Electricity Sector, as it owns and operates the main transmission network as well as transmission network in Dhofar through which electricity is transmitted from the generating stations to the distribution load centers in all governorates of the Sultanate. The main electricity transmission network operates at high voltage of 132kV and above. Also, OETC has the responsibility of balancing generation and demand at all times of the day as part of its responsibilities for the economic dispatch of power in the Sultanate, and are currently looking for motivated Omani candidates for the following position:

Job Title	Job Code
Operational Planning Expert	IRC15257

Interested candidates may apply for this post through www.omangrid.com/vacancies by not later than **11 Feb 2022**.

Note: only shortlisted candidates will be contacted.



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



Khedmah and Vodafone sign joint cooperation agreement

Oman Investment and Finance Company (Khedmah) and Vodafone Oman recently signed a joint cooperation agreement. Within the framework of the agreement, Vodafone Oman will be offering its services in Khedmah branches.

The agreement was signed at the Vodafone office by Saud Ahmed al Siyabi, chief operating officer for OIFC and Ahmed Said al Shuaili, chief financial officer for Vodafone. As per the agreement, Khedmah will offer Vodafone sim cards along with subscription and recharge services.

Commenting on the Vodafone tie-up, Siyabi, said, "We would like to congratulate Vodafone on the launch of their operations in Oman, and we are also delighted to collaborate with them at the beginning of their journey. The agreement reflects Khedmah's constant efforts toward keeping up with the latest developments on the market by integrating with brands and companies that are a necessity in individual lives today. That is why we aspire to release new and smart products that cater to community needs. Khedmah is a safe and complete platform that allows customers to avail many services at the same time and save their time, effort and money."

From his side, Shuaili, stated, "As part of Vodafone's efforts to extend its services to all its subscribers within the sul-

tanate, our recent agreement allows us to ensure the availability of Vodafone's offering to

Khedmah's network of 68 branches, located across all the wilayats of Oman, as well as on

its renowned digital platforms. This signing is also aligned with our vision to digitise telecom-

munication in the country by raising it to a whole new level that sees the provision of an integrated and unmatched customer experience."

Fulfilling its customer-centric approach, Khedmah focuses on creating the best experience for the customer by enhancing the efficiency and quality of the services. OIFC branches have a qualified workforce trained to fulfil customers' requirements with the highest service standards. This approach is also in line with Vodafone's vision of enhancing excellence by providing a dedicated customer care centre under a completely Omani management.

Oman Investment and Finance Company is one of the leading investment and services companies and specialises in billing, collection and debt factoring for electricity, water and telecom services in the sultanate. The company's various branches and e-payment channels allow customers to easily pay their electricity, water and telecommunications bills and avail of other value-added services as well.

Vodafone in Oman is the latest mobile telecommunications services provider in the sultanate. It began its operations late last year by launching an exclusive offer to its customers that provided the first-of-its-kind package of services at nominal prices. Vodafone is renowned as one of the largest international companies in the world, specialising in communications and information technologies.



Al Mouj Muscat wins Most Trusted ITC Brand Award

Al Mouj Muscat, Oman's premium lifestyle and leisure destination, has been voted 2021's Most Trusted Brand in the Integrated Tourism Complex (ITC) sector.

Oman's Most Trusted Brands Awards is now in its fifth year with members of the public invited to vote for brands they value most. With over 700,000 votes cast, Al Mouj Muscat came out on top as the nation's best ITC.

Set along 6km of beautiful coastline, Al Mouj Muscat is a joint venture between Majid Al Futtaim Properties, Omran and Tanmia. Established in 2006, it has grown to achieve world-wide renown for its vibrant mix of dining, leisure and retail options. With 85 cafés, restaurants and stores, an award-winning championship golf course, a luxury 400-berth marina, international hotels and pristine beaches, it attracts 3.9mn visitors a year and is home to over 19,000 residents.

Commenting on the new accolade is Nasser bin Masoud al

Sheibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat, said, "It is a true honour to have received this award as it reflects the trust the public have in our destination."

"The vision for Al Mouj Muscat was to become the sultanate's leading ITC and we have delivered that. In doing so, we are actively contributing to the aims of Oman Vision 2040. We are creating jobs and opportunities for businesses large and small as well as attracting foreign direct investment (FDI). We are preserving our unique natural environment and our community is thriving, with people from over 85 nationalities now calling Al Mouj Muscat home."

"To be awarded Oman's most trusted ITC really is a testimony to the extraordinary commitment of our staff who work hard to help make great moments happen, every day. Now, we will all continue to do everything possible to make sure that Al Mouj Muscat remains the place people love to work, visit and live," Sheibani added.

ROHM presents Anastasia ballet

The Royal Opera House Muscat is delighted to present Anastasia from the acclaimed National Academic Bolshoi Opera and Ballet Theatre.

Inspired by the legendary love story of a prince and a princess in times long past, the ballet portrays a snapshot of the cultural history of Belarus. Drama, betrayal, masterfully choreographed battles and magnificent court scenes are the backdrop for this story of loyalty and love.

Anastasia opens the ballet with a scene depicting her as a young girl falling in love for the first time and sharing her first kiss with Mikhail, a young man who is on the cusp of adventure.

He leaves her bereft and heartbroken. Years later, Anastasia marries Prince Simeon and Mikhail reappears at court after a long time at war and realises his love and loss. Time passes again and the fighting spills over into the court, Mikhail is embroiled in the attack and the king, Simeon is killed. Anastasia is taken prisoner by the warlord and given to Mikhail as spoils of war. He, out of love and pity, gives her freedom. Anastasia raises an army and takes back her country. Mikhail fights on her side finally.

The strong tradition of ballet in Belarus has been evolving progressively since the nineteenth century and is now one of the



finest in the world. The Bolshoi Theatre of Belarus is a landmark in the country, as well as on the international landscape. Anastasia premiered in October 2018.

All visits to the opera house are conducted under the guide-

lines of the Supreme Committee responsible for measures to tackle the development of COVID-19. Social distancing is maintained throughout the building and the wearing of facemasks is mandatory.

NBO makes achieving financial goals easy with Mazaya account

Continuing to be at the forefront of privilege banking in Oman, National Bank of Oman (NBO)'s Mazaya account offers a unique and highly personalised experience while steering customers towards their financial goals. With priority service in-branch and at the call centre, customers can enjoy dedicated support along with a whole world of exclusive lifestyle benefits that complement the life they lead.

Available for both Omanis and expats who earn between RO1,000 and RO3,499, or have a deposit base of RO15,000, it includes a range of saving and investment products, preferential



Tariq Atiq

pricing for financing options, a first-year free credit card, higher debit card withdrawal and spend limits, and instant local transfer for just 200bz.

Tariq Atiq, chief retail and digital banking officer at NBO, said,

"At NBO we aim to not only make our customers' banking experience easier, but add value to their financial goals. Complete with prompt, efficient service and a list of exclusive benefits, the Mazaya account includes access to a dedicated relationship manager who will guide customers through their financial journey, giving them the freedom to focus on their priorities."

With Mazaya, life is made even better with account-holders gaining exclusive access to over 1,800 discounts and buy-one-get-one-free offers on The Entertainer, plus 2,000 Nuguati points as welcome gift.

Mercedes-Benz Oman introduces new limited-edition model

Ring in the new year in style, Mercedes-Benz Oman is pleased to introduce its first launch of 2022, the new limited-edition Mercedes-AMG CLS 53 4MATIC+.

The front end in particular, with new radiator grilles and bumpers, expresses the dynamism of the four-door coupé even more strongly. At the same time, the interior has been upgraded with additional leather and trim combinations as well as a new generation of steering wheel. A strictly limited special model of the Mercedes-AMG CLS 53 4MATIC+ forms the sporty-exclusive spearhead.

Thanks to a comprehensive refresh last summer with updates to the driving assistance systems, the MBUX (Mercedes-Benz User Experience) multimedia system and ENERGIZING Comfort, the CLS was already

up-to-date technologically.

"With its unmistakable design and trend-setting technologies, the new Mercedes-AMG CLS 53 4MATIC+ provides an exceptional driving experience whether doing the daily commute or taking it for a leisurely weekend spin. We are thrilled to be offering such an iconic model to our discerning customers in Oman and are confident that it will surpass their expectations of this inimitable class and assure them a vehicle they will cherish driving," said Shaun Michael, chief executive officer at Mercedes-Benz Oman.

As a coupé, the CLS, together with all roadsters and cabriolets, belongs to the category of dream cars at Mercedes-Benz. To date, more than 4mn examples have been sold to customers all over the world, including more than



450,000 CLS models since the launch of the first generation in 2004. China was the largest sales market for the CLS Coupé

in 2020, followed by South Korea, the USA and Germany. The reason most frequently cited by customers for buying the CLS

is its design: Sportiness is the true luxury in this customer segment.

Now the CLS shows off an

even sportier look.

If the CLS is equipped with the AMG Line Exterior, it signals its sportiness even more clearly: AMG styling components are fitted in this version. These include an AMG-specific front apron with A-wing in black, a front splitter in silver chrome, sporty, distinctive air intakes with vertical bars and aerodynamically shaped flics in high-gloss black. Other features include AMG sill trim on the side and AMG spoiler lip on the boot lid. In combination with AMG Line Exterior, two new colours can be selected for the 20-inch, high-gloss AMG multi-spoke light-alloy wheel in bi-colour look: tremolite grey or high-gloss black.

All models with AVANTGARDE Exterior or AMG Line Exterior receive a new radiator grille. Special features of this grille are the Mercedes-Benz

pattern (a three-dimensional star pattern with chrome-gloss surfaces), a louvre in high-gloss black with chrome inlay and the integrated Mercedes star. The new paint colour for the CLS is spectral blue metallic.

In addition to the more distinctive exterior, the interior has also been enhanced. Two new trim finishes, including for the centre console, are available in open-pore brown walnut and high-gloss grey wood. The range of leather seat upholstery has also been expanded: Neva grey/magma grey and sienna brown/black are the two new colour combinations here.

As part of the update, the CLS receives a redesigned multifunction steering wheel in nappa leather. The spokes are finished in high-gloss black with silver chrome edging, the paddle shifters in silver chrome.

Mazoon Dairy wins Most Trusted Brand Award

Building upon its many accolades, the flagship dairy company of the Sultanate of Oman, Mazoon Dairy, was recently recognised as one of Oman's Most Trusted Brands 2021, receiving the award in the Dairy Category. Instituted by Apex Media, Oman's Most Trusted Brand Awards was held under the auspices of H E Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Minister of Energy and Minerals and is a validation of the public's confidence in a brand.

Oman's Most Trusted Brand Awards, now in its 5th edition, saw the presentation of awards to several brands in Oman in 45 categories.

The awards are the ultimate recognition of a brand's products and services as well as customer

satisfaction.

The public is free to nominate the companies or brands they prefer without being limited to just a few names. It is a true test of brand recall and an excellent way of establishing genuine public perception of different brands in the country.

Commenting on this honour, Khalid al Mahruqi, branding manager, at Mazoon said, "Over the last three years, Mazoon has been at the forefront in redefining quality by providing fresh and healthy dairy products to consumers - building on our foundation of exceptional quality control. In our industry, customer trust is a vital criterion and our tireless commitment towards providing our consumers with the best in health, nutrition, and

taste is what sets us apart from the rest."

"This award is an encouragement for us to continually evolve and widen our knowledge of consumer needs so we can always exceed their expectations."

A revolutionary Omani company with the aspiration to go global, Mazoon continues to grow from strength to strength by pioneering new products, while meeting top international standards and local needs for nutritious and healthy dairy products. Over the years Mazoon has built a legacy of not only extending quality products but also enriching lives with uncompromising taste and nutrition.

"On behalf of Mazoon Dairy, I would like to thank everyone

who participated in the survey, which made it possible for us to win this award," he said.

We will ensure that we continue our efforts to provide our customers with only the best products - to nurture with care. Additionally, I would like to congratulate Apex Media for yet another successful award culmination," Khalid added.

Mazoon Dairy is one of the most technologically advanced dairy companies in the region, with state-of-the-art facilities and equipment.

With its original and wholesome offerings, Mazoon Dairy enables people to make the right choices for an active and healthy lifestyle. Its purpose is to unlock the force of nature in people and nourish a better tomorrow.



Deal signed for first Omani veterinary platform



Muscat Apps, represented by Engineer Saleh al Khalidi, signed an agreement to work, design and develop the first Omani veterinary platform, Ovet, with Dr Talal al Obaidani. Ovet platform aims to provide veterinary services electronically to make it easier for animal breeders and owners to take medical advice and book services appointments in specialised veterinary clinics, in addition to displaying and selling animals and their accessories, feeding, management and housing.

Misfat Al Abriyeen heritage project launches VR facility at Bait Al Siraj

The Misfat Al Abriyeen heritage tourism project in the Wilayat of Al Hamra, which was developed by Bank Muscat in partnership with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, has announced the launch of Bait Al Siraj, the first virtual reality (VR) powered facility in the sultanate.

As one of the most important and distinguished tourism projects in Misfat Al Abriyeen, it uses VR technology to promote a highly interactive and fun experience for visitors, both young and old, to enjoy the beauty and pristine views of the picturesque mountain village including centuries-old mud houses and agricultural terrace fields. The new



project includes a section that sells antiques and gifts as well as refreshments so as to make it a highly memorable experience for visitors.

The landmark tourism devel-

opment project in Misfat Al Abriyeen, which was initiated in 2019 by the Bank in line with its commitment to partnership in sustainable development and promotion of national goals has seen much success since the facilities were opened to the general public in 2020 as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Blessed Renaissance of Oman. The tourism project promotes a sustainable development model that benefits local communities and strengthens the country's environment and cultural heritage.

Based on international specifications, it included the restoration of the main gate of Misfat Al

Abriyeen. The restoration of a number of old mud houses were also done so as to set up a restaurant to serve authentic Omani cuisine to visitors. Vehicle parking facilities, a tourist information centre and office, a souvenir shop were also developed as part of the project.

The project has been boosting heritage tourism, leading to sustainable development of Al Hamra and the surrounding areas, and is greatly benefiting the local community and entrepreneurs from the region. It is also an inspiration to further develop heritage tourism and power the sultanate's economic diversification drive.

The final of MG Cup concludes; Bahla Club lifts the trophy

In a nail-biting finish to the grand finale of the 2021-2022 MG Cup, Bahla Club scored the penalty goal against Oman Club and lifted the prestigious MG Cup trophy. Last year, Mohsin Haider Darwish and Oman Football Association had signed an agreement, under which MHD ACERE became the exclusive sponsors of the MG Cup.

MG Motor's passion and commitment towards the game is a known global fact and the UK-born brand is supporting football teams locally, regionally as well as internationally.

MG Motor is the official global automotive partner of the fa-

mous British football club Liverpool FC.

Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, the CEO of MHD ACERE - the official distributors of MG Motor in Oman - congratulated all the teams, "This season of MG Cup has been exciting and action-packed. We congratulate all the teams for their exceptional performances. We congratulate Oman Club for their fighting spirit and the winning Bahla Club for their well-deserved victory".

"Football in Oman is a national obsession and we are so pleased to be able to support it by entering into a partnership with OFA. We joined hands with

prominent footballer Ali al Habsi and he came onboard as MG Motor Oman's brand ambassador," he said.

"As sole representatives of MG Motor in the country, it is our aspiration to support the national sports and the national talents for them to reach great heights in their sporting careers," Bahrani added.

MG is a British-born automotive brand established in 1924, known for its historic models, awards and achievements throughout the past 97 years. MG was founded by William Morris and Cecil Kimbers and has one of the oldest car club in

the automotive industry. Best known for its two-seat open sports cars, MG also produced saloons and coupes. Since its acquisition of MG, SAIC MOTOR, as a Global Top 500 company, has opened a new chapter for this British icon.

MG is at the forefront of the introduction of innovative technologies and new energy vehicles for car buyers. MG Motor showrooms in Oman are located in Wattayah, Azaiba, Al Manuma, Bidaya, Sohar, Nizwa, Salalah, Sur, Ibra and Ibri. For more information, to book a test drive and to purchase a car online, visit <https://mg-om.com>



ARA Petroleum contributes to Ministry of Energy initiative

ARA Petroleum Exploration and Production, a member of the Zubair Corporation group of companies, took part in an initiative launched by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals to institute a centre for culture and innovation in Musandam, covering an area of 10,000 sqm.

This step was carried out in cooperation with the Governor's Office in Musandam, alongside six other companies from the oil and gas sector.

The agreement was signed between H E Sayyid Ibrahim al Busaidi, Minister of State and Governor of Musandam, H E Eng Salem al Afi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and Talal al Afi, CEO of OQ.

In this regard, Dr Omar bin Salem al Jaidi, general manager of ARA Petroleum Exploration

and Production, said, "This cooperation between the seven companies involved in the establishment of the Musandam Centre for Culture and Innovation, stems from the objective of uniting similar visions and goals towards serving the local community in Musandam governorate."

"Together with the Governor's Office in Musandam, the centre will be based on three main pillars, encouraging community innovation, enhancing culture and innovation and promoting entrepreneurship within the governorate. Musandam Centre looks to spread awareness and enhance cultural development within the region by conducting a number of events and activities," Jaidi added.

These include seminars, conferences, poetry nights and art

exhibitions.

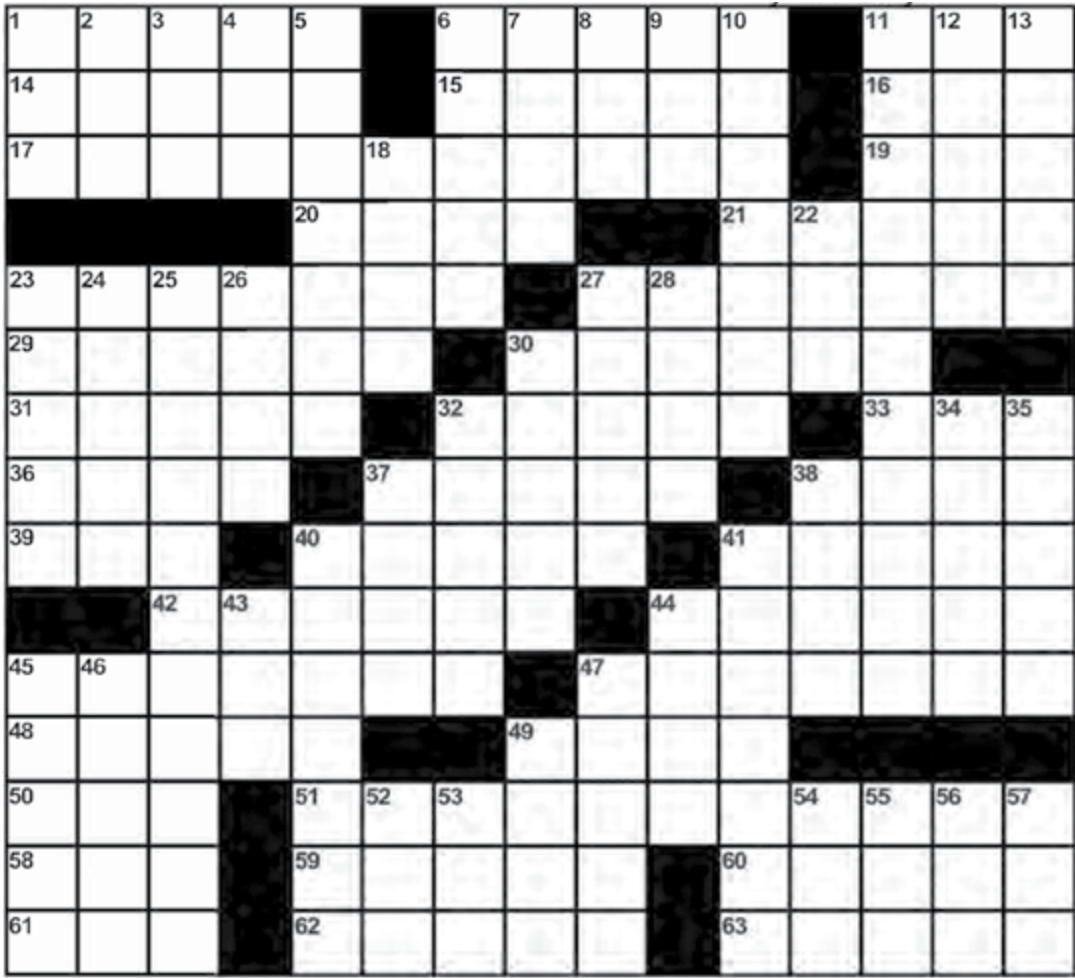
Moreover, it will seek to enrich innovation by enabling entrepreneurs to transform their ideas into state-of-the-art projects. In addition, the cultural, innovation and investment aspects of the project will be overseen by the Ministry of Culture and Sports, the Ministry of Education and Musandam Municipality, respectively."

Musandam Centre will be established with the contribution of the following seven companies, specialised in the oil and gas field, namely, Petroleum Development Oman, Occidental Oman, BP Oman, OQ, Daleel Oil Company, CC Energy Development and ARA Petroleum.

OQ will be responsible for the management and establishment of the centre on behalf of the joint-stock companies.



DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) News windup
6) Acute anxiety
11) Some undergraduate degs.
14) Give a formal address
15) Bit of an uproar
16) It's this or nothing
17) Passionate with a constant temperature?
19) "Christ the Redeemer" city
20) Defraud
21) American felines
23) Morally blemished
27) Devoted to reading
29) Used the backspace key
30) Tutu wearer's dance
31) Sign on a grade-school bathroom
32) Protrude outward
33) Zig's companion
36) Topmost spot
37) Destiny or fate, to Hindus
38) Eye part that holds the iris
39) American uncle
40) Weasley of the "Harry Potter" books
41) What the ruling Romanovs were
42) A charmer?
44) 1982 Oscar-winning role for Meryl

45) Mountaineering attempts
47) Gliding steps in
31-Across
48) Thai monetary units
49) Dry, as a desert
50) Geisha's waist-cincher
51) Activity of choir members
58) Cub Scout faction
59) Brainstorm aftermaths
60) Frightfully strange
61) Before, to poets of old
62) Bike and bridle, for two
63) Has a breakdown

DOWN

1) Line of seats
2) Significant time, historically
3) It can get you there
4) Sign at many convenience stores
5) Flintstone child
6) "You've Really Got_ On Me"
7) Cranny cohort
8) Word on US coins
9) This boat
10) Creature that loses its tail
11) Rites of passage for some 13-year olds

12) Fake identity
13) Play in a mud puddle
18) Stretched the truth
22) Hawaiian instrument, briefly
23) French Impressionist Edgar
24) "All My Children" character
25) Harvester or tractor, e.g.
26) Ferry destination, often
27) Like Caribbean weather
28) Korbut of gymnastics fame
30) More than charred (Var.)
32) Downfalls
34) Eagle's nest
35) Radon and krypton
37) "Braveheart" garment
38) Org. with carriers
40) Armada component
41) Yes men
43) NYC opera house (with "The")
44) Knee neighbor
45) Dwelling place
46) Cavalry sidearm
47) Christian symbol

49) Beijing housemaid
52) Abbr. on a toothpaste box
53) No longer playing (Abbr.)

54) Type of garden with rocks
55) Keogh plan kin
56) Tuck partner
57) Some refrigerators

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

When dealing with other people today, listen to them with an open mind. Not everyone around you will be able to agree on the right way to go about doing things. Luckily, you should find all this bickering quite amusing! Let them vent their frustrations without offering your own opinion. Amid all the griping, you might find a creative solution to a vexing issue. Aren't you glad you stuck around for this?

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You need a change of scenery. Sitting still has always been a challenge for you, but at the moment it's basically impossible. Why fight it? Get out there and mix it up. Someone special would like to spend some quality time with you right now. Whether it's an old friend, a new flame, or a long-neglected family member, share yourself with someone you adore. They'll appreciate the gesture.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Your brilliant ideas could win you a lot of accolades, and a lot of people might ask you about the secret to your success. Don't be too specific about how you get your ideas. Right now you need to protect your sources of inspiration. Plus, other people need to find their unique pathways on their own. Giving them a shortcut will only make them waste time in the end. Keep things vague right now. Details are too tedious.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

The people who are disagreeing with you today aren't being intentionally difficult, so be patient with them. They have new ideas that are worth hearing even if they don't know how to express them in a way you can understand. What seems like rudeness could simply be inarticulateness, so be careful how you react. Ask a lot of questions, and don't end the conversation until you're absolutely sure you know what they're talking about.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You're totally engrossed in your work, and that's how it should be. But a certain authority figure has been on your mind lately too, and your thoughts are anything but professional. A crush on the boss? Is the feeling mutual? Perhaps! Tread carefully. Before you start planning your wedding and considering the names of your children, ponder whether you're ready to lose your job over this fling. If you don't care, by all means go for it!

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Too much is going on, and you'll miss out on some exciting stuff if you're not careful! You've been cruising along in the fast lane lately, but today you might want to ease over to the slow lane. Sometimes it's nice to downshift, get off the main highway, and take a more leisurely route to your destination. The landscape is lovely in your life right now. Why not take a longer look and invite a passenger along for the ride?

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

It can go one of two ways for you right now, romantically speaking. An existing relationship will become far more intimate or a new relationship will take off like a speeding train. Either way, you'll have to excuse the rest of the world and sneak off to your little love shack. Don't worry. Everything will still be here when you emerge whenever. Enjoy your time with your partner. The next few days are going to be filled with romance.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

More than anything right now, you're enjoying the intimacy you've allowed yourself to give and receive. Your favourite peeps have confided in you, and you've shared your own secrets with them too. It's not the intrigue that has you so mesmerised. Not exactly. Although, honestly, that does appeal to you. What you really love is the closeness that opening up your heart brings.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Your reputation is your top concern right now, so tend to it with a little TLC. Avoid being seen in the wrong places with the wrong people, at least for the time being. Make sure you come off in a good light. Attention to detail is more important than ever, so reread your professional communiques at least twice and don't dress right for every occasion. Make sure you're polished and smooth at all times.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

If you really want to be different, why not put your money away, and breathe new life into a garment or accessory you already own? You're always in the mood to shop, but are you ever in the mood to create something new? Instead of making more debt, why not explore ways to stabilise your financial future. Invest in some raw materials. You might end up with a profitable part-time business.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You definitely have a way with words, but today's astrological additives can magnify your verbal dexterity tenfold. If you've been meaning to make amends, reveal a secret, or just get something off your chest, clear your throat and start talking. Once you start, all the right words will come to you automatically. It couldn't be a better time to set yourself up for success. You'll triumph in all your communicative endeavours.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Everything can go well if everyone cooperates today, and they will, mostly. Except, of course, for a few diehards. Just ignore those folks for now, they will come around later. No matter how you shake it, today is a great day to be you. It'll be an even better day if that certain special someone you've been obsessed with somehow materialises in the process. You've never had it so good!

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The mountainous Kyrgyz Republic borders which of these countries?

A. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam
B. The Republic of Lithuania
C. The Republic of Kazakhstan
D. The Russian Federation

2. The rumba was originally danced where?

A. Canada
B. Spain
C. Cuba
D. Greece

3. Which player made a comeback to international tennis in 2006 after 4 years?

A. Steffi Graf
B. Martina Hingis
C. Gabriela Sabatini
D. Kim Clijsters

Answers: 1. C 2. C 3. B

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

T	S	T	A
O	I	B	U
Y	A	U	B
B	P	Y	T

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

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

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

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

UN appeals for \$826mn in aid for coup-hit Myanmar

Geneva, Switzerland - The UN appealed Tuesday for US\$826mn to get humanitarian aid to 6.2mn people in Myanmar in 2022, saying the country had plunged into unprecedented suffering since last year's coup.

Exactly a year on from the February 1 military takeover, the United Nations said the economic chaos following the coup had left many unable to feed their families.

The UN estimates that out of 54mn people in Myanmar, 25 mn are living in poverty and 14.4mn need humanitarian aid - including five million children. Of those, the UN hopes to reach the 6.2mn most severely in need, with a plan that seeks a record amount for the country - more than twice the money requested last year.

"The economic and political turmoil of 2021, combined with the devastating impact of COVID-19, has driven half the population into poverty," Jens Laerke, a spokesman for the UN's humanitarian agency, told reporters in Geneva.

"Many can no longer afford to feed their families because of job and income losses, and price increases."

Myanmar's military seized power one year ago, ousting the civilian government and arresting its de facto leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

The United Nations Human Rights Office said that since the coup, at least 1,500 people had been killed by the military in a brutal effort to crush dissent,



This file photo shows an image of detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi being projected on a screen during a night-time demonstration by protesters against the military coup in Yangon, on March 13 last year (AFP)

while thousands more would have been killed in the wider armed conflict and violence.

'Appalling conditions'

Laerke said more than 400,000 people had been displaced since the coup d'état.

"Thousands of displaced people are living in appalling conditions, many in camps and displacement sites, others with

host communities. And some have crossed the borders with Thailand and India or have sought refuge in the jungle without adequate food, shelter, sanitation, protection or medical care," he said.

He called for humanitarian agencies to be allowed access to displacement sites to deliver life-saving food, water and healthcare. Ramanathan Balakrishnan, the UN resident and humanitar-

ian coordinator in Myanmar, said the outlook was 'grim' and many of the country's gains of the last 15 years were under serious threat.

"2021 has been a traumatic year for the people of Myanmar, characterised by unprecedented levels of human suffering," he said in the document outlining this year's response plan.

"Poverty is back to levels not seen since 2005, with almost

half the population now unable to make ends meet."

He said more than 13mn people were now in moderate or severe food insecurity.

"The outlook for malnutrition is dire unless we intervene now," Balakrishnan said.

"People are increasingly resorting to dangerous coping strategies to survive, leading to worsening protection risks."

AFP

Japan's parliament adopts resolution raising concern on rights issues in China

Tokyo, Japan - Japan's parliament on Tuesday passed a rare resolution expressing concern about rights issues in China, including the treatment of its Uyghur Muslim population and Hong Kong, days before the Beijing Olympics open.

The wording of the resolution proposed by a bipartisan group was reportedly watered down after lengthy discussions, avoiding directly accusing Beijing of rights abuses.

But it comes at a time of increased focus on China's rights record as the country prepares to host the Beijing Winter Olympics this month.

Tokyo has sought to walk a careful line in its approach to China, balancing the pressure put on Beijing by close ally Washington. The United States and China are Japan's biggest trading partners.

A majority vote in the lower house approved the resolution, which expresses 'serious concerns over the human rights situations' in China's Xinjiang region, Tibet, Hong Kong and Inner Mongolia.

The resolution also calls on Japan's government to engage constructively on right issues in China.

Beijing has long denied accusations over its treatment of the Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim Turkic people, including a US allegation it committed genocide.

Experts have estimated that more than one million people are incarcerated in camps in the Xinjiang region

home to the minority.

Likewise, Beijing has denied claims that Tibetans live under strict surveillance with the threat of jail or abuse for any signs of a non-Chinese identity, including possessing images of the Dalai Lama, their exiled spiritual leader.

On Hong Kong, Japan has repeatedly expressed 'grave concerns' over the former British colony's electoral system as China ramped up control of the financial hub, prompting huge pro-democracy protests.

In December last year, Japan said it would not send government representatives to the Beijing Olympics as it called on China to respect human rights and the rule of law.

The move came after the United States, Britain, Australia and Canada this announced diplomatic boycotts of the Games over what they consider to be widespread rights abuses by China.

Their boycott stops short of not sending athletes to the Winter Games, which start on February 4.

But Beijing has warned the four Western nations would 'pay the price' for the US-led campaign.

Japan, which hosted the virus-postponed Tokyo Olympics last year, is sending Tokyo 2020 chief Seiko Hashimoto and Japanese Olympic Committee head Yashuhiro Yamashita to attend the Beijing opening ceremony.

AFP

Amnesty joins other rights groups in condemning Israeli 'apartheid'

Jerusalem - Amnesty International on Tuesday labelled Israel an 'apartheid' state that treats Palestinians as 'an inferior racial group', joining the assessment of other rights groups which the Jewish state vehemently rejects.

"Israel's cruel policies of segregation, dispossession and exclusion across all territories under its control clearly amount to apartheid," said Amnesty's secretary general Agnes Callamard. "Whether they live in Gaza, east Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank, or Israel itself, Palestinians are treated as an inferior racial group and systematically deprived of their rights."

Israel's Foreign Minister Yair Lapid strongly rejected the report as 'divorced from reality' and charged that 'Amnesty quotes lies spread by terrorist organisations'. A year ago, the Israeli-based human rights group B'Tselem drew fire when it asserted that Israeli policies had been designed to enforce 'Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea' and met the definition of 'apartheid'.

New York-based Human Rights Watch in April last year became the first major international rights group to publicly level the controversial allegation.

The report by London-based Amnesty builds on those previous calls in asserting that Israeli-enforced apartheid exists in occupied Palestinians territories and within Israel itself, where Arab citizens make up more than 20 per cent of the population.

Amnesty stressed it was not comparing Israel's treatment of Palestinians to conditions in apartheid-era South Africa but said Israeli conduct and policies met the criteria for the crime of apartheid as defined under inter-



Agnes Callamard (AFP)

national law.

Callamard told AFP that Israel's Arab citizens 'will not experience the apartheid in the same way' as a Palestinian in Gaza but that 'the regime of apartheid' exists in both places.

Israel's foreign ministry, in a statement released on Monday, called on Amnesty to 'withdraw' the report. "Amnesty was once an esteemed organisation that we all respected," said Lapid. "Today, it is the exact opposite."

'Open to scrutiny'

"Israel is not perfect, but it is a democracy committed to international law and open to scrutiny," said Lapid, who is also Israel's alternate prime minister.

He also charged that Amnesty had an anti-Semitic agenda. "I hate to use the argument that if Israel were not a Jewish state, nobody in Amnesty would dare argue against it, but in this case, there is no other possibility," he said. The president of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald Lauder, said Amnesty's report "does absolutely nothing to offer a constructive way forward and has no real interest in promoting the human rights of Palestinians or advancing peace and a lasting two-state solution. "It will only serve, like previous

similar prejudiced reports, to fuel the fires of anti-Semites under the guise of political correctness." Callamard countered that "a critique of the practice of the State of Israel is absolutely not a form of anti-Semitism."

"Amnesty International stands very strongly against anti-Semitism, against any form of racism," she said.

"We have repeatedly denounced anti-Semitic acts and anti-Semitism by various leaders around the world."

'Avenues to justice'

Israel has controlled the West Bank and east Jerusalem since 1967. Some 700,000 Jews now live alongside Palestinians in both areas, in settlements regarded as illegal under international law.

Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005 but has enforced a blockade of the Hamas-controlled territory since 2007.

The International Criminal Court has opened an investigation into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict expected to focus in part on possible war crimes committed during the 2014 conflict in Gaza. Amnesty called on the ICC 'to consider the crime of apartheid in its current investigation'. It also urged the United Nations Security Council to 'impose targeted sanctions, such as asset freezes, against Israeli officials most implicated in the crime of apartheid'.

It said the international community needed to 'face up to the reality of Israeli apartheid and pursue the many avenues to justice which remain shamefully unexplored'. Callamard told AFP that international 'fatigue' to address the plight of Palestinians was 'not an option'.

AFP



Netherland's short track speed skaters take part in a training session at the Capital Indoor Stadium in Beijing on Monday, ahead of Winter Games (AFP)

US watchdog warns over athletes' safety at Winter Games in China

Washington, US - A US rights monitor sounded the alarm on Monday over athletes' safety at China's upcoming Winter Olympics, after the host threatened 'punishment' for anti-Beijing comments.

The Congressional-Executive Commission on China - a group of Washington lawmakers and White House officials - asked US Olympics authorities for an 'urgent effort' to protect their sports stars' free speech rights at the February 4-20 event.

The commission spoke out after Yang Shu, a senior official in the Beijing Games organising committee, told an online briefing on January 18 that 'any behaviour or speech that is against the Olympic spirit, especially against the Chinese laws and regulations, are also subject to certain punishment'.

"Given Yang Shu's statement

and the Chinese government's documented behaviour, we urge the USOPC to be vigilant and prepared to defend any Olympians who speak out," the commission said in a letter to the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee seen by AFP.

The United States, Australia, Canada and Britain announced in December that they would not be sending official representatives to Beijing, citing the alleged genocide and crimes against humanity against the Uyghur population, a minority Muslim group in the Xinjiang region.

The countries said their athletes would still participate, but China nevertheless responded angrily, warning Western nations that they would 'pay the price' for the protest.

Advocacy groups have backed the boycott, with Human Rights Watch (HRW) China di-

rector Sophie Richardson calling it a 'crucial step toward challenging the Chinese government's crimes against humanity targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic communities'.

'Gold medal for censorship'

Campaigners say that at least one million Uyghurs and other Turkic-speaking, mostly Muslim minorities have been incarcerated in 're-education camps' in Xinjiang, where China is also accused of forcibly sterilizing women and imposing forced labour.

Beijing has defended the camps as vocational training centers aimed at reducing the appeal of Islamic extremism.

The commission also voiced concerns over Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai, who made sexual assault allegations against a

top Communist Party official.

Peng was not heard from for nearly three weeks, and there remain concerns about how free she really is. New York-based HRW awarded China a 'gold medal for censorship' last week, in a statement accusing the Asian giant of trying to 'sports-wash' its 'abysmal human rights record'.

"Athletes participating in the games will be surveilled, and their rights to free speech and protest severely curtailed," said Director of Global Initiatives Minky Worden.

Asked whether President Joe Biden supports US athletes making political statements at the Olympics, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters the administration had 'conveyed support for freedom of speech of individuals'.

AFP

US cyber official to meet NATO on Russian threats

Anne Neuberger will start in Brussels for meetings with NATO to enhance resilience in cyberspace

Washington, US - The top White House official for cyber security began a tour of European NATO allies on Tuesday to prepare for potential Russian attacks in cyberspace, senior US officials said.

Anne Neuberger, deputy national security advisor for cyber and emerging technology, will start in Brussels for meetings with NATO to "enhance national and alliance resilience in cyberspace, including deterring, disrupting, and responding to further Russian aggression against Ukraine, neighbouring states, and in our respective countries," the officials said.

The US officials, sharing details of the trip in a statement on condition of anonymity, said Neuberger will next go to Poland for meetings with Polish and Baltic cyber chiefs.

She is also due to consult with members of eastern European NATO countries, known as the B9 group, and have virtual meetings with German and French officials. "Our focus is on ensuring that the United States and our allies and partners are prepared for any cyber-related contingency and prepared to respond in the current environment. We will also discuss how we will co-ordinate and support Ukraine, and each other, in the event that cyberattacks occur," officials said.



A demonstrator displays a placard reading 'RUSSIA GO HOME!' as others wave Ukrainian flags during a protest at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate on Sunday (AFP)

"It will be crucial for the US and allies and partners to be united." Russia has massed a formidable military force on Ukraine's borders. Although Moscow insists it has no intention to invade, it already seized the Crimea region

in 2014 and backs a bloody separatist rebellion in the Russian-speaking east of Ukraine. US and European officials warn that short of a military attack, Russia could still inflict considerable damage on Ukraine's stability through cyberattacks.

"The Russians understand that disabling or destroying critical infrastructure - including power and communications - can augment pressure on a country's government, military and population and accelerate their acceding to Russian objec-

tives," the senior US officials said. Moscow denies any aggressive intentions, saying the more than 100,000 troops being deployed just outside Ukraine are conducting exercises. The Kremlin, however, says that it feels threatened by NATO

and will not climb down if the United States does not agree to permanently exclude non-NATO member Ukraine from the Western alliance, as well as pull back forces in other eastern European countries. AFP

Italy PM calls Putin on Ukraine tensions

Rome, Italy - Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi called for a 'de-escalation' of tensions over Ukraine in a telephone call on Tuesday with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Draghi's office said.

"Prime Minister Draghi underlined the importance of working for a de-escalation of tensions in light of the serious consequences that a worsening of the crisis would have," his office said. "They agreed on a joint commitment to a sustainable and lasting solution to the crisis, and the need to rebuild a climate of trust."

The Tuesday morning call also covered bilateral issues, the statement said. Tensions between Russia and the West over Ukraine have been building for weeks, with Washington accusing Moscow of preparing an imminent invasion of its pro-Western neighbour. AFP

Two infant girls killed by winter cold in northwest Syria, says UN

Haranbush, Syria - Two Syrian infant girls have died from harsh winter weather in northwest Syria where snow and rain have destroyed the tents of hundreds of displaced families, the United Nations said on Tuesday.

"A seven-day-old girl and a two-month-old girl have died from the cold in Idlib province," the UN's humanitarian agency OCHA told AFP.

According to an AFP correspondent in northern Idlib, both children were announced dead on Tuesday. They were taken to the Al-Rahman specialist hospital in the Idlib village of Haranbush which has received an influx of children in recent days amid sub-zero temperatures, the correspondent said.

Deaths due to the cold are an annual occurrence in Syria's last



An infant lies inside an incubator at Ibn Sina hospital, in Idlib on Tuesday (AFP)

major rebel enclave which the UN says is home to 2.8mn displaced people. Dwindling donor funds have already caused dire shortages of medicine and equipment in hospitals and clinics in the region,

many of which are now at risk of closing down.

"Children are at risk of the cold. They live in worn-out tents and there is a lack of winter clothes and fuel," said OCHA spokesman Patrick Nicholson. AFP

"The problem is getting worse due to the economic crisis, lack of resources to provide winter aid and increased needs." According to OCHA, harsh weather in January has destroyed at least 935 tents and damaged more than 9,000 others in several displacement sites in Syria's north. Unsafe heating methods, including exposed rudimentary heaters, have often triggered deadly fires. Since the start of the year, 68 fires were reported, which resulted in 24 injuries and two deaths in northern Syria alone, according to OCHA. The last rebel enclave in the Idlib region is dominated by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham alliance, which is led by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate. AFP

Israel to free Spanish aid worker jailed 'for funding fighter group'

Jerusalem - An Israeli judge agreed on Tuesday to the early release of Spanish aid worker Juana Rashmawi, who was jailed in November for illegally funding a Palestinian fighter group, her lawyer said. Attorney Avigdor Feldman said he expected Rashmawi to be freed within a week, provided the state does not appeal the parole board decision to release her early from her 13-month sentence. "This was the right decision, it was supposed to be taken a month ago and the prosecution or the state has no grounds to appeal this decision," Feldman told AFP. "I hope she will be released in next seven days." Rashmawi was sentenced in November after a military court convicted her of working with an

organisation that it said was funding the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a leftist group blamed for previous attacks on Israelis. She had already spent some months in custody awaiting trial which were counted towards her sentence, her lawyer said. Rashmawi had been working for a Palestinian group, the Union of Health Work Committees, which Israel said funnelled European donations to the PFLP. In 2020, Israel banned the aid group from working in the occupied West Bank. In her November plea deal, Rashmawi claimed she did not know the health organisation had been funding the PFLP. The deal required her to pay a fine of 50,000 shekels (US\$16,000 approx). She was arrested in April last year, and

Feldman said she signed the deal to avoid a lengthy trial. "In the indictment against her, it says very clearly that she was not aware that the money was transferred from the organisation to the PFLP, if it was transferred," Feldman said. "It was not proven even that the money was transferred." Rashmawi holds Spanish citizenship and the Spanish ambassador to Israel attended the parole board hearing in Nazareth on Tuesday at which the decision was handed down. Judge Chanan Efrati wrote that he approved Rashmawi's early release in part because 'the prisoner is an older woman and this is her first incarceration... It's reasonable to assume that after her release she will leave Israel for Spain, where her family lives'. AFP

In space race, Europe faces choice: A passenger or pilot?

Paris, France - As the race to send people to the Moon and beyond heats up, Europe faces calls to make a choice: Keep paying for seats on spacecraft or finally fly its own manned vehicle. Imagine if Christopher Columbus did not have a ship to sail to the Americas, the head of the European Space Agency said recently, lamenting that the continent lacked a vessel to 'explore the next frontier'. "We will be on the Moon and we believe we will be living there. We will use the Moon as an economic zone. This is a new frontier," ESA director general Josef Aschbacher told the 14th European Space Congress last week in Brussels. "The big question is, do we want, as Europeans, to be part of it, or do we want to be watching others going to the Moon?" NASA is aiming to return to the Moon with its Artemis programme by 2025, while China plans to send one of its taikonauts there by 2030. India plans an uncrewed test

flight for its Gaganyaan programme this year to prepare for a manned mission. Europe, meanwhile, has no manned vessels to speak of, having relied on US and Russian spacecraft to take more than 30 astronauts into orbit over the years. Private companies have now become major players in the sector, with Elon Musk's SpaceX taking astronauts to the International Space Station. French astronaut Thomas Pesquet, who travelled to and from the ISS aboard SpaceX's Dragon capsule, has called for more ambition in Europe in terms of crewed flights. European space firm ArianeGroup, owned by Airbus and French group Safran, says it is ready to develop a reusable two-stage launcher capable of carrying astronauts. Philippe Baptiste, president of France's CNES space agency, says such a launcher would pave the way for Moon and Mars missions, but he



This file photo shows Arianespace's Ariane 5 rocket with NASA's James Webb Space Telescope onboard lifting up from the launchpad, at Europe's Spaceport in Kourou, French Guiana, on December 25 last year (AFP)

said Europe's space ambitions remain a political question. That question takes on particular significance in the runup to a European space summit in the French city of Toulouse on February 16. An ESA ministerial meeting will be held in Novem-

ber to lay out priorities and budgets for the coming years.

Mere passengers

The ESA's 2021 space exploration budget stood at US\$822mn - just 7 per cent of NASA's.

Meanwhile, private-sector funding in space-related companies exceeded US\$10bn last year - an all-time high - and investors are directing more funds to Moon projects and further from Earth's orbit, according to the McKinsey consultancy.

Lacking its own vehicle, the ESA will seek to secure a spot for a European on a NASA Moon mission by proposing to develop a lunar supply lander, Didier Schmitt, the agency's head of exploration strategy, told Bsmart online media. Europe is already guaranteed three stays on NASA's Gateway, a space station that will orbit the Moon with several European-built modules. But even NASA has had to rely on SpaceX for flights to the ISS as the US space agency works on a new vessel to replace the mothballed space shuttle programme. German astronaut Alexander Gerst warns that using private hardware could see his colleagues denied full access to data. "I see that from my colleagues who were training now for example with SpaceX with the Dragon, it's a totally different game. They're not partners on an equal level anymore, they

are actually more like passengers," he said. "They're not allowed to have access to all the information anymore, so it is a step back." 'Economic rationale' Europe tried to have its own manned spacecraft before. The Hermes programme, however, was abandoned in 1992 after delays and failure to meet cost and performance goals. Jean-Jacques Tortora, director of the Vienna-based European Space Policy Institute, said arguments in favour of a European space programme lack an 'economic rationale'. "Essentially, it is about political objectives, if Europe has the desire to be a space power or not," Tortora said. In last week's Brussels conference none of the ministerial level representatives from France, Germany or Italy mentioned crewed European flight as a priority. AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Denmark lifts all curbs to 'live normally' again with Omicron

Copenhagen, Denmark - Denmark waved goodbye to face-masks and health passes on Tuesday as it became the first European Union country to lift all of its domestic COVID curbs despite record numbers of cases of the milder Omicron variant.

Only a few restrictions remain in place at the country's borders, for unvaccinated travellers arriving from non-Schengen countries.

After a first attempt at lifting restrictions between September and November, the Scandinavian country once again ditched its COVID checks and limited opening hours for bars and restaurants.

"For me, the best part is that we don't need to wear masks anymore. At least now we have a choice, if we want to protect ourselves or we want to feel free," Natalia Chechetkina, a receptionist in Copenhagen, told AFP.

Marie Touffet, a 23-year-old French student in the capital, said it was 'pretty strange to take the metro without a mask, compared to France'.

"It's really nice to be able to see people's faces and it feels like we're living normally again."

The easing comes as Denmark registers around 40,000-



Customers are seen at the fishmarket in Torvehallerne in Copenhagen on Tuesday (AFP)

50,000 new COVID cases a day, or almost one per cent of the country's 5.8mn inhabitants. Health officials believe those figures will soon start going down.

"There are strong indications that the infection has peaked in the areas where it has been most pronounced," Tyra Krause of Denmark's public health and research institution SSI told news agency Ritzau.

"So it's super good timing for

the restrictions to be eased," she added.

More than 60 per cent of Danes have received a third dose of a COVID-19 vaccine - one month ahead of health authorities' schedule - compared to an EU average of just under 45 per cent.

Including those who have recently had COVID, health authorities estimate that 80 per cent of the population is protected against severe forms of

the disease.

"With Omicron not being a severe disease for the vaccinated, we believe it is reasonable to lift restrictions," epidemiologist Lone Simonsen of the University of Roskilde told AFP.

Two years after the outbreak of COVID-19, the Danish strategy enjoys broad support at home.

In a poll published on Monday by daily *Politiken*, 64 per

cent of Danes surveyed said that they had faith in the government's COVID policy, while the lifting of the restrictions also has widespread support in parliament.

Personal responsibility

Going forward, Danes are being urged to exercise personal responsibility.

"Without a COVID pass there will be a shift of responsibility," Simonsen said.

Danes have increasingly used home tests to detect infection, but these are now being phased out and instead, anyone with symptoms is advised to stay home.

The Danish Health Authority currently 'recommends' those who test positive to isolate for four days, while contact cases no longer need to quarantine.

Facemasks and the COVID pass are also recommended for hospital visits.

One of the rare critics of the decision to lift restrictions was the country's Gout Association.

"We think it's important to continue using masks as long as the infection is spreading widely," association director Mette Bryde Lind told Ritzau. AFP



Pedestrians walk past a wall mural depicting health workers wearing PPE suits in Mumbai on Saturday (AFP)

Medical waste posing threat, warns WHO

Geneva, Switzerland - The World Health Organization warned on Tuesday that the vast amount of waste produced in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic posed a threat to human and environmental health.

The tens of thousands of tonnes of extra medical waste had put a huge strain on healthcare waste management systems, the WHO said in a report. The extra waste is 'threatening human and environmental health and exposing a dire need to improve waste management practices', the UN health agency said.

As countries scrambled to get personal protective equipment (PPE) to cope with the crisis, less attention was paid to disposing of COVID-19 health care waste safely and sustainably, the WHO said.

The report looked at the 1.5 bn units - approximately 87,000 tonnes - of PPE procured between March 2020 and November 2021, and shipped out to countries via the United Nations system - a small fraction of the global total. Most of this equipment has likely ended up as waste, the WHO said.

"It is absolutely vital to provide health workers with the right PPE. But it is also vital to ensure that it can be used safely without impacting on the surrounding environment," said WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan.

Furthermore, over 140mn test kits have been shipped, with the potential to generate 2,600 tonnes of mainly plastic, non-infectious waste and 731,000 litres of chemical waste.

Approximately 97 per cent of plastic waste from tests is incinerated, the report said.

And the first eight billion COVID-19 vaccine doses administered globally produced 144,000 tonnes of additional waste such as syringes, needles and safety boxes.

The WHO does not recommend using gloves for vaccine injections but the report said it appeared to be common practice. Gloves, in terms of volume, constitute the greatest proportion of PPE waste of all items procured by the UN, the report said.

Practical solutions

The 71-page report warned that safe management services for healthcare waste were lacking even before the pandemic added further pressures.

The latest available data, from 2019, suggested that one in three healthcare facilities globally did not safely manage healthcare waste - and in the 46 least-developed countries, more than two in three facilities did not have a basic healthcare waste management service.

"This potentially exposes health workers to needle stick injuries, burns and pathogenic microorganisms, while also impacting communities living near poorly-managed landfills and waste disposal sites through contaminated air from burning waste, poor water quality or disease-carrying pests," the WHO said.

The report recommended practical solutions, such as using PPE more rationally; using less packaging and developing reusable PPE.

AFP

UK PM safe for now, but future in jeopardy: Analysts

London, UK - British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is 'probably safe' for now despite a scathing report into government lockdown parties, but his long-term future is 'very much out of his hands' as police probe the claims, analysts said on Tuesday.

Johnson on Monday apologised after his government was criticised for 'failures of leadership and judgment' in allowing parties at his offices during lockdown.

His position has been hanging by a thread because of the steady drip of revelations since late last year, leading to an increasingly mutinous mood among his MPs.

Senior civil servant Sue Gray



PM Johnson speaking in the House of Commons in London on Monday (AFP)

published her report into the claims on Monday, but that was only a watered-down version as she has passed on the most serious accusations to the police to investigate.

This has given Johnson some breathing space, but 'given how much is being investigated by the police, that is going to hurt him very hard,' Simon Usherwood, political and international

studies professor at the Open University, told AFP.

"He's probably safe for the next short period of time but I think yesterday has really highlighted that it's very much out of his hand at this point," he added.

The timeline 'is probably weeks rather than months', he added.

'Mark of shame'

Despite being limited in what she could say, Gray still managed a stinging rebuke to the prime minister's authority, contrasting government officials' behaviour with the sacrifices made by the public during the pandemic.

'Too little thought' had been given about how appropriate

boozy events were and would be seen as others stuck to the rules, unable to comfort sick and dying loved ones with COVID.

"Some of the events should not have been allowed to take place. Other events should not have been allowed to develop as they did," she added.

Opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer said the fact that 12 of the 16 parties, including one in Johnson's own flat, were subject to a police probe was 'a mark of shame'.

Anand Menon, European politics and foreign affairs professor at King's College London, said Johnson was 'slightly more in jeopardy' than before the report was published.

AFP

France to decide on Mali presence after envoy expelled

Paris, France - France said on Tuesday it would decide with EU partners on a future military presence in Mali by mid-February, admitting there would have to be changes after the ruling junta expelled its envoy.

French ambassador Joel Meyer was told on Monday to leave Mali within 72 hours in the latest souring of ties between the West African country, which has been racked by an insurgency, and its former colonial ruler.

The Bamako authorities said they were ordering him out after 'hostile' comments by French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who has described the new Malian regime as 'illegitimate'.

Even after recent draw-downs, France has some 4,000 troops deployed across the Sahel region, half of them in Mali, in the Barkhane operation to fight insurgents.

Paris wants now to increasingly rely on a European force known as Takuba to take the pressure off its military.

"It is clear that the situation

can't go on like this," government spokesman Gabriel Attal told Franceinfo radio on Tuesday.

He said Paris and its partners in the Takuba special forces mission would work out 'between now and mid-February' any changes to the deployment in Mali.

'Illegitimacy'

Rebel officers led a coup in August 2020 that toppled Mali's elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who was facing angry protests at failures to stem the insurgents.

The following May, the junta pushed out a civilian-led government appointed to oversee a transition period and named strongman Colonel Assimi Goita as interim president.

Tensions had already been rising after President Emmanuel Macron lashed out at the junta's failure to stick to a timetable for a return to civilian rule.

But the expulsion of Paris' envoy appears to have been triggered by recent comments from Le Drian, including to the



Demonstrators gather to support Mali on Obelisk Piazza in Dakar, on Friday (AFP)

Journal du Dimanche newspaper on Sunday.

Le Drian said the junta's decisions were keeping it in 'illegitimacy' and said they were

behaving as if the 'coup d'etat had created law'.

He also expressed alarm at the junta's reported decision to hire mercenaries from the Russ-

ian paramilitary group Wagner, which the Malian authorities deny.

Wagner's actions 'disrupt the entire military system present in

Mali', Le Drian said, adding that the 'fight against terrorism must continue, but no doubt under different conditions'.

France wants to halve Barkhane troop numbers by the summer of 2023, with the Takuba force taking up some of the slack by training and fighting alongside Malian units.

'Dead end'

But Denmark announced last week it would withdraw a newly deployed contingent of 100 troops from Mali after the authorities indicated they were not welcome.

Germany meanwhile criticised the junta's decision to expel France's ambassador, saying the 'unjustified' move would lead 'to a dead end'.

Germany has around 1,500 soldiers in Mali as part of the United Nations' MINUSMA peacekeeping mission and an EU mission to train Malian soldiers.

The West Africa bloc ECOWAS imposed a trade embargo and border closures against Mali on January 9, a

move backed by France, the United States and the European Union.

Asked if French troops would now pull out of Mali, Attal replied that Paris had 'progressively reduced the numbers and would continue to do so'.

"Can a French soldier still risk his life for the sake of protecting a failed country which is expelling its ambassador?" the retired French colonel Raphael Bernard, author of the book *At the Heart of Barkhane*, asked on Twitter.

However, a full exit from Mali would not be a smooth process for France.

The withdrawal of French soldiers deployed at bases in Gao, Menaka and Gossi, would take several months to organise, according to the military.

Moreover, transferring the burden to Takuba also promises to be a headache: Niger has indicated it will not host this task force, and another neighbour Burkina Faso has just experienced a coup of its own.

AFP

RECIPE PLAGIARISM

BORROWED
feathers



In the food world, the debate rages about recipe plagiarism. "The only hope for chefs wishing to protect their concoctions may rest in recipes that include enough original literary expression," legal experts say

"A recipe is just a listing of ingredients and simple instructions," New York-based attorney Lynn Oberlander, who specialises in the area, said. "How can you copyright, for example, scrambled eggs?"

Were that a possibility, she says, given there are not an infinite number of ways to prepare the dish, a chef could ultimately keep another from including the dish in a cookbook.

The only hope for chefs wishing to protect their concoctions may rest in recipes that include "enough original literary expression," either in the instructions or in the historical narrative, to be considered unique, Oberlander says.

As recipe plagiarism has multiplied in recent years, cookbook authors have done just that, using more descriptive stuff in their written work, according to Jonathan Bailey, a consultant on plagiarism issues. The only risk, he says, is that readers sometimes find the verbiage annoying.

Inspiration or outright copying

Last October, a recipe scandal rocked the culinary world. Singaporean chef and author Sharon Wee accused Elizabeth Haigh of having 'copied or paraphrased' recipes and other passages from her 2012 book 'Growing Up in a Nonya Kitchen', which recounted her experiences cooking with her mother.

Wee said she was distressed by the incident, which resulted in Haigh's book 'Makan' being withdrawn from circulation. But in a business where the reinvention of classic dishes is commonplace, where does inspiration by another chef's work end and plagiarism begin?

In France in the 1980s, chef Jacques Maximin wanted to launch a group that would protect chefs' creations, to fill the legal loopholes. His proposal prompted a firestorm of criticism from top chefs.

Paul Bocuse said, he was perplexed by Maximin's idea, saying all chefs 'take inspiration from others' and admitting he had nicked the idea for one of his signature dishes from an old guy in France's Lower Ardeche region. There is still significant disagreement on the issue.

There have been calls on some food blogs to end plagiarism, with explicit instructions on how to correctly credit the work of another chef.

"The internet has made plagiarism a sport," Malgieri says, with some recipes cropping up on 20 or 30 blogs at the same time.

For Kelli Marks, an Arkansas pastry chef who sells wedding cakes in the Little Rock area via her website, most food bloggers have no illusions about the idea that some of their content might eventually show up elsewhere.

When she wrote her first book last year, she said she was careful to go through and check her recipes to make sure she was only sharing ideas that she herself had created from scratch - a process her publishers requested.

Marks says she does not believe she has yet been the victim of plagiarism, but she is always on alert, and so she is reluctant to put some of her exclusive recipes online. "They're so important to me, I would hate for someone else to take something I've created," she said.

AFP

This file pic shows French chef Paul Bocuse, at Collonges au Mont d'Or in l'Aubergede Pont de Collonges kitchen, during a culinary work shop in Mont d'Or

Pastry chef Nick Malgieri was scrolling through a food blog when he came upon a recipe for panettone, a puffy sweet bread that the author said conjured up fond memories of Christmases spent with his Italian grandmother. But it quickly became clear that the instructions were all too familiar.

"I started reading the recipe and I said, 'This is my recipe!'" he recalled in an interview with AFP. Malgieri's unpleasant experience was unfortunately not a one-time thing. After decades of work and 12 published cookbooks, the American expert baker has seen his work all over the internet - reproduced without his consent on numerous sites.

Some of his recipes have even been claimed by other chefs and included in their cookbooks. In one, he says, he found a copy of his food processor puff pastry, prac-

tically word for word.

Plagiarism has become widespread in the food world. It is difficult to curb, and even more difficult to prosecute. Given that the cookbook with Malgieri's puff pastry recipe had a small circulation and likely minimal profits, Malgieri's publishing house opted not to even file a complaint.

When chefs do look to the US courts for relief, the chances of getting recognition of their copyright or a monetary settlement are seen as remote, because recipes are generally not protected under intellectual property laws.



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WINTER WARMERS



Chilly evenings are the right time to enjoy food that warms you up, whether at home or outdoors. And every dish on your platter must have a 'love at first sight' appeal, besides leaving you totally satiated at the end of the meal. Hear are a few easy recipes for a warm dinner:

Spaghetti Bolognese

- Ingredients**
- 400g spaghetti or any other favourite pasta
 - 250g beef /lamb mince
 - 1 cup chopped tomatoes
 - 1 red onion - minced
 - 1 green chilli – slit
 - 1tsp red chilli powder
 - 1tsp all spice (or garam masala)
 - 1tbsp Worcestershire sauce
 - 2tbsp tomato paste
 - 2-3 cloves
 - ¼tsp cinnamon powder
 - 1tbsp oil
 - 1tbsp chopped mint leaves – for garnish
 - 1tbsp grated Parmesan cheese – for garnish
 - Salt to taste

Method

Boil the spaghetti as per packet instructions, drain and set aside to cool. Boil the mince in a pressure cooker with 3 cups of water and salt to taste, and set aside.

To prepare the bolognese sauce, in a saucepan, heat oil and saute the onion. Then add the green chilli and chopped tomato and fry for two minutes. Add the spice powders, cloves, tomato paste, Worces- tershire sauce, and mix well. Cook for 2 minutes on low flame then add the cooked mince along with the stock and more salt, if needed. Cook on medium flame for 5-10 minutes till the sauce thickens up with the mince. Sprinkle cinnamon powder, mix well, and switch off the heat.

To serve, place a few swirls of spaghetti in the middle of the plate with a generous helping of the mince on top. Garnish with mint leaves and Parmesan cheese, as desired.



Beef Stew

- Ingredients**
- 500g beef -cubed
 - 2 carrots – chopped
 - 1 large potato – peeled and chopped
 - 1 cup chopped tomatoes
 - 2 green chillies – minced
 - 1 red onion – sliced
 - 2tsp minced ginger and garlic, or ginger-garlic paste
 - 1tsp red chilli powder
 - ½tsp turmeric powder
 - 1tsp garam masala
 - 2tsp lemon juice or white vinegar
 - 2 pods black cardamom
 - 1 small stick of cinnamon
 - 2tbsp oil
 - Salt, to taste
 - 1-2 sprigs coriander – for garnish

Method

Boil the carrot and potato till tender, yet firm, and set aside. In a pressure pan, heat the oil, and add the onion along with the cinnamon stick and cardamoms. Saute for two minutes, then add the ginger-garlic and fry for two minutes. Add the spice powders, chopped tomatoes, lemon juice, salt to taste, and cook for 4-5 minutes on medium heat. Then add the beef cubes, mix well and cook for two minutes. Add two cups of water, cover the lid with whistle and cook for 20 minutes on medium heat. (Slightly reduce heat after a couple of whistles.) Serve piping hot, garnished with sprigs of coriander, with rice or bread.



Garlic Bread Twists

- Ingredients**
- 3 cups warm water
 - 4tbsp sugar
 - 2tbsp yeast
 - 1tsp butter
 - 6 ½ cups flour
 - 1tsp salt
 - 1tbsp garlic salt
 - ½ cup butter – melted

Method

In a large mixing bowl, add warm water, yeast, and sugar. Stir and set aside for 5 minutes. Once yeast foams, add in butter. Then gradually stir in the flour and salt, half cup at a time, until fully incorporated. Continue to knead the dough for 5 minutes until the dough sticks to your fingers but comes off when you pull it. Cover and set aside for 10 minutes.

In the meantime, melt the butter. Then roll out dough into a rectangle shape. Brush with butter, and sprinkle on the garlic salt. Fold dough in half so that the butter mixture is in the center. Use a pizza cutter to cut 3cm strips of the dough. Take each strip, and twist them to form suitable twists. Place on an ungreased baking sheet, cover and let them rise for 20 minutes. Pre-heat oven to 180º C and bake the twists for 15-20 minutes, till you get the desired colour of the crust (golden brown). Remove from oven, brush on melted butter, and sprinkle a little more garlic salt. Enjoy with stew or as a warm snack.



Butternut Squash Soup

- Ingredients**
- 1 butternut squash – about 500g
 - 1 small red apple - skinned, chopped to small bits
 - 3tsp salted butter
 - 2 cloves
 - 1 green chilli – slit (optional)
 - ¼tsp black pepper powder
 - A pinch of salt

Method

Skin the butternut squash and cut to cubes. Heat 1tsp butter and saute the chopped up butternut till tender. Remove, cool and blend with 1cup water to form a smooth puree. In a medium size pot, heat 1tsp butter and saute the apple bits till tender – 2 minutes. Now, add the butternut puree, cloves, green chilli, and a pinch of salt. Mix slightly and cook on slow flame for 6-8 minutes. Add ½ cup water if you like a thinner consistency. Switch off the heat, add 1tsp butter and sprinkle black pepper powder as desired. Serve hot topped with croutons and a dollop of cream (if preferred).

Conflict zone to slalom for India's only Beijing Olympian



In this picture taken on January 27, Indian skier Arif Mohammad Khan skies down a slope during a training session at a ski resort in Gulmarg, some 55 km north of Srinagar (AFP)

New Delhi, India - At the age of four, Arif Mohammad Khan put on skis for the first time, just a few kilometres from the Line of Control that divides the disputed, conflict-ridden region of Kashmir.

It was to be the start of a difficult journey that will culminate in him being the only athlete from India, a country of nearly 1.4 billion people, when the Beijing Winter Olympics begin on Friday.

Skiing is in the family. Arif's father runs a ski shop and tour company in Gulmarg in the Indian-administered Kashmir, one of the world's highest ski resorts that offers the chance to ski deep, fresh powder.

It is reachable only by helicopter and the Himalayan views are breathtaking. But the Muslim-majority region has been split between India and Pakistan since independence in 1947, with the nuclear-armed neighbours both claiming it and fighting two of their three wars over it.

Territory controlled by Pakistan is visible from Gulmarg's highest sections and the area has seen violence in the past.

"There have been real difficulties going through the long-lasting conflict and many other issues," said Arif, 31.

"But if you have a dream and you want to live with your dream,



Arif Mohammad Khan prepares for a training session at a ski resort in Gulmarg (AFP)

nobody could stop you really," he added, speaking from training in Austria. You have to be brave."

Arif showed early promise on the slopes, winning gold in his first appearance at the national junior championship at 12.

Despite being home to part of the world's highest mountain range, winter sports barely figure in cricket-obsessed India's sporting interests. The country has previously sent only 15 athletes to the Winter Games.

Usually short of the money needed for travel, Arif's training and competitive activities in Eu-

rope have been largely funded by friends and family.

And the conflict affects everyone who lives in Kashmir.

Rebel groups have fought Indian forces for over three decades, demanding independence or merger with Pakistan, while Delhi accuses Islamabad of facilitating cross-border attacks in the territory, something it denies.

The insurgency erupted in 1989 - at times gunfights and deaths occurred on what are now Gulmarg's slopes - and for around 15 years tourism was re-

duced to a trickle, hammering the Khan family business.

Training with soldiers

Gulmarg itself is heavily militarised, with several Indian military and border guard units permanently stationed in the resort town and multiple checkpoints on the road from Srinagar, Kashmir's main city.

Its highest gondola reaches 3,950 metres (13,000 feet) on Mount Apharwat, home to the Indian Army's elite High Altitude Warfare School - with whose

But if you have a dream and you want to live with your dream, nobody could stop you really

ARIF MOHAMMAD KHAN

soldiers Arif sometimes trains.

Arif mostly competes and trains in Europe and has appeared in four world championships, his best result 45th in the giant slalom in Italy last year.

He delayed his wedding to try to amass enough ranking points to qualify for Beijing, finally earning a slot in the slalom in November - at an event on an artificial

slope inside a giant shopping mall in Dubai - making him a first-time Olympian relatively late in his career. Shortly afterwards, he won a spot in the giant slalom too.

His Olympic appearance comes at a time when the coronavirus pandemic has brought yet another slump in tourism, said the skier's father, Moham-

mad Yaseen Khan, whose younger son Merajudin is a national-level snowboarder.

"So we have problems aplenty, but that's life," he said. "Arif making it to the Winter Games has more than made up for any trouble we faced."

Mountain to climb

Arif would like his Games debut to promote India as a skiing destination and raise sporting standards.

"The amount and quality of snow we receive is good," he said. "If we get some more infrastructure developed in the next few years, we might really reach the level of the European athletes."

But they have a mountain to climb. Ski and Snowboard India, the official governing body for winter sports in the country, was only made a fully fledged member of the global International Ski Federation (FIS) last year.

None of India's previous Winter Olympians have won a medal and Arif's chances of changing that are slim to non-existent.

But he hopes the mere fact of his appearance will make a difference.

"If you do good in a country where you have 1.4 billion people, definitely there will be people who will love you," he said. AFP

Archer back in IPL auction list but likely to miss 2022 season



England's Jofra Archer has placed himself in the top bracket of potential recruits for IPL

New Delhi, India- England's Jofra Archer has been added to the India Premier League auction list but the tournament's franchises were told Tuesday to pick the fast bowler at their own risk.

Archer, who is recovering from a second operation on his injured elbow, is among 590 cricketers going under the hammer on February 12 and 13 in Bangalore.

The 26-year-old has placed himself in the top bracket of potential recruits with a base price of \$267,285.

But the England and Wales Cricket Board registered him "with a view to potential participation in 2023 and 2024, as

due to his current injury it is unlikely that he can participate in IPL 2022," the league's chief operating officer Hemang Amin

With a view to potential participation in 2023 and 2024, as due to his current injury it is unlikely that he can participate in IPL 2022

HEMANG AMIN

told its 10 franchises in an email seen by AFP.

"Therefore, his name has been included in the auction list but he won't feature in the marquee or other sets to be presented," Amin added.

"He will be available to be called during the accelerated

auction and whoever picks him will not get a replacement player for IPL 2022 season."

Ten teams will bid and par-

ticipate in this year's IPL after the addition of two new franchises, Ahmedabad and Lucknow.

Trent Boult, Pat Cummins, Quinton de Kock, Faf du Plessis, Kagiso Rabada, and David Warner are among the marquee players at the top of the

mega auctions.

Earlier, England all-rounder Ben Stokes, Australian fast-bowler Mitchell Starc and veteran West Indies big-hitter Chris Gayle had decided to opt-out.

The 15th edition of the IPL, the world's most lucrative cricket tournament, will begin in the last week of March and run till the end of May.

The league's last edition began in India but was suspended in May 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

It was later finished in the United Arab Emirates, with Chennai Super Kings emerging as champions.

AFP



Alli signed a two-and-a-half-year contract at Goodison Park

Dele Alli wants to be 'happy' again after Everton move

London, United Kingdom - Dele Alli said he wanted to re-discover the joy of playing football after securing a move to Frank Lampard's Everton in an effort to revive his faltering career.

The England midfielder signed a two-and-a-half-year contract at Goodison Park, bringing his seven-year stay at Tottenham to an end late in the transfer window, which closed on Monday.

Alli, 25, was a member of Gareth Southgate's 2018 World Cup squad but has struggled under a succession of managers at Spurs in recent seasons and fallen out of the England reckoning.

"I've had a few good conversations with him (Lampard) already and he's a player I've admired watching his whole career," Alli told Sky Sports. "To have the opportunity to work with him now is very exciting and hopefully I'm sure we're going to do great things together."

When asked his main motivations for the move, he said he wanted to enjoy playing.

"I just want to be happy playing football and I think working with Lampard and

the great players they've got there I think it's a great opportunity to do that.

"I'm excited to go there and show the fans what I can do and help the club as much as I can."

Alli's move came just hours after Everton had confirmed former Chelsea boss Lampard as Rafael Benitez's

To have the opportunity to work with him now is very exciting

DELE ALLI

successor.

Lampard also secured the services of Donny van de Beek on deadline day, with the Netherlands midfielder joining on loan from Manchester United for the remainder of the season.

The 24-year-old joined United in a \$47mn move from Ajax in 2020 but has made just four Premier League starts for the Red Devils.

AFP

Senegal beginning to live up to billing after slow start

Yaoundé, Cameroon - After a slow start to their Africa Cup of Nations campaign, Sadio Mane's Senegal are finally starting to justify their tag as pre-tournament favourites heading into Wednesday's semi-final against Burkina Faso.

The west African rivals meet in Yaounde with Aliou Cisse's team looking for the victory that would take them through to a second consecutive AFCON final, two and a half years on from their defeat to Algeria in Cairo.

The Lions of Teranga carry the pressure of being Africa's top-ranked national team and perhaps feel the weight of history more heavily too: Senegal have never been continental champions, while on the other side of the draw stand Egypt and Cameroon, the two most successful nations in the tournament's history with a combined 12 titles.

Senegal are fresh from seeing off a spirited Equatorial Guinea in Sunday's quarter-final, winning 3-1 in a game that showcased the strength in depth available to Cisse.

After they had been pegged back to 1-1 early in the second half, Cisse looked to his bench and sent on two Premier League players in Cheikhou Kouyate of Crystal Palace and Watford's Ismaila Sarr.

Both went on to score.

It was a first appearance at the tournament for the gifted winger Sarr, who Senegal brought to Cameroon despite him not having played for Watford since November due to injury.

"I insisted that he should be in the squad and we had to fight with Watford for two months to get him. He has worked hard to be fit and come back but I'm not sure if he is ready to start a game yet. We will go one step at a time with him," Cisse said.

COVID-19 cases

Senegal's AFCON campaign began in underwhelming fashion as they topped their group despite scoring just one goal, and



Senegal's forward Sadio Mane reacts after winning the Africa Cup of Nations 2021 quarter-final against Equatorial Guinea on January 30 (AFP)

'Added motivation' for Burkina Faso: Coach

Yaoundé, Cameroon - Burkina Faso coach Kamou Malo admitted that news of political unrest in the country is spurring his team on at the Africa Cup of Nations as they prepare for Wednesday's semi-final against Senegal.

"These goings-on give us added motivation," said Malo, whose side are through to the last four after edging Tunisia 1-0 in the quarter-finals.

"We dedicated that victory to the people back home who are going through a turbulent



Burkina Faso's coach Kamou Malo attends a press conference

time politically and socially."

The landlocked west African nation has been battling a jihadist insurgency, while last week President Roch Marc Christian Kabore was overthrown in a military coup.

On Monday Burkina Faso was suspended from the African Union. "We have been dealing with this terrorism for a number of years now and it continues to plunge our people into mourning, so our objective is to give them something to smile about," Malo said.

that was a 97th-minute penalty by Mane to beat Zimbabwe.

However, they were affected by Covid-19 cases with Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy and defensive rock and captain Kalidou Koulibaly sitting out their first two games after testing positive. Midfielder Nampalys Mendy, who has only made one

appearance all season for his club Leicester City, is another who did not feature in the opening two outings but has since come in and was the man of the match against Equatorial Guinea.

It is not uncommon for teams to start slowly at a major tournament before coming good, France hardly convinced in the

group stage before winning the 2018 World Cup, while eventual champions Portugal drew all three group matches at Euro 2016.

Senegal have come good in the knockout rounds, beating Cape Verde 2-0 in the last 16 with second-half goals from Mane and substitute Bamba

Dieng, before seeing off Equatorial Guinea.

"We know we can do better, but we know we're getting stronger," said Koulibaly after Sunday's game at the Ahmadou Ahidjo Stadium in Yaounde, where they will return on Wednesday.

AFP

Joao Cancelo signs contract extension at Man City

London, United Kingdom - Joao Cancelo has signed a two-year contract extension keeping him at Manchester City until 2027, the Premier League leaders announced on Tuesday.

The Portuguese international full-back has established himself as a key player of Pep Guardiola's side since arriving from Juventus in 2019, playing 106 games and winning three major trophies.

"Manchester City is a fantastic club, so I am incredibly happy to have signed this new agreement," said the 27-year-old.

"City players have everything they need to reach their full potential, with amazing facilities, world-class teammates and an



incredible manager who pushes us every single day.

"There is nowhere better to play football and it's a pleasure to work here. I have so much I want to achieve before my career ends, and Manchester City offers me the best chance of fulfilling my ambitions."

City's director of football, Txiki Begiristain, said, "Joao is the ultimate professional. He absolutely loves football and applies himself every single day in a bid to become better. He is so versatile. Whether he plays right-back, left-back or in midfield, he operates at the same high level. That is a dream for a manager."

AFP

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South Korea's players react after winning the Qatar World Cup Asian Qualifiers football match against Syria, in Dubai on February 1 (AFP)

South Korea reach 10th straight World Cup finals

Dubai, United Arab Emirates - South Korea beat Syria 2-0 in Dubai on Tuesday to reach their 10th straight World Cup finals. The Koreans, who have appeared at every finals since Mexico in 1986 and came fourth when they co-hosted the tournament in 2002, go to Qatar alongside Iran, who had already clinched a place from Asia's preliminary Group A. Even without injured English Premier League star Son Heung-Min, Paulo Bento's side dominated the game but they did come close to scoring until forward Cho Gue Sung's shot from close in went wide in the 43rd minute. Two minutes later, Cho, who got the winning goal in the last match against Lebanon, headed the ball against the post. Kim Jin-Su opened the scor-

ing with a 54th minute shot that gave Syrian goalkeeper Ibrahim Alma no chance. Kwon Chang-Hoon shot from outside the penalty area to double the score in the 74th minute. Iran beat Iraq last Thursday to reach their third straight finals. The third-place teams from Asia's two qualifying groups will clash in a playoff for the right to play a South American team for a place in Qatar. The first World Cup finals in an Arab country will start in Qatar on November 21. South Korea have a history of World Cup upsets. They knocked out Italy to reach the semi-finals in 2002 and at the last World Cup in Russia beat Germany 2-0 but failed to reach the knockout rounds. AFP

Oman draw 2-2 with Australia, out of WC race



Oman team played its heart out in the must-win game against Australia in AFC Asian Qualifiers - Road to Qatar Group B at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex on Tuesday but only managed a hard-fought draw. Oman came from behind twice with both the strikes coming from Abdullah Fawaz (Jersey No 12), one in the 54th minute and other from a penalty in the 88th minute. With the draw, Oman is officially out of the World Cup race. While the Australia team has complicated its direct qualification to the World Cup and will be playing for their lives in the last two matches on the road to Qatar 2022.



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Caleb Ewan celebrates his win

Aussie Ewan sprints to Saudi Tour first stage

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Australian Caleb Ewan got his season off the mark by winning a sprint finish for the first stage of the Tour of Saudi Arabia which got underway on Tuesday. The Lotto rider finished just ahead of Estonia's Martin Laas with Colombian Fernando Gaviria third in the same time

after the 198km run which started and finished at Winter Park. The most anticipated stage four of the event is a 4km long climb which includes 2.7km at 12% and a part with a gradient of 22%, leading to a lunar style plateau that offers stunning views over the valley of AlUla. AFP

Red-hot Japan down Saudis to move closer to World Cup

Saitama, Japan - In-form Japan took a huge step towards World Cup qualification with a 2-0 home win over group leaders Saudi Arabia on Tuesday. Liverpool forward Takumi Minamino gave the four-time Asian champions the lead midway through the first half, before Junya Ito bagged another after the break in Saitama. The Saudis went into the game four points clear of Japan at the top of Group B, knowing that a win would seal their place in Qatar. But Japan's victory instead set up a tense battle for the two automatic qualifying spots with two games remaining, with Australia also still in the hunt. The Socceroos were in action away to Oman later in the day. Japan started the qualifying campaign with two losses from



Japan's Takumi Minamino shoots to score a goal during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 Asian zone qualifier against Saudi Arabia (AFP)

their first three games, but have now won five in a row. Again shrugging off the absence of key defensive pair Maya Yoshida and Takehiro Tomiyasu, the home side started strongly and took the lead in the 31st minute. Ito burst clear of a Saudi defender down the right to square a low cross that Yuya Osako left for Minamino, and the Liverpool man's shot looped up off the goalkeeper and in. AFP



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