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ARABIC LANGUAGE CLASSES PICKING UP
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Nominal GDP grows 12.7%

Fitch Ratings upgraded Oman's outlook to 'stable' from 'negative' on Monday

Our Correspondent
Muscat

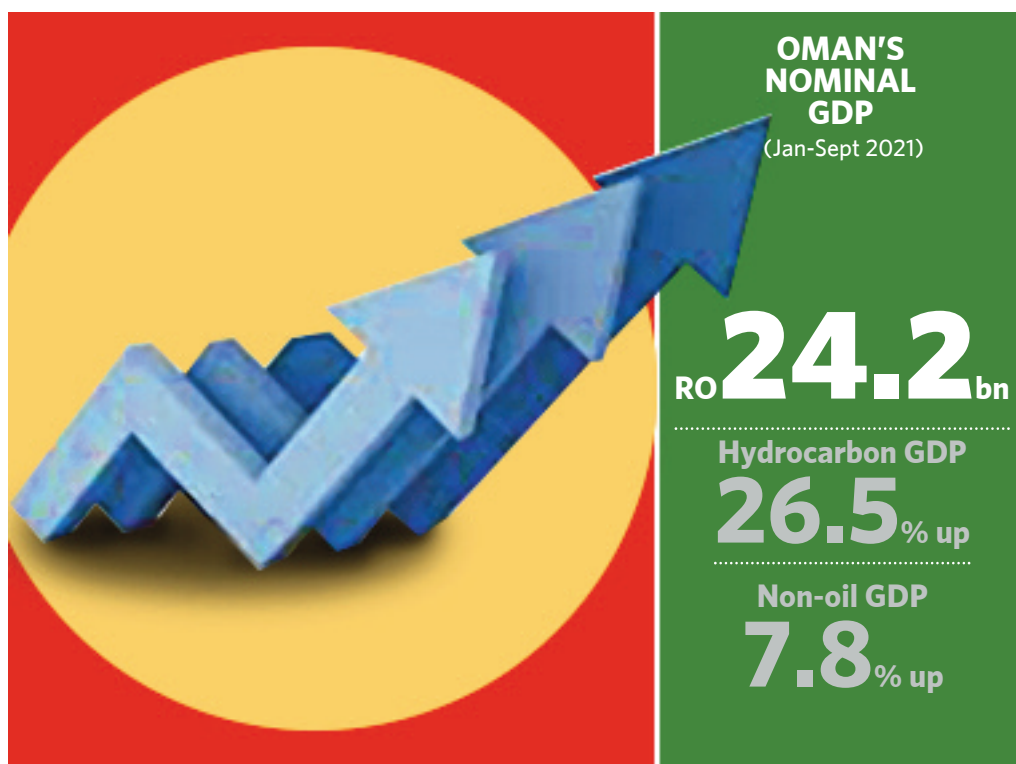
Oman's nominal GDP – the gross domestic product at current market prices – recorded a robust 12.7 per cent growth during the first nine months of 2021, surpassing the pre-pandemic level.

Supported by the government's economic stimulus packages, reopening of economic activities and higher oil and gas prices, the sultanate's nominal GDP grew at a solid rate from January to September this year in another sign that the economy is on a sustained path of recovery from the pandemic recession.

Nominal GDP surged to RO24.2bn in the first nine months of 2021 compared to RO21.5bn in the same period of 2020, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

'As a result of the economic stimulus and economic diversification efforts, the Omani economy continues its growth trend, recording a 12.7 per cent growth by the end of the third quarter of 2021. The manufacturing industries recorded the highest growth rate this year of 25.8 per cent,' Oman's Ministry of Economy stated in a tweet on Tuesday.

Broad-based recovery
NCSI data shows that Oman's



Manufacturing industries recorded the highest growth rate this year of 25.8 per cent

economic recovery is broad-based with all major sectors – oil and gas, industry, services, and agriculture and fisheries – recording robust growth rates during the first nine months of

2021.

With increased output and improved prices of oil and gas, Oman's hydrocarbon GDP jumped by 26.5 per cent to RO7.4bn in the first nine months of 2021 from RO5.8bn in the same period of 2020.

On the back of higher crude prices, the value of oil output surged more than 33 per cent to RO6.3bn in January–September period this year against RO4.7bn in the same period a year ago, while the value of natural gas output decreased nearly two per

cent to RO1.1bn.

The sultanate's non-oil GDP grew 7.8 per cent to RO17.7bn in the first nine months of 2021 from RO16.4bn recorded in the same period a year ago. Among non-oil sectors, industrial sector output grew by 9.1 per cent to RO4.7bn, while the services sector grew by 7.5 per cent to RO12.3bn.

Within the industrial sector, manufacturing bounced back with 25.8 per cent growth to RO2.1bn in the first three quarters of 2021, while mining and

quarrying grew by 6.2 per cent to RO177mn.

Construction sector activities, however, remained 3.8 per cent lower at approximately RO1.9bn during the January–September period of 2021 against the corresponding period of 2020.

Within the services sector, wholesale and retail trade recorded 15.3 per cent growth to reach RO2.1bn in the first nine months of 2021 from RO1.8bn in same period of 2020. Financial and insurance sector activities grew by 11 per cent to over RO1.6bn.

The agriculture and fisheries sector recorded a 4.8 per cent year-on-year growth to reach RO588mn in the first nine months of 2021.

Improving outlook

International financial institutions, such as International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank and global credit ratings agencies, have recently upgraded their outlook for Oman's economy, predicting a real GDP growth of 2.5 per cent or more for 2021.

On Monday, Fitch Ratings upgraded Oman's outlook to 'stable' from 'negative' while affirming the sultanate's sovereign long-term foreign and local currency issuer default ratings at 'BB-'.
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RO62mn paid in insurance claims for Cyclone Shaheen

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Over RO62mn has been paid in compensation by insurance companies to those affected by cyclone Shaheen, according to the Capital Market Authority (CMA).

The weekly reports monitored by CMA of insurance companies settling claims and payments of compensations after Shaheen show that the volume of claims amounted to RO62.373mn from more than 9,800 claims from a number of wilayats affected by the cyclone in the governorates of Muscat, North Batinah and South Batinah.

The data indicated that most claims submitted to insurance companies were for policies covering risks of natural disasters, including vehicles and property.

The data also indicated that claims worth about RO51.7mn are still under settlement; reparation for these damages require

Total compensation for property exceeded RO45.3mn, followed by RO8.9mn for motor insurance

time as these are houses, buildings and other facilities. Insurance companies paid about RO10.6mn to redress other damages, and as per indicators, the size of the total compensations is expected to reach approximately RO69mn by the end of all claims related to the cyclone.

The total compensation for homes, buildings and properties exceeded RO45.3mn, followed by RO8.9mn for motor insurance. Compensation for engineering insurance amounted to RO7.5mn.

► NEWS BRIEFS

ROP SEIZES OVER 1MN TABLETS IN DRUG BUST

Muscat - Royal Oman Police (ROP) has thwarted the smuggling of more than 1mn captagon tablets, an illegal, addictive amphetamine drug.

In a statement, ROP said, 'Within the framework of international cooperation, Royal Oman Police, in cooperation with the competent authorities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, was able to thwart the smuggling of 1.8mn captagon tablets weighing 315kg'.

The drugs were being transported hidden in glass plates. The case is under legal proceedings.'

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Iran's ambassador to Yemen dies of virus after evacuation

Third dose vital to avoid another wave: Experts

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In the wake of rising COVID-19 infections and 17 cases of the Omicron variant registered in the sultanate to date, medical experts are calling for immunisation with the booster dose to avoid another wave of COVID-19.

While reiterating the role of vaccines in preventing infection and complications in case of infection despite immunisation, Dr Feryal bint Ali al Lawati, head of the Communicable Disease Control Unit at The Royal Hospital, said, "The effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines has decreased due to the mutant Omicron. There are studies indicating that the third dose raises antibodies and immunity by more than 75%."

According to Dr Feryal, the spread of the Omicron variant has necessitated a reduction in the gap for the booster dose with studies confirming the safety of getting vaccinated after three months.

"Additionally, a large British study showed the safety of mixing vaccines and its ability to form antibodies better. There is no harm in getting a Pfizer-BioNTech shot after two doses of a different vaccine," Dr Feryal said.

Statistical analyst Ibrahim bin Ahmed al Maimani noted that the last time Oman recorded more than 30 daily cases was on September 30, 2021, when 31 cases were registered. "The total number infected with COVID-19 in November was 263 - an average of nine cases per day. The total number infected in December to date (Tuesday) is 320 - a



22 new cases of COVID-19

Muscat - The Ministry of Health announced that it registered 22 new cases of COVID-19 and no related deaths on Tuesday, taking the total number to 304,896 in the sultanate.

The ministry also stated that the Directorate General of Health Services in Muscat Governorate is witnessing a large turnout of citizens and residents at several vaccination centres for the third dose being administered as part of a nationwide campaign.

rate of 16 cases per day."

Cautioning against the situations, Dr Zaid al Hinai, paediatric infectious diseases consultant at Sultan Qaboos University, said the Ministry of Health's decision to reduce the gap for the booster jab from six months to three opens the way for most people to take the third dose.

Dr Ahmed al Ammar, director of public health in the Gulf Health Council, informed that three doses of vaccine are important for prevention, and resistance to Omicron increases 25 times compared to those with two doses.

On December 12, the Ministry of Health announced the regis-

tration of the first two cases of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 in two citizens who had returned from travel abroad.

On Tuesday, the Supreme Committee tasked with dealing with the impact of COVID-19 announced that 15 new cases of Omicron have been recorded in Oman who are currently under epidemiological investigation. It urged all to adhere to preventive measures such as wearing face masks, maintaining social distancing, avoiding crowded places and gatherings of all kinds and keeping hand hygiene.

It called on all 18 years and older to take the booster dose against COVID-19.

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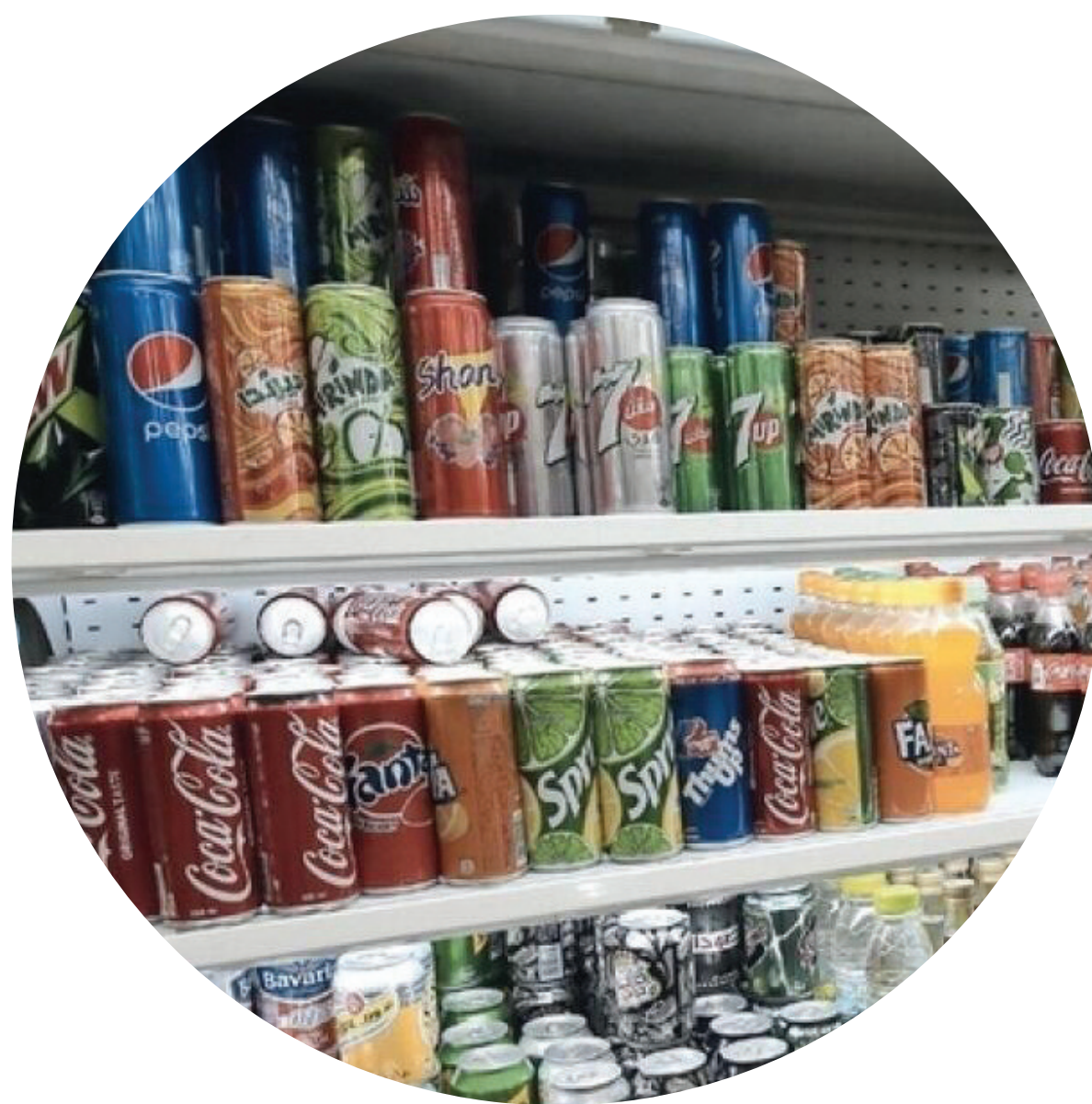
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Arabic language classes picking up

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To celebrate the World Arabic Language Day, which falls on December 18, *Muscat Daily* met an Omani national who set up an institute to teach Arabic language to non-native speakers.

Nasser al Jabri, founder of Arabia Experience Institute, said, "We teach Arabic and the Gulf dialect to non-native speakers at the Arabia Experience Institute. We welcome everyone interested in learning Arabic language, customs, traditions and culture of the Gulf. We are proud of our excellence in teaching the Omani dialect, customs and traditions, and we have many programmes. Many foreigners have come to the sultanate to learn Arabic.

"We opened the institute on



(Supplied photo)

November 18, 2015. I got the inspiration from the Late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who cared a lot about the Arabic language, supported and encouraged us to master it and speak it. I follow his example.

"At the institute, Omani dialect is taught individually and in

groups, too. Our students also get the opportunity to experience the language and culture outside the school. We offer accommodation with Omani families and while learning the language, students also get to enjoy Arabic and Omani food during their home stay.

"Initially, I faced many challenges in setting up the institution and I overcame these gradually. But I'm still facing difficulties in attracting students to live with Omani families."

Semitic language

Anetta Szabo, one of the foreign students studying at the institute, said, "A language is like a mountain, that you can't move in a day. But you can move it slowly, day by day with a spoon. When I started studying Arabic at Arabia Experience Institute, I told myself: Even if it takes ten years, in ten years, looking back I won't regret that I have started it. I will say it was worth it."

Anetta added, "Arabic is a Semitic language. It's very different from other languages, it seems to have evolved from Indo-European languages - English,

French... etc. So first it is very difficult because it is so different from the languages most Europeans study in schools but later one realises that the spoken Arabic has very little grammatical rules and it is not so difficult if you study in Arabia Experience Institute in Oman.

"Language learning takes courage because you regularly put yourself into situations that are uncomfortable. You need to practise the little you know and use the broken language you have. But with continuous practice you can get far. It is hard work and courage but it is a good investment; it opens doors for you in the professional world as well as making you feel more at home in another country. My Omani friends have always been helpful. They gave me a chance to learn it."

MoE launches Al Farahidi Award for Arabic language

Muscat - The Ministry of Education (MoE) launched the Al Farahidi Award for Arabic language on Tuesday during an event held to celebrate the International Day of Arabic Language, which falls on December 18 under the slogan 'Arabic Language and Civilizational Communication'.

The ceremony was held under the patronage of H E Dr Madiha bint Ahmed bin Nasser al Shibaniyah, Minister of Education, in the presence of H E Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Undersecretary for Education in the Ministry of Education.



The Al Farahidi Award was launched with the aim of developing students' skills in Arabic reading, writing, literary creativity and conversation. It targets students from Grade 1 to 12.

Al Khalil Ahmad al Farahidi was an Arab philologist, lexicographer and leading grammarian.

From fries to fuel, Oman's transition to green fuels

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As crude oil prices surge in the Middle East, biofuels could be a strong contender for trucks, ships, buses and cars in the region and Wakud - Oman's first biodiesel plant, is set to scale up commercial production and sale of local biodiesel.

Wakud's plant, located in Khazaen Economic City, utilises locally collected cooking oil, turning waste into biodiesel. With more biofuel providers coming into the picture in the Middle East, there is an increase in market share. Biodiesel is already a significant source of alternative fuel in other parts of the world, including the US, UK and Europe.

"We are very excited to launch commercial operations and to see Omani biodiesel consumed within Oman. If Wakud's biodiesel replaces even a small proportion of the diesel consumed within Oman, it will have a tremendous impact on Oman's carbon emissions while also retaining economic value within the sultanate," said, Maher al Habsi, CEO of Wakud International.

The facility represents the future of sustainable fuels in Oman. "Khazaen Economic City is proud of managing to attract Wakud as the first SME and supporting them in bringing a world



(Supplied photo)

If biodiesel replaces even a small proportion of diesel, it will have a tremendous impact on Oman's carbon emissions

MAHER AL HABSI

class biodiesel plant to Oman," said Salim al Duhli, CEO of Khazaen Economic City.

"This facility represents the future of sustainable fuels in Oman and Wakud's biodiesel can be used by consumers and organisations as a green and environmentally friendly product produced at Khazaen Economic City," he added.

Wakud has a growing local client base with new partners

Oman Truck, 44.01 and Masirah International committing to sustainable power for their operations this year.

Biofuels are a powerful tool that can power vehicles sustainably, helping the country's work towards decarbonisation. The use of biodiesel can reduce carbon emissions by up to 85 per cent without changes or modifications to standard diesel engines.

In addition, Wakud's biodiesel can be used as a blend (ten per cent to 20 per cent) which results in a significant emissions reduction.

Maximising the availability of biofuel will help to reach Oman's decarbonising goals in line with the Paris Climate Agreement and Oman Vision 2040.

The plant has the capacity to produce 7.2mn ltr of biodiesel per year.

MAFWR to support 20 rural families in North Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has launched a new programme in cooperation with Dar al Atta'a Society to support 20 families located in rural areas of North Batinah governorate for breeding and propagation of honey bees.

Khalida bint Mohammed al Shezawiya, head of the Rural Development Department in North Batinah governorate, said, "The initiative aims to support the honey-producing families in cooperation with the Dar al Atta'a to enhance the community partnership between associations and the government sector.

"The project aims to find marketing outlets for their products and work on implementing training and awareness programmes for them. It also aims to empower



(Supplied photo)

families with limited income and social security. The ministry has developed an action plan for implementation, follow-up, and solutions to the challenges in its project," said Khalida.

She said the project produces different types of honey, such as Sidr, Samar, flower honey and aromatic plant honey. "Sidr and Samar honey are among the most desirable types that are being marketed more in the local and foreign markets."

Omani honey market is rapidly developing into a profitable business for thousands of apirists actively involved in the industry, according to the ministry, which has organised honey markets since 2014. Sales jumped by 15.7 per cent in 2019 compared to 2018.

"The number of beekeepers in the sultanate reached 5,336 with 112,068 honeycombs that produced 672,208kg of honey in 2018," said the ministry.

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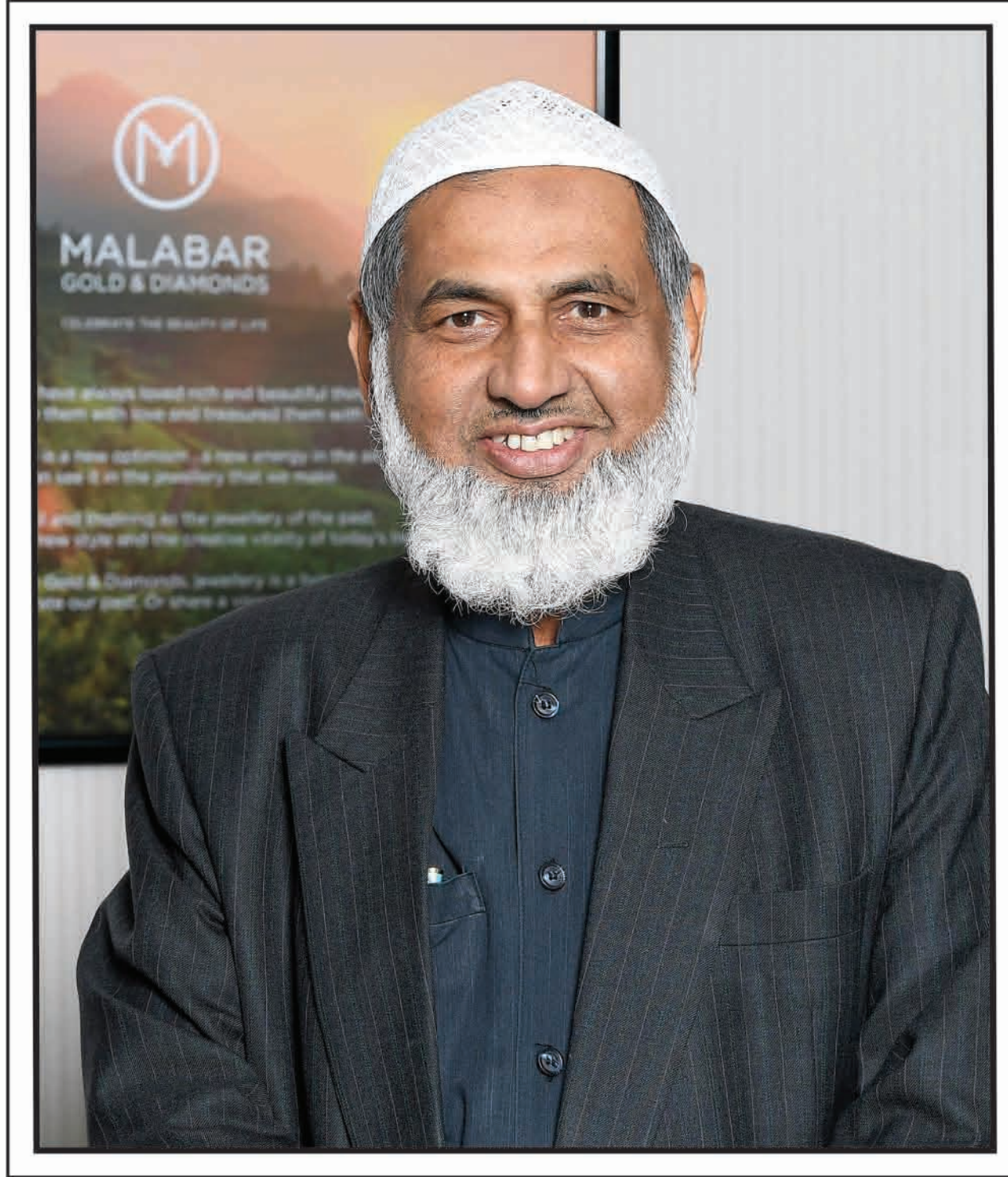
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Dr. P. A. IBRAHIM HAJI

(6th September, 1943 - 21st December, 2021)

CO-CHAIRMAN, MALABAR GROUP

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The Board of Directors, Shareholders and Management team members of Malabar Group express their profound grief over the passing away of Dr. P.A. Ibrahim Haji on 21st December, 2021.

As an inspirational leader and enthusiastic philanthropist, he touched the hearts of many during his lifetime and he will continue to live in them.

Our hearts go out to his family and loved ones at this difficult time.



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Bangladeshi Taka	223.11
Philippine Peso	129.89
Sri Lankan Rs	526.60

*Rates as on December 21
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Lebanon needs up to \$15bn to kickstart recovery

Lebanon needs to receive between US\$12bn to US\$15bn from its partners to kickstart its economic recovery and shore up fast-diminishing foreign currency reserves, Central Bank governor Riad Salameh said on Tuesday.

Lebanon is grappling with an unprecedented economic crisis branded by the World Bank as one of the planet's worst in modern times. More than 80 per cent of the population lives in poverty and the currency has lost more than 90 per cent of its black market value amid political squabbling that has delayed an agreement with the International Monetary Fund.

"Our quota in the International Monetary Fund is 4 billion," Salameh said in an AFP interview. "If countries add to it, we could reach US\$12bn to US\$15bn, an amount that could help start Lebanon's recovery and restore confidence," he said.

Lebanon defaulted on its debt for the first time last year but political leaders have continued to resist key reforms demanded by donors to unlock necessary funds.

Oman signs gas concession deal with Shell for Block 10

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals on Tuesday signed a concession agreement with Shell Integrated Gas Oman BV, a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell, and its partners, OQ and Marsa Liquefied Natural Gas (a joint venture between TotalEnergies and OQ), to develop and produce natural gas from the sultanate's Block 10 of the Saih Rawl gas field.

The parties also signed a separate gas sales agreement for gas produced from Block 10. The two agreements follow an interim upstream agreement signed in February 2019.

H E Dr Mohammed al Rumhi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, said, "We share a long and strategic collaboration with Shell and our other partners. This project will further maximise the potential of Oman's energy industry, in line with the sultanate's strategy to create growth opportunities across all energy streams and in line with Oman's Vision 2040 priorities."

Shell's entry into Block 10 signifies a further commitment by the company to Oman, while enhancing and diversifying Shell's gas supply.

"These agreements represent a major step for Shell and for our relationship with Oman. They generate value and strengthen our integrated gas business, which we need to deliver the energy Oman and the world need today. And we are looking at how Shell can help Oman with devel-



Shell and Energy Development Oman (EDO) signed an agreement to process the natural gas from Block 10 in EDO's Saih Rawl facility

oping low-carbon energy in the future," said Wael Sawan, director for integrated gas, renewables and energy solutions at Shell.

The concession agreement establishes Shell as the operator of Block 10, holding a 53.45 per cent working interest, with OQ and Marsa Liquefied Natural Gas holding 13.36 per cent and 33.19 per cent, respectively.

For the initial phase, Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) is building the infrastructure for the project, including the main pipeline to the Saih Rawl gas processing facility, on behalf

of the Block 10 venture partners. The venture will drill and hook up wells to maintain the production beyond the initial phase. The block is expected to reach production of 0.5bn standard cubic feet of gas per day. Start up is expected within the next two years.

In addition, Shell and Energy Development Oman (EDO) also signed an agreement to process the natural gas from Block 10 in EDO's Saih Rawl facility.

Shell and the government of Oman have agreed that, in parallel to the development of Block 10, Shell will develop options for a separate downstream gas proj-

ect in which Shell could produce and sell low-carbon products and support the development of hydrogen in Oman. Any project would be subject to further agreements and future investment decisions.

Block 10 - which covers an area of approximately 1200 sqkm - is located in Saih Rawl in the Al Wusta governorate of Oman, around 400km from Muscat.

Shell has been a partner in Oman's development and progress over the last several decades.

The company is active in Oman across the oil and gas industry and is involved in joint venture and independent activities ranging from research and development, exploration and production to trading, retail and new energies.



Madayn signs deal with China's Shanzuo Group

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with China's Shandong Shanzuo Holding Group to develop and promote strategic cooperation in diverse areas that serve interests of the two sides.

The MoU was signed remotely by Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, CEO of Madayn, and Lillian Shi, CEO of Shandong Shanzuo Holding Group, and in the presence of Warda al Shaqsi, deputy head of Oman's mission in China.

The agreement focuses on mutual promotion to encourage investments in both countries and establish projects that contribute to achieving economic growth. The agreement also aspires to boost cooperation in import-export activities between Oman and China, provide support in carrying out related commercial businesses, as well as ensure provision of administrative and logistical support

for the businesses.

Hasani emphasised that this strategic MoU comes along the lines of Madayn 2040 Vision priorities, specifically in pillars related to strengthening public-private partnership, attracting more foreign investments into Oman, and fostering international cooperation.

"The MoU aims at strengthening strategic cooperation between Madayn and Shanzuo Group - exchange information, organise visits for investors from both sides, and explore business opportunities in both countries for the investors. Moreover, we will provide the investors with all necessary information and incentives they need to set up projects in Oman and China," he said.

Lillian said, "We are pleased that Madayn and Shanzuo Group have reached to this strategic partnership. As Shandong Shanzuo Holding Group, we strive to be a comprehensive multi-national corporation through delivery of high profile international business services."

Al-Fayhaa United signs deal to operate Park Inn Hotel project in Quriyat

Muscat - Al Fayhaa United Real Estate Development Company on Tuesday revealed the launch of its tourism project, Park Inn Hotel Suites, in Bimma village in Quriyat, managed by the Radisson International Group.

During the launch ceremony, an agreement was signed between the Radisson International Group and Al Fayha United Real Estate Development Company, in order for the first to manage and operate the project.

This project will be a tourist destination in one of the most important villages in Muscat Governorate overlooking the Sea of Oman.

This came during a press conference which held under the patronage of H E Eng Rida bin Juma al Saleh, president of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and in the presence of Sheikh Saud bin Hamad al Tai, chairman of Al Fayha United Real Estate Development Company, the developer of the project.

During the press conference, the Park Inn Hotel Suites project and its contribution to the



tourism sector were revealed. The project contains 80 hotel suites, varying between one and two rooms, with a private swimming pool.

The project was chosen in the village of Bimma in the State of Quriyat due to its beaches with clear golden sand and its view of the Sea of Oman to the east and it's location that is near many tourist sites such as the village of Dabab, Fins, Hawiyat Najm Park, Wadi Deyqah, and its strategic

proximity to Muscat, as well as from Wadi Al Shab. Hence, making the project attractive to tourists and residents and send the spirit of exploration, hiking and enjoying the scenic views, especially the view of the sea and sunrise and other advantages that make the project an attractive tourist destination.

Tariq al Farsi, CEO of Al Fayhaa United Real Estate Development, said, "The tourism project Park Inn for hotel suites, man-

aged by the Radisson International Company, will achieve a qualitative transfer in the village of Bimma, known for its tourist beauty and splendor with its pleasant atmosphere.

This project, with its specifications, will be a tourist destination and achieve capacity for people with its facilities. The diverse and various services that we intend to implement will be different and unique and make the project a source of tourist attraction."

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Erdogan's shock moves revive Turkey's ailing lira

Istanbul, Turkey – Turkey's beleaguered lira strengthened on Tuesday, after a wild start to the week saw its value swing by 30 percentage points in response to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's emergency economic support measures.

The mercurial Turkish leader stunned markets and his political opponents on Monday by effectively tying the value of some lira bank deposits to the dollar.

Economists and many Turks were still trying to understand how this new exchange mechanism will work or where the government will get the money to pay for it.

But the impact on the lira – which had lost 45 per cent against the greenback from November 1 to late Monday afternoon – was monumental.

It was trading down 10 per cent on the day by the time Erdogan appeared on national television to announce his new economic proposals after a weekly cabinet meeting.

It was trading up 20 per cent on the day a few hours after Erdogan had finished.

"We finally understood that the Erdogan administration cares about the exchange rate, and has avoided capital controls," economist Timothy Ash of BlueBay Asset Management said in a note to clients.

"Erdogan affirmed that he believes in markets, albeit not interest rates."

Indirect rate hike

Erdogan holds the unconventional belief that high interest



People walk through the Eminonu district of Istanbul, Turkey on Tuesday (AFP)

rates cause inflation, rather than tamping it down by slowing economic activity.

He has pushed the central bank to slash its policy rate to far below the annual rate of price increases – now at 21 per cent and rapidly climbing.

This meant that Turks who put liras in their bank accounts were effectively losing money each month.

Economists feared that Turkey could see a potentially paralysing run on the banks unless something was done quickly.

Erdogan's new policy – dubbed an "indirect interest rate hike" by former treasury advisor Mahfi Egitmez – is meant to defend the value of lira holdings against fluctuations in the ex-

change rate.

It guarantees that the government will cover any depreciation of lira bank deposits against the dollar through periodic payments.

"If the exchange rate increases by 40 per cent, and the interest rate increases by 14 per cent, 26 percentage points will be paid in compensation," Egitmez explained on Twitter.

The policy is designed to manage inflation expectations and make Turks feel safer about their lira assets.

The lira gained a further 22 per cent early Tuesday. It then erased all those gains before climbing back up six per cent by Tuesday afternoon.

Yet many economists ques-

tion whether Erdogan's new approach is sustainable.

"The deposit guarantee method will increase the public burden," former Turkish economy minister Ali Babacan told reporters.

"The treasury will pay for it with taxes. This is the dollarisation of the country's economy."

Economists also expressed doubts about whether the move could truly protect Turks from rapid cost of living increases.

"This is still bad policy," Ash said.

"This scheme likely has bought time and avoided an immediate crash in the banking sector but it has done nothing to fight inflation."

AFP

Natural gas prices hit fresh record peaks in Europe

London, UK – European and UK gas prices rocketed on Tuesday to all-time highs on strong winter demand and simmering geopolitical tensions between key supplier Russia and consumer nations.

Europe's reference Dutch TTF gas price hit €162.775 per megawatt hour in late morning deals, up more than 10 per cent from Monday, while UK prices leapt to 408.30 pence per therm.

Both markets beat previous records from October, also struck on demand worries for the northern hemisphere winter months. They are currently about seven times greater than at the start of 2021.

Runaway spot gas prices, alongside other buoyant commodities including crude oil, have fuelled mounting concern about spiking inflation worldwide.

European gas "continued its inexorable rise... to another record," wrote Deutsche Bank analysts in a client note.

"It comes as temperatures have continued to decline heading into the European winter, and we also got the news that (Russian energy giant) Gazprom had not booked any extra capacity in January for gas flowing through Ukraine."

"That's an important story heading through the winter with implications for European growth, and one that will have investors closely following the weather forecasts to work out what might happen."

Europe's gas stocks had already been depleted by a prolonged winter last year.

Added to the picture, calmer



In this file photo a sign displays the prices per litre of fuels, outside a filling station in Lower Kingswood, south of London (AFP)

prevailing weather conditions have this year sharply reduced the supply of wind power.

Some analysts blame the market spike on ongoing controversy surrounding Russia's planned Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

German Economic Affairs Minister Robert Habeck warned Saturday of "severe consequences" for the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany if Moscow attacked Ukraine.

The Baltic Sea pipeline is set to double supplies of cheap natural gas from Russia to Germany,

which the European Union's top economy says is needed to help it transition from coal and nuclear energy.

But the €10bn project has for years been dogged by delays and drawn fierce criticism from both Germany's eastern EU allies like Poland and the United States.

Critics say Nord Stream 2 will increase Europe's dependence on Russian gas and Ukraine has described it as a "geopolitical weapon".

One third of Europe's total gas supplies come from Russia.

AFP

Nominal GDP grows 12.7%

Continued from Page 01

'The revision of the outlook reflects actual improvements in, and the expected evolution of, key fiscal metrics including government debt/GDP and the budget deficit, driven by higher oil prices and fiscal reforms, and a lessening of external financing pressures,' Fitch Ratings said.

Earlier in October, S&P Global Ratings, the world's biggest credit rating agency, upgraded its outlook on Oman to 'positive' as it now believes that the sultanate's reforms programme and higher oil prices will narrow fiscal deficits and slow the increase in government debt.

Moody's Investors Service also revised its outlook on the government of Oman's issuer ratings to 'stable' from 'negative'.

IMF also recently said that a strong rollout of vaccines, higher oil prices and continued implementation of structural reforms would considerably improve the outlook for Oman's economy. IMF expects Oman's real GDP – which contracted by 2.8 per cent in 2020 – to grow by 2.5 per cent this year and by 2.9 per cent in 2022.

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Al Maha Petroleum Products signs agreement with Talabat

Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company has announced an association with Talabat, the leading online food delivery service in Oman. Under the new terms, Talabat Riders will be offered a host of benefits. The signing ceremony took place recently at the Al Maha head office.

Representing Al Maha Petroleum at the signing ceremony was its division head of Marketing and Business Development, Ahmed al Shanfari, while Mohamed Zourob, the managing director, signed on behalf of Talabat. Also in attendance at the event were other members of the executive and senior management of both companies.

Speaking about the association, Shanfari said, "Food and grocery delivery services such as Talabat are a lifeline in light of the current global health and safety concerns."

"This is in no small part, due to the hard work of the Talabat Riders. Through our association with Talabat, we will reward them for their hard work as well as make their lives a little easier."

Under the new partnership, all Talabat Riders will be issued an e-Rial card and will benefit from instant cashback on the fuel they purchase using the card.



They will also receive discounted prices on all Al Maha lubricants as well as car washes at the service stations. Al Maha will also be hosting raffle draws with attractive prizes for all Talabat Riders making use of these benefits.

That is not all, Talabat Riders will also benefit from discounts from Oman International Hospital (OIH) on specific services, as well as discounts on Insurance purchased from the Bima insurance platform. "In addition to these benefits, we also plan to

implement 'Rider Lounges' at our service stations and convenience stores in the near future. Talabat Riders will be able to freely use these spaces to get some much-deserved rest in between their deliveries," added Shanfari

Zourob said, "We're constantly looking for ways to partner with companies to not only help us better serve our customers but also improve the quality of life of the riders. Considering the number of deliveries riders must make every day and

the distances they travel, the fuel savings they can get by using Al Maha's e-Rial card, as well as the discounted prices on other services, will be of great value to them. We are therefore pleased to have entered into this association with Al Maha."



Dr P A Ibrahim Haji

'Ibrahim Haji will always be remembered'

"Dr P A Ibrahim Haji will always be remembered for his commendable contributions in the field of education," said M P Ahammed, chairman, Malabar Group, offering condolences on the demise of the renowned businessman and philanthropist.

"As co-chairman of Malabar Group, his activities always served as inspiration for us, and he contributed greatly to the development of our company. A true believer in the power of education to empower communities, his contributions in the field of education are noteworthy," Ahammed said.

"His social commitment lives through the various educational institutions and the different charitable endeavours he has initiated in India and abroad. He made charity a way of life. We are deeply saddened by his passing. My thoughts and prayers are with the bereaved family," he added.

Celebrate festive season in style with Park Inn Hotels

Count on Park Inn by Radisson Muscat & Duqm hotels to make your festive season extra special.

This festive season won't be about the turkey and presents, it will be about being together in a unique festive environment with your loved ones.

Inspired by the magic of the festivities, Park Inn by Radisson Muscat & Duqm presents the special season's menu while guest enjoy the ambiance and services.

Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve dinner buffets are priced at just RO14 net, while on the 31st is RO18 net per person at Park Inn by Radisson Muscat. Guests can enjoy our specially selected beverages for the night.

For those who want to dine



under the stars and celebrate with beachfront views, RBG Duqm will host special dinner buffet on December 24 and 31. Dinner packages start from RO12 per person at Park Inn by Radisson Hotel & Residence Duqm. A special promotion is available for groups.

Hyundai expands presence of N Brand models in ME

Hyundai Motor Company on recently unveiled its high-performance philosophy and ambition for sustainable driving fun at an event showcasing Hyundai's N Brand for the Middle East and Africa.

The company showcased N Brand's high-performance philosophy and highlighted its commitment to sustainable e-performance, giving a glimpse of the future direction for motorsport initiatives and how it will serve as a basis for upcoming N models.

N Brand was born out of Hyundai's aim to create high performance vehicles that adhere to high standards of driving excellence while ensuring fun-to-drive as they are practical.

With technology inspired by motorsports, N Brand excels at delivering driving enthusiasm based on the three pillars of N - Corner Rascal, Everyday sports car, Racetrack Capability

Hyundai had recently rolled



out the Veloster N, Kona N, Elantra N and Sonata N Line in Saudi Arabia.

Hyundai announced its plans to introduce N Brand models in other parts of the region and expand its line up with 3 N Brand models through 2022.

Bang Sun Jeong, head of Hyundai Motor Company Middle East & Africa HQs, said, "We are thrilled to share the philosophy behind N Brand and our vi-

sion to be a leader in the high-performance category."

"The expansion of N Brand to the region will allow customers to experience the exhilarating feeling of the 'fun to drive' offering delivered, something which our customers are enjoying in Saudi Arabia and other markets."

Since its inception in 2015, N Brand has been performing at the highest level offering

exclusive engine performance and dynamic technology innovations to satisfy performance-oriented enthusiasts.

Till Wartenberg, head of N Brand Management and Motorsport sub-division added, "Our goal with N Brand is to push the limits of performance and to help drivers discover how fun driving can be."

"We want them to do more than simply drive and enjoy

every second of the driving experience. N models can carve corners on the racetrack and bring excitement to everyday driving. This is reflected with our new N Brand slogan 'Never just drive'."

The event highlighted the N DCT transmission, the enhanced version of Hyundai's in-house developed 8-speed wet DCT. The transmission control unit is calibrated for N, resulting in faster shifting and enabling a range of exclusive driving features. All N models have sportier exteriors, enhanced powertrains, track-ready suspension and exhaust notes while N Line models have sportier exterior and N inspired interior compared to the base models.

OTE Group is the exclusive dealer for Hyundai in Oman offering excellent sales and after-sales service support, underpinned by a nationwide service network, that's on par with global standards.

Oman International Hospital's first open day a huge success

Oman International Hospital (OIH), the newly soft opened super-multispecialty hospital in Al Ghubrah, Muscat, organised an 'Open Day' for Children on December 19, which was hailed by its partners and visitors as a great success.

The first ever open day event was organised by OIH in an exclusive collaboration with The Sultan's School and in association with its business partners, Oman Air, Talabat, NBO, Sohar International Bank, Al Habsi Football Academy, A Maha, OQ, Waterfront and Zahra Luxury Yacht with the hashtag #We-care.

The goal of the Open Day was to provide the young children with a general overview of the world of medicine, inculcate healthy habits, give firsthand experience of first-aid and distress support in case of



emergency situations.

Young students aged between 4 to up to 15 years from the Sultan's School and from OIH major partners, along with several parents attended the event very ably coordinated and supported by OIH

team of doctors, nurses and paramedical staff.

The event started off with the hospital's nurses, Tahira and Catryss educating the children about COVID-19 and how to be safe followed by Dr Mohammed Fawzy, orthopedic

specialist, Dr al Shaimaa Samy, pediatric specialist and Saida al Maqbali, nutritionist, joining the floor answering some fun questions posed by the children about healthy habits, eating healthy and how to become a doctor.

Football coaches from Al Habsi Football Academy energised the young children with fun filled exercises.

The children were then taken on a tour of the hospital's various modern facilities and equipment including the radiology depart-

ment. Radiologists, Samaneh and Nastaran educated the children about what it means to be a radiologist, about the human organs and also showed the children the X-ray of a teddy bear filled with toys.

Later, the children went on to learn firsthand how to do Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) on a person in case of emergency demonstrated by the hospital's ER doctor, Dr Ali Barakat.

The children also visited the OIH's word class Ambulance, where ER nurse, Donnie explained the ambulance's various instruments to save patients and taught the kids first aid and other precautions.

After a lunch sponsored Talabat, it was time to say goodbye and the children were presented with Oman International Hospital 'Certificate of Completion'

along with a toy 'Doctor's set' and the official 'Junior Sindbad' merchandise sponsored by Oman Air.

Marcelo Pereira, CEO of OIH said, "We are very happy to be one of the first hospitals to do such an activity and glad the children loved it and so did our doctors! We believe such entertaining yet educational initiatives not only open up the young minds but also help shape their future. On behalf of my team, I would like to thank all our partners, who have supported us to make this possible especially The Sultan's School. The success of the event has in fact encouraged us to organise more such outreach programmes."

Oman International Hospital, which soft-opened in May, is managed by IdealMed GHS, Portugal, which manages many hospitals across the world.



Oman Aquarium receives Silver Award at Retail Congress MENA

Oman Aquarium bagged the Silver Award in Retail Excellence at the prestigious Retail Congress MENA.

The award was presented to Oman Aquarium for outstanding performance, innovation, and commercial success at a glittering ceremony held in Dubai.

Oman's largest and only public Aquarium located at the sprawling Mall of Muscat is spread over 8,000 sqm of space and is home to a variety of marine animals.

Oman Aquarium was in the news recently for welcoming the first African baby penguin to be born in the sultanate.

Mall of Muscat, where Oman Aquarium is located, was a close contender in the NOI Enhancement Category at the Retail Congress MENA awards.

The mall was a finalist in the category that recognises unique examples of operational efficiencies or other cost-saving measures that resulted in ex-

pense reduction and/or increased revenue for the shopping centre owner.

The Retail Congress MENA is organised by The Middle East Council of Shopping Centres and Retailers (MECS+R) in partnership with the Dubai Association Centre (DAC) and the Dubai Chamber of

Commerce, bringing together retail professionals globally for a conference, exhibition, dealmaking, networking and awards celebration.

"The Retail Congress MENA Awards distinguishes the best in the industry. It is an honour to be recognised and awarded by esteemed panelists of The Mid-

dle East Council of Shopping Centres and Retailers. We are proud of Oman's first and largest public aquarium, which has gained popularity across the region," said Mahmood Mohamed Ali al Jarwani, chairman of Tamani Trading & Entertainment LLC, the operator of Oman Aquarium.

Ooredoo's charity auction returns



You've got to be in it to win it! Ooredoo's popular charity number auction is back and from December 25-31, customers have the chance to bid for as many as ten of their favourite mobile numbers. With 100 of Ooredoo's most sought-after Diamond and Gold digits up for grabs, and all the proceeds being donated to charity, it's the perfect opportunity to have fun while doing a good deed too.

Interested customers can browse the online list, which includes different starting prices for different numbers. A registration fee of RO20 is applicable to take part in the auction and first-time bidders are required to fill out a registration form. Meanwhile, those who have participated in previous auctions can simply activate their account.

Oman Post & Asyad Express offers services at 137 locations

Providing a host of postal and logistics services, Oman Post & Asyad Express, a member of Asyad Group, provides a service center network of 137 locations across Oman consisting of a mix of owned and outsourced service centers.

Putting customers first and foremost and in line with its market collaborations with the private sector, the company expanded its retail outlet presence after the recent joint collaborations with Oman National Engineering and Investment Company (ONEIC), and Oman Investment & Finance Co (OIFC). Customers can now avail of Oman Post & Asyad Express services at a vast network of locations, providing them with convenience and business value to support their growth plans in Oman and beyond.

"Oman Post & Asyad Express is proud to be a driver of economic activity for all our customers whether individuals, small and medium enterprises or corporates. With our expanded network of 137 branches and re-



tail touchpoints at ONEIC and OIFC, our operations continue to generate economic activity and support the local business community," said Sayyid Nasr Albusaidi, general manager Customer Experience at Oman Post & Asyad Express.

"Postal and logistics' services are key enablers of trade, especially in the context of e-commerce. We are providing unique and tailored offerings to businesses, leveraging our state-of-the-art fulfilment centre, as this will have a significant impact not only on our partners' bottom lines, but also on shipping domestically across Oman and ex-

port trends overseas."

Oman Post & Asyad Express branches and retail outlets at ONIEC Tasdeed and OIFC Khedmah provide a range of core services to customers who can benefit from the company's connectivity, not only on a domestic level, but also worldwide.

Oman Post & Asyad Express offers a suite of postal and logistics services ranging from the physical and virtual PO Boxes, to its e-commerce shipping service, Matjar. Other services include the premium international and domestic document and parcel shipping services, Rapid Parcel, and Asyad Express International.

Muscat University students continue training at Zubair Corporation companies

In line with the programmes and initiatives launched by the Omani Talent Support and Empowerment programme at The Zubair Corporation, the students of Muscat University participating in the Zubair Practical Training Programme continued their intensive training in six different companies across The Zubair Corporation. This training programme will last for seven months.

Commenting on this occasion, Hilal Omar al Siyabi, head of Corporate Services at The Zubair Corporation, said, "We would like to welcome the students participating in the Zubair Practical Training Programme to the companies and institutions of The Zubair Corporation. This programme is part of our efforts to support and empower Omani competencies to localise job opportunities by providing graduates with the skills and competencies required by the labour market. This step is also aligned with the government's future vision in empowering



young Omanis in various companies and private sector institutions."

"The Zubair Corporation will continue to attract new batches of distinguished students from Muscat University, based on the joint cooperation agreement with the university. As the Corporation is committed to training and qualifying these students in the various sectors in which the Corporation operates. I would like to thank Muscat University for this fruitful cooperation to make the Zubair Practical Training Programme a success. To-

gether, we will strive to enable the students to make the most of their training programme, which is the first step in their professional career," he added.

Abeer al Shamisi, student training officer at Muscat University said, "We would like to thank The Zubair Corporation for their cooperation in training final year students across various companies and institutions of The Zubair Corporation. Through the Zubair Practical Training Programme, we are keen to refine their skills of training and qualification across dif-

ferent work environments, in order to highlight their competencies and prepare them to enter the labour market."

"From the first day, the students participating in the programme demonstrated their enthusiasm and sincerity in performing the tasks assigned to them. Through follow-up, the programme contributed towards refining the students' professional skills and enhancing their abilities to communicate with fellow employees and have an impact on the growth of their institutional values," she said.

Stylish Wyndham Garden Salalah Mirbat hotel to open its doors soon

Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, the world's largest hotel franchising company with approximately 9,000 hotels across nearly 95 countries, continues to cement its presence across the Middle East with the opening of the 237-room Wyndham Garden Salalah Mirbat hotel in Mirbat, Oman. The hotel marks Wyndham's continued growth in the leisure segment, as well as the first in collaboration with Dhofar Tourism Company - one of the largest and most diversified developers of sustainable towns in Oman.

Expected to open later this month, Wyndham Garden Salalah Mirbat is located ocean-front in Mirbat, and a short drive away from Salalah, the third largest city in the Sultanate of Oman and the capital city of Dhofar governorate. Mirbat is a culturally rich up-and-coming

tourist destination, known for its white sand beaches and natural beauty. Guests of the hotel can enjoy oceanic views and leisure activities including water sports, a spa and kids club.

The opening of Wyndham Garden Salalah Mirbat marks Wyndham's fourth hotel in Oman and second under the Wyndham Garden brand. These openings in Oman are part of the Company's strategic growth plans for the Middle East and Africa region, which include the addition of 23 new properties by 2023.

Panos Loupas, vice president development, Middle East, Eurasia and Africa, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, said, "Wyndham Garden Salalah Mirbat, offers fantastic accommodations for both regional and international travellers who wish to experience the picturesque beauty



of Mirbat. With the opening of this hotel, we look forward to further supporting the city's devel-

opment as a global holiday destination - as well as continuing to support Oman's ambitious 2040

tourism plans to revitalise travel in the country and double the number of tourists. We are ex-

cited to open our first hotel in this unique city, an important milestone that will see us further bolster our presence in the Sultanate."

Ahmed Yousuf Alawi Abdullah al Ibrahim, chairman, Dhofar Tourism Company said, "We are thrilled to be collaborating with Wyndham Hotels & Resorts on the opening of the Wyndham Garden Salalah Mirbat. This opening is a reflection of our unique and sustainable development plans to foster tourism across Oman."

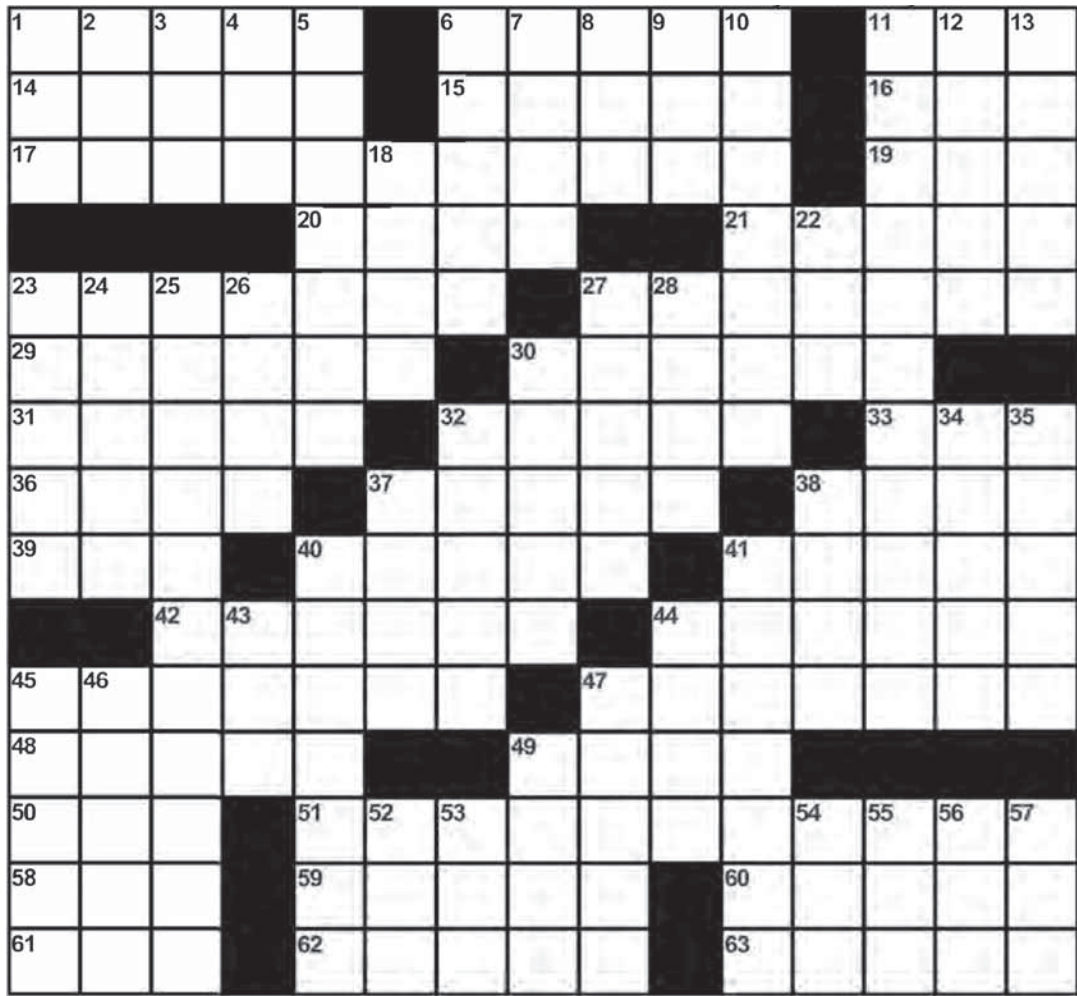
"Wyndham Garden Salalah Mirbat supports our mission to create further long-term value for the tourism, real estate and leisure sectors and we look forward to delivering an engaging and positive experience for all our guests."

Wyndham Garden Salalah Mirbat borders pristine white

sandy beaches and offers modern rooms and boasts state-of-the-art leisure facilities for guests including on-site restaurants, a spa, outdoor pool, a fitness centre, as well as additional sports facilities. For guests travelling with children the property also offers the convenience of a kids club. Business travellers can utilise the property's three spacious corporate meeting rooms which have the combined capacity to host over 500 people. In addition, Wyndham Garden Salalah Mirbat offers complimentary parking and a shuttle service to Salalah Airport.

Wyndham hotels in Oman and around the world participate in Wyndham Rewards, the world's most generous hotel rewards programme with more than 50,000 hotels, vacation club resorts and vacation rentals worldwide.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Church focal point
6) Far away from port
11) "Boo" mo.
14) Difficult to get through
15) Understand
16) Promise
17) Driving toward
19) 112.5 degrees from S
20) Add it to "a one" to make "none"
21) Material that's worsted for wear?
23) Zagreb's place
27) Old pro
29) Moved by semi
30) Gen. Charles de _
31) Bewhiskered mammal
32) Group of officers
33) Software program, briefly
36) Customary practice or observance
37) Prefix meaning "bone"
38) Cut remnant
39) Word from Homer
40) Like a DC comics "man"

41) "I'll second that"
42) Mexican Januaries
44) Like many radials
45) If everything fails miserably
47) Chinese dumplings
48) Where Dolphins play
49) Start up a computer
50) Wood shaping tool (var.)
51) Attempt to lure
58) _Paulo
59) Dangerous sub of WWII
60) Aligned perfectly
61) _pitch softball
62) Numerical sense?

DOWN

1) Big hullabaloo
2) Sportscaster Berman
3) Blast maker
4) Fire remnant
5) Come again?
6) Old Greek marketplace
7) Food carrier
8) Feeling blue
9) "To the max" suffix
10) Last Supper guest

11) Be melodramatic
12) Kind of line
13) Adolescent, almost
18) Make a sudden attack
22) Sniggler's catch
23) Musical combo?
24) 6:1, e.g.
25) Expensive way to pay?
26) Away from gales
27) Skywalker's daddy
28) Certain dollar
30) Airport choices
32) A hundred bucks
34) Eucharist plate
35) Gives the goad-ahead?
37) Yours and mine
38) Deposit for a moist bank
40) Not to be taken lightly
41) Having toothlike notches
43) _ de plume
44) TV, informally (with "tube")
45) Gather for a collection
46) Type of wave

4 7) Market value
49) Defeated
52) Agent's org.
53) Sly critter
54) Nest egg letters

55) Give a little pull
56) Communications abbr.
57) Keats poem, e.g.63) America's bird

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Life is easy today, especially with the universe in such a generous mood. Everything goes down smoothly, and you should feel quite fortunate. A few nagging doubts might threaten to ruin your fun, but don't get all bent out of shape just because things aren't perfect. Acknowledge your issues, then tell them to get lost, at least for the time being. Once that's settled, you can get back to the business at hand.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You need a little sympathy today if you want to soothe your troubled soul. You've got people who are great listeners, so give them a shout now that you really need them. They could help you clarify whether you need good advice or just a fresh pair of ears. If socialising feels somewhat beyond you, get some downtime somewhere comfy. The answer ought to show up just when you need it most.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

Old memories might be overwhelming now, so beware of any situations that could trigger nostalgia or remind you of past pain. It's a good time to avoid sad movies and deep conversations with those who always push your buttons. Try not to form or continue unhealthy attachments with the people you know you're better off avoiding. Try to spend some time surrounded by nature today. It will be very relaxing for you.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Stretching out in someone's doorway and refusing to leave until they agree you're right is always an option, and so is holding your breath until you turn blue. Another classic is the silent treatment, of course. All of these extreme tactics from your childhood are tempting, but they're not very effective and are likely to be counterproductive. For now, you need to agree to disagree.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Watch out for schedule overload today. It can be hard, especially since so many amazing opportunities are flying your way, but remember that they're all worthless if you're sluggish thanks to exhaustion or stress. Today, your judgment might not be totally accurate. Pay close attention to all financial issues and work-related changes and you should have a definite idea of how to make the most of this situation.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Romance can be an awful lot of fun unless the rules keep changing. In that case, it's no fun at all for any of the players. Don't let yourself get caught up in emotional messes or manipulation by making your moral code clear and sticking to it. This should keep you aimed in the right direction, because it helps you get around some combative obstacles you don't have time for.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You may tend towards overconfidence or even laziness today, but it must be avoided at all costs. Ensure that your colleagues know all about the schedule, since communication can easily go off the rails today. Once work is over, get some rest and relaxation, because you certainly deserve it! Try to keep your socialising low-key, because you still have things to do for a while yet.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You're feeling a little less wild and quite a bit more mild. You're not ill, You just need a change of pace. Listen to your heart and give it what it needs, starting with time off, and don't work yourself to death just because it's what you think you ought to be doing. Just like any other high-performance equipment, your mind and body need proper maintenance if you want them to keep running smoothly.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Your life feels like it's on fast-forward, but some issues, primary dealing with relationships and home responsibilities, all cry out for extra attention. This is actually a good thing. You should accomplish quite a lot and make great progress in some areas that have been a bit stagnant, but the risk of burnout is significant! Get plenty of sleep and make your health your top priority.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

If you're feeling somewhat fragile, handle yourself with care and let people know you need some warm fuzzies from them as well. It's hard for you to say no to those you care about, especially now that they're begging for advice and telling you that your input is vital, but for now, make yourself top priority. Feel free to ignore annoyances. Make time for some kind of pampering today. It's a good day for a relaxing massage or a pedicure.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Cynicism is the easy way out, and it helps no one in the end. It's way too easy to grouch about how hard life is now, but when was it ever easy? It's still a deeply interesting world, and part of what keeps you engaged is solving all those problems. Try a new attitude of amused detachment instead of taking every bump in the road as a comment on you, and then see just how much simpler life can be!

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

It's not exactly comfortable when someone decides that you're going to solve all their problems for them. Tell that loved one that they need to find their own solutions and give you a little room to breathe. You're more than willing to help (as usual), but they need to understand what's appropriate and what's crossing the line. Be firm but as gentle as you can.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- 1. The ozone layer restricts**

 - a. visible light
 - b. infrared radiation
 - c. x-rays and gamma rays
 - d. ultraviolet radiation
- 2. The Secretary-General is required to submit an annual report on the work of the UN to**

 - a. the General Assembly
 - b. the Security Council
 - c. the Trusteeship Council
 - d. All of the above simultaneously
- 3. The site of the third oldest civilisation after the Sumerian and Egyption, Mohenjo-daro, was built in**

 - a. 2500 BC
 - b. 2500-2000 BC
 - c. 2300 BC
 - d. 2200 BC

Answers: 1. d 2 a 3 a

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

E	O	S	A
A	G	I	R
C	U	S	T
N	T	I	P

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

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

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

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

Saudi-led strikes halt aid flights into rebel-held Yemen capital

Sanaa, Yemen - UN aid flights into Yemen's rebel-held capital Sanaa have been halted by airstrikes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition which supports the government, an airport official said on Tuesday.

Because of coalition airstrikes targeting the Huthi rebels, 'the airport is no longer able to receive aircraft operated by the United Nations or international humanitarian organisations', the official told AFP.

Flights into Sanaa airport have been largely halted by a Saudi-led blockade since August 2016, but there have been exemptions for aid flights that are a key lifeline for the population.

The airport official, who asked not to be identified, called on the United Nations to secure a halt to the raids so that the airport could resume operations.

On Monday evening, the coalition said it had carried out 'a limited number of precision strikes on legitimate military targets in Sanaa airport'.

'The operation was mounted in response to the threat and use of airport infrastructure to carry out cross-border attacks,' it said in a statement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency.

Coalition aircraft hit six targets in the airport, including sites used to 'control attacks by drones loaded with explosives' or to 'train terrorist elements' for such operations, the statement said.

The coalition insisted that its strikes were 'in accordance with international humanitarian law' and have no impact on the airport's operational capacity.

Khaled al Shayef, director general of Sanaa airport, told AFP that the 'health quarantine quarters and warehouses to store export and import goods were destroyed'.

A metal hangar and cement structures near an air traffic control tower were also destroyed, an AFP correspondent reported.

The Norwegian Refugee Council urged both sides to work with the UN to reopen the airport for humanitarian and commercial flights.

'Aid delivery to the airport is



Destroyed Sanaa International Airport following a reported airstrike by the Saudi-led coalition targeting the rebel-held Yemeni capital on Tuesday (AFP)



An airport worker holds what is reportedly the remains of a missile inside a damaged building in Sanaa Airport on Tuesday (AFP)

The coalition aircraft hit six targets in the airport. The strikes were in accordance with international humanitarian law and have no impact on the airport's operational capacity

THE COALITION

now at a standstill. We urge both the authorities in Sanaa and the Saudi-led coalition to keep Sanaa airport out of the

crossfire and to ensure that it can function again for medical and commercial flights,' NRC country director Erin Hutchin-

son said in a statement.

Tit-for-tat attacks

The rebels have repeatedly launched missile and drone strikes against neighbouring country of Saudi Arabia, targeting the kingdom's airports and oil infrastructure.

They have intensified their strikes on the kingdom in recent months.

In August, a drone hit Abha international airport, wounding eight people and damaging a civilian plane.

And in October, Saudi state media reported that 10 people were injured in a drone attack on a civilian airport in the Saudi Red Sea city of Jeddah.

Saudi Arabia and its allies intervened in the Yemeni civil war in 2015, shortly after the rebels seized the capital Sanaa.

The conflict has led to what the United Nations has called the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Tens of thousands of people - most of them civilians - have been killed in the war.

More than 80 per cent of the population of around 30mn

people require humanitarian assistance. A UN Development Programme report last month said the war will have claimed 377,000 lives by the end of the year through both direct and indirect impacts.

Nearly 60 per cent of deaths will have been caused by consequences such as lack of safe water, hunger and disease, it said, suggesting that fighting will have directly killed over 150,000 people.

While the United Nations and Washington are pushing for an end to the war, the Huthis have demanded an end to the coalition air blockade of Sanaa airport before any ceasefire or negotiations.

'Last night's attacks on Sanaa airport will not change much for the millions of impoverished Yemenis who were already cut off from the rest of the world,' Hutchinson said.

'But it should serve to open the world's eyes to the madness that is punishing millions of civilians who have no say in this conflict.'

AFP

Minister swims 12 hours to shore after chopper crash

Antananarivo, Madagascar - A Madagascar minister was one of two survivors to have swum some 12 hours to shore on Tuesday after their helicopter crashed off the island's northeastern coast, authorities said.

A search was still ongoing for two other passengers after the crash on Monday, whose cause

was not immediately clear, police and port authorities said.

Serge Gelle, the country's secretary of state for police, and a fellow policeman reached land in the seaside town of Mahambo separately on Tuesday morning, apparently after ejecting themselves from the aircraft, port authority chief Jean-Edmond

Randrianantenaina said.

In a video shared on social media, 57-year-old Gelle appears lying exhausted on a deck chair, still in his camouflage uniform. 'My time to die hasn't come yet,' says the general, adding he is cold but not injured.

Gella became minister as part of a cabinet reshuffle in August

after serving in the police for three decades.

The helicopter was flying him and the others to inspect the site of a shipwreck off the northeastern coast on Monday morning.

At least 21 people have died and around 60 gone missing in that disaster, according to the latest official toll on Tuesday.

Zafisambatra Ravoavy, another police general, said Gelle had used one of the helicopter's seats as a flotation device.

'He has always had great stamina in sport, and he's kept up this rhythm as minister, just like a thirty-year-old,' he said.

'He has nerves of steel.'

AFP



The International Atomic Energy Agency headquarters, in Vienna

Unlike West, Iran upbeat about talks, say experts

Tehran, Iran - Iran believes it has scored points in the Vienna talks meant to revive its tattered 2015 nuclear deal by managing to include sanctions relief in discussion documents for the next round, experts say.

The lifting of the punishing sanctions regime then-US president Donald Trump imposed when he pulled Washington out of the agreement in 2018 has been Tehran's top priority.

European powers have voiced frustration at a lack of progress so far in the Vienna talks, which their diplomats warned on Friday are 'rapidly reaching the end of the road'. But from Tehran's perspective, there has been progress, say Iranian officials and political analysts from the Islamic republic and abroad.

'The parties have agreed on two new texts, the result of intense discussions in recent days in Vienna,' Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said on Monday.

'These are documents in which Iran's position has been taken into account... and on the basis of which we can continue future discussions.'

Bernard Hourcade, a French expert on Iran, said Tehran had 'succeeded in this session in convincing their interlocutors that the sanctions must be settled as a priority, because this will pave the way for technical settlement of the nuclear component'.

He said Iran regularly stresses that it has 'always respected' the original 2015 deal, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and 'that it is up to the United States, which has flouted its honour, to repair the damage'.

Iran, Hourcade added, 'knows the balance of power is to its advantage because it is now at the threshold, that it is able in the short term, like about 30 other countries in the world, to manufacture an atomic bomb if it wishes. It

can enrich uranium whenever it wants.'

Preparing 'alternatives'

The parties to the 2015 deal with Iran - Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States - saw it as the best way to stop it developing a nuclear weapons capability, a goal Tehran has always denied pursuing.

Iran pledged to reduce its nuclear activities, which are monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency, in exchange for relief from sanctions then in force against it.

When Trump pulled out of the deal, he imposed an even more painful and sweeping sanctions regime, including a unilateral US ban on Iran's oil sales, leading Iran to step up its nuclear activities again.

After US President Joe Biden replaced Donald Trump, talks to revive the accord resumed. They stopped before Iran's June presidential election, then resumed on November 29.

Tehran's new ultraconservative government has said agreement could be reached 'quickly' if the West is serious about lifting sanctions and stops making 'threats'.

Iran refuses to engage directly with the US, so Washington is participating indirectly.

Iran's arch foe Israel is not a party to the talks but has threatened force if diplomacy fails, and the US has also said it is preparing "alternatives."

'Inhumane sanctions'

Mali's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, has voiced frustration with the talks, saying days ago that 'it's not going well in the sense that we do not yet have a pathway back into the JCPOA'.

Sullivan was due to arrive in Israel later on Tuesday for talks, which White House officials said would focus partly on Iran.

AFP

France says killed suspect in 2020 murders of aid workers in Niger

Paris, France - French soldiers have killed one of the suspects in last year's murder of six young French aid workers in Niger, the general staff said on Tuesday.

The Islamic State group had claimed the killings in August last year of the six aid workers aged between 25 and 31 and their two local guides while they were visiting a nature reserve in the West African country.

The army identified the killed extremist as Soumana Boura, one of the bosses of the so-called Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

General staff spokesman Colonel Pascal Ianni told AFP that Boura had filmed the execution of the eight victims in Au-



This file photo shows the coffins of the six humanitarian aid workers from the French NGO Acted, who were killed in an attack in Niger, during a ceremony at the Orly Airport in south of Paris on August 14, 2020 (AFP)

gust and overseen the publication of the footage.

Boura, who headed a group of dozens of fighters in western Niger, was killed by a French drone strike on Monday as he was riding his motorcycle, he said. A French unit was on its way to secure the area and formally identify him, the army said.

The six French humanitarian workers, their guide and their driver were killed on August 9 in the Koure National Park, a wildlife haven 60km from Niger's capital Niamey.

IS said that the eight had been killed following their capture in a 'blitz attack'.

French President Emmanuel Macron said at the time that the

killings were 'manifestly a terrorist attack' and he threatened repercussions.

ISGS boss Adnan Abou Walid al Sahraoui, who France believes ordered the execution of the aid workers, was killed in August by French soldiers.

Eleven other people implicated in the murders were arrested in Niger in recent months.

The area where the aid workers died, famous for its giraffes, is a popular destination for weekend leisure trips by Niamey residents, including foreigners.

The attackers cut the throat of a young woman in the group, shot the others dead, set fire to their jeep and fled.

Monday's strike against the IS

leader helped 'to fight against the expansion of ISGS and to stop it taking control of some parts of the three-border region' between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, the army said.

After nine years of military presence in the Sahel region, France has begun to reorganise and wind down its Barkhane force there.

It has already left its northern Mali bases of Tessalit, Kidal and Timbuktu and is refocusing its presence on Gao, Menaka and Niamey.

French troops, currently 5,000 in the region, are to be drawn down by about half by 2023.

AFP

China blacklists US federal commission members

The move is a tit-for-tat response to Washington’s sanctions on Chinese politicians and companies

Beijing, China - China blacklisted four members of a US federal commission on religious freedom on Tuesday in the latest tit-for-tat response to Washington’s own sanctions targeting alleged perpetrators of ‘genocide’ in Xinjiang.

The move came as Beijing also hit out at Washington for appointing a new special coordinator for Tibet and blasted global powers over their criticism of local polls in Hong Kong that vetted out the opposition.

China’s treatment of Tibetans, Muslim minority Uyghurs in Xinjiang and an on-going crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong have contributed to worsening diplomatic relations between Western powers and Beijing.

Xinjiang in particular has prompted Washington to slap sanctions on a growing list of Chinese politicians and companies as well as a diplomatic boycott of the upcoming Winter Olympics, sparking fury in Beijing and reciprocal measures.

On Tuesday China announced the latest targets - four members of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

Beijing’s Foreign Ministry named chairwoman Nadine Maenza, vice chairman Nury Turkel, as well as commissioners Anurima Bhargava and James W Carr as newly sanctioned.

“These countermeasures include the prohibition of the above-mentioned persons from



This file photo shows policemen forcibly removing Tibetan activists from the Students for a Free Tibet group, as they perform a sit-in at the entrance of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) headquarters ahead of the February’s Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, in Lausanne on December 11 (AFP)

entering China and the freezing of their assets in mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau,” spokesman Zhao Lijian said.

“Chinese citizens and institutions are also prohibited from dealing with these people.”

Set up in 1998, USCIRF is a federal commission that surveys religious freedom around the world and has been a vocal critic

of China’s treatment of Uighur Muslims, a rare bipartisan issue in polarised Washington.

The announcement came days after the US unleashed a volley of new actions over Xinjiang that included a ban on virtually all imports from the region - a major global cotton producer - over forced labour allegations.

It has also recently blacklisted

Chinese companies like drone maker DJI and artificial intelligence startup SenseTime over their alleged work with authorities in Xinjiang.

Tibet and Hong Kong

China’s previous reciprocal sanctions have included European, British and US lawmakers, academics who study Xinjiang

and a London law firm.

Campaigners say that at least one million Uyghurs and other Turkic-speaking, mostly Muslim minorities have been incarcerated in camps in China’s north-western Xinjiang region after a series of bloody attacks.

Human rights groups and foreign governments have found evidence of what they say is



US under secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights Uzra Zeya has been appointed as Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues

Counter-measures include prohibition from entering China, freezing of assets in mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau

ZHAO LIJIAN

mass detentions, forced labour, political indoctrination, torture and forced sterilisation. Washington has described it as genocide. After initially denying the existence of the Xinjiang camps, China later defended them as vocational training centres aimed at reducing the appeal of extremism.

On Monday the US also named a new ‘special coordinator for Tibetan Issues’, who will

be tasked with restarting dialogue between the Dalai Lama and China, as well as promoting ‘respect for the human rights’ of Tibetans.

Zhao said China was ‘firmly opposed’ to the move.

“Tibet affairs are purely China’s internal affairs and brook no interference from any foreign forces,” he said on Tuesday.

He also took exception to criticism from G7 and European nations over this weekend’s poll in Hong Kong.

World powers condemned Sunday’s tightly vetted legislative vote in a series of coordinated statements that said Beijing’s decision to reduce directly elected seats and control who could stand had eroded democracy in the territory.

“These Western countries should face up to the reality that Hong Kong has returned to China for 24 years,” Zhao said.

AFP



Starry Lee (centre), chairwoman for the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong speaks at a press conference with party members in Hong Kong on Monday (AFP)

G7 flays ‘erosion’ of democracy in Hong Kong polls

Hong Kong, China - World powers on Monday condemned Hong’s Kong tightly vetted legislative vote, saying rules imposed by Beijing that reduced directly elected seats and controlled who could stand had eroded democracy in the Chinese territory.

China has overseen a sweeping crackdown in Hong Kong in response to huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago.

It imposed a national security law in the former British colony that criminalised much dissent and introduced political rules that vet the loyalty of anyone standing for office.

The first public vote under this new order was held on Sunday for the city’s legislature, with a historic low turnout recorded and the number of those directly elected slashed from half to 22 per cent.

Figures showed just 30 per cent of the electorate cast ballots, the lowest rate both of the period since the city’s 1997 handover to China and the British colonial era.

Turnout at the last legislature polls in 2016 was 58 per cent, while the 2019 district council elections, when pro-democracy figures won a landslide, saw a

record 71 per cent.

The foreign ministers of the G7 group of most developed nations expressed ‘grave concern over the erosion of democratic elements’ in Hong Kong’s electoral system after the poll.

The new vetting process ‘to severely restrict the choice of candidates on the ballot paper undermined Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy’ under the principle of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ agreed for the handover of the territory from the UK to China in 1997.

The foreign ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and US called on China ‘to restore confidence in Hong Kong’s political institutions and end the unwarranted oppression of those who promote democratic values and the defence of rights and freedoms’.

The European Union’s foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in a statement that the poll was ‘yet another step in the dismantling of the ‘One Country Two Systems’ principle’, and called for a ‘high degree of autonomy as well as respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, democratic principles and the rule of law’ in Hong Kong.

AFP

Taliban allow protest calling for Afghan assets to be released

Kabul, Afghanistan - Around 200 Afghans marched in Kabul on Tuesday to demand the release of billions of dollars of assets frozen by the international community - a rare protest allowed by the Taliban as the country battles a major economic crisis.

There were no women in Tuesday’s march, organised by a little-known group called the Afghan People’s Movement which in the past has held peace rallies in the capital.

The Taliban have outlawed protests unless approved, cracking down hard on several demonstrations held by women clamouring for the right to jobs and education.

Tuesday’s march clearly had



People holding a banner march during a protest in Kabul on Tuesday (AFP)

the blessing of Afghanistan’s new rulers, with Taliban social media accounts featuring multiple images and video clips saying

participants spoke for ordinary citizens. ‘Let us eat’ read one banner carried by a marcher near a square in central Kabul.

“Our main demand is that the United States should release our assets as soon as possible,” organiser Shafiq Ahmad Rahimi told AFP.

“This is the wealth of the nation, not of any single person, group or government,” he said.

Since the Taliban’s August 15 return to power, nearly US\$10bn of assets have been frozen by an international community loathe to give access to the funds directly to the hardliners.

But the country is in the grip of a major humanitarian crisis and the UN more than half of Afghanistan’s 38mn people face hunger this winter.

Western countries have tied the unfreezing of assets to the

Taliban respecting human rights - especially with regard to women being allowed to work and girls to attend school.

Tuesday’s march comes two days after the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) met in Pakistan and agreed to establish new ways of getting aid to Afghanistan.

The country’s economy, already battered by decades of war, went into freefall after the Taliban’s return.

Banks have also placed severe restrictions on withdrawals by private customers, and many in the capital have resorted to selling household possessions to buy food for their families.

AFP

Philippine troops deliver aid to typhoon survivors

Loboc, Philippines - Troops raced on Tuesday to deliver food and water to typhoon-ravaged islands of the Philippines as charities appealed for aid to help hundreds of thousands left homeless by the deadly storm.

At least 375 people were killed and hundreds injured when Typhoon Rai pummelled the southern and central regions of the archipelago on Thursday, wiping out wooden houses, uprooting trees and knocking out power across entire islands.

“Our food is about to run out, probably in a few days or tomorrow,” Simplicia Pedrablanca, a town mayor in the Dinagat Islands, told local radio station DZBB.

More than 400,000 people were sheltering in evacuation centres or with relatives, the national disaster agency said, after their homes were damaged or destroyed by the strongest typhoon to hit the country this year.

One of the hardest-hit islands was Bohol - known for its beaches and dive spots - where



A vehicle swept away due to floodings in Typhoon Rai-hit Loboc town on Tuesday (AFP)

at least 96 people have died, provincial Governor Arthur Yap said on Facebook.

A state of calamity has been declared on the island where people sat under umbrellas next to their empty water drums.

Yap said the province had run out of money and pleaded for President Rodrigo Duterte’s government to send funds to buy food and drinking water for des-

perate families.

“If you won’t send money to buy food, send soldiers and police because there will be looting here,” Yap warned during an interview with DZBB.

While other parts of the Philippines celebrated Christmas, Bohol was ‘undergoing a Yolanda-like situation’, he added, using the local name for Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

On nearby Negros island, Carl Arapoc, 23, told AFP there was no electricity in his city and his family was using ‘driftwood’ to cook. There has also been widespread destruction on Siargao, Dinagat and Mindanao islands, which bore the brunt of the storm, packing winds of 195km per hour.

“It was really, really bad, the strongest storm I ever witnessed

in my life,” said Tal Oran, an Israeli living in the Siargao tourist town General Luna.

‘All available assets’

Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana has ordered the military to deploy ships, boats, aircraft and trucks to deliver food, drinking water and medical supplies to the survivors, who have been struggling hard for various basic necessities.

The Red Cross is also flying relief to popular holiday destinations Siargao and Bohol islands.

“The emergency appeal by IFRC helps us to act swiftly and do all we can to help people and families get back on their feet,” said Alberto Bocanegra, head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the Philippines.

The organisation has appealed for US\$22mn to fund urgent relief and recovery efforts.

The UK has pledged around US\$1mn to the IFRC effort, while Canada promised about US\$2.3mn in assistance.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Omicron dominant variant in United States

Following WHO's call, US president urges Americans to get vaccinated and adopt safety measures

Washington, US - US President Joe Biden has urged Americans to get vaccinated with the fast-spreading Omicron variant confirmed as the dominant strain in the hard-hit country.

His call comes as the World Health Organization called for vigilance over the holiday period with fresh virus surges reported globally.

The highly-mutated Omicron variant, now present in dozens of countries, appears to be more infectious and possibly have higher resistance to vaccines, despite early indications that it is not more severe than the Delta strain.

Its lightning fast dash around the globe has forced governments to reimpose restrictions ahead of the holidays, dampening hopes the worst of the pandemic is over.

Omicron now accounts for 73.2 per cent of new US cases over the past week ending Saturday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

Biden took to Twitter late on Monday to encourage people to get vaccinated and adopt safety measures like mask-wearing, warning that Omicron cases are on the rise.

"If you're an adult choosing to be unvaccinated, you will face an extremely difficult win-



People wait in long lines in Times Square to get tested for COVID-19 in New York City on Monday. (AFP)

ter for your family and community," he said. The government will distribute 500mn free COVID-19 tests and mobilise military medical personnel if needed, a senior White House official said on Tuesday.

"We have the tools to get through this wave," the official

said, noting there are no plans to impose new restrictions.

With Biden set to deliver an address on the pandemic later on Tuesday, the White House reported that a mid-level, fully-vaccinated and boosted staff member had tested positive for COVID-19 after spending 30

minutes in proximity to the president three days prior. Biden has so far tested negative.

'Celebrate later'

WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus called for nations to redouble efforts to help end the pandemic, call-

ing for new year events to be canceled because it was better to 'celebrate later than to celebrate now and grieve later'.

"We have to focus now on ending this pandemic," he said on Monday.

The warning came as the European Union approved its fifth

Omicron cases are on a rise. If you're an adult choosing to be unvaccinated, you will face an extremely difficult winter for your family and community

JOE BIDEN

COVID-19 jab on Monday - from US firm Novavax - with Europe already far ahead of other parts of the world with its rollout of vaccines and booster shots.

Authorisation of the jab, which uses a more conventional technology than other COVID-19 vaccines, has raised hopes that people worried about getting vaccinated might now come forward.

The other vaccines approved in the bloc are from Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson, and the EU has already signed a deal to buy up to 200mn doses of the two-shot Novavax vaccine.

"At a time where the Omicron variant is rapidly spread-

ing... I am particularly pleased with today's authorisation of the Novavax vaccine," EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said.

Paris has already cancelled its new year celebrations, and Germany is expected to roll out tight restrictions on private parties and close nightclubs.

Spain's Catalonia region is considering a clampdown as well, while Morocco has announced a blanket ban on New Year's Eve celebrations.

London on Monday said it had cancelled a New Year's Eve event in the central Trafalgar Square for 6,500 people.

But British Prime Minister Boris Johnson ruled out any further tightening of England's coronavirus rules over Christmas, while pledging to keep the situation 'under constant review'.

Queen Elizabeth II is nonetheless understood to have canceled plans to spend Christmas at her Sandringham estate and will instead take 'sensible precautions' and stay at Windsor Castle, said British media.

The Netherlands has already imposed a Christmas lockdown, and von der Leyen has warned that the Omicron variant could be dominant in Europe by mid-January.

AFP

Faced with surging cases; US promises additional \$580mn in international aid

Washington, US - The United States will give US\$580mn in additional aid to international organisations to fight COVID-19 in the face of surging Omicron cases, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"The rapid spread of the Omicron variant reinforces that we must all continue to accelerate our efforts to end this pandemic and that none of us are safe until all of us are safe," Blinken said in a statement.

"The world is at a critical point in our global response to this virus."

Blinken said he was scheduled to hold a meeting later on Tuesday with his counterparts from other countries to coordinate the international response to the new variant, which has already become the dominant strain in the United States.

"I call on my counterparts to fulfill and bolster their commitments in fighting the pandemic. We must work together, and we must act quickly," Blinken said.

The additional funds to seven multilateral agencies bring overall US assistance to US\$19.6bn,



Antony Blinken speaks to the press after a meeting with Slovenian Foreign Minister Anze Logar in Washington, DC on Monday (AFP)

as per the State Department.

In addition to the 330mn vaccines Washington has given to the rest of the world, the US\$580mn 'is a significant contribution to turn vaccines into vaccinations; strengthen public health capacity; support communities in need, and provide

urgent, life-saving relief', he said.

US\$280mn of the additional funds will go to the World Health Organization, which is

once more at the heart of US health strategy under President Joe Biden, after a break under his predecessor Donald Trump. Unicef will receive

The rapid spread of the Omicron reinforces that we must all continue with our efforts to end this pandemic and that none of us are safe until all of us are safe

ANTONY BLINKEN

US\$170mn to help with its efforts to vaccinate vulnerable populations.

"The United States has sought to galvanise global collective action with our own example and leadership, and it is critical that other governments fulfill their commitments and support those on the frontline of this pandemic," said Blinken.

His announcement comes hours before a much-anticipated speech from Biden on his government's response to the Omicron variant.

AFP

Iran's ambassador to Yemen dies of virus after evacuation

Tehran, Iran - Iran's envoy to Yemen died of COVID-19 on Tuesday despite his evacuation from the rebel-held capital Sanaa in a rare exemption from a Saudi-led air blockade, the foreign ministry said.

Foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh blamed the 'slow cooperation of certain countries' in facilitating the Saturday evacuation for the death of envoy Hassan Eyrlou.

The diplomat served as ambassador to the rebel-installed administration in Sanaa, which is recognised only by Tehran.

"The ministry announces the death from COVID-19 of martyr Hassan Eyrlou, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Yemen's National Salvation Government," ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said in statement.

"Martyr Eyrlou, who was also wounded in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, fell victim to COVID in the country where he was assigned, because of the slow cooperation of certain countries," Khatibzadeh said, without specifying which ones.

"Unfortunately he returned



A file photo of Hassan Eyrlou, Iran's Ambassador to Yemen

home to the country in adverse circumstances and despite treatments to improve his health, he died this morning.'

Eyrlou was flown out of Sanaa on Saturday on an Iraqi flight, after his rebel hosts secured authorisation from the Saudi-led coalition, which has enforced an air and sea blockade on rebel-held territory since August 2016.

An Iranian spokesman said Eyrlou had already been sick with COVID-19 for several days while Iraqi and Omani mediators organised the exemption.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have been bitter foes for years, taking opposing sides in conflicts from Syria to Yemen.

Riyadh has said that its 2015 intervention in Yemen in support of the beleaguered government was aimed at preventing an Iranian ally taking power on its doorstep.

The conflict has devastated healthcare system of the country and triggered what the United Nations has described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

AFP

Hong Kong adds Britain to government camp quarantine tier

Hong Kong, China - Travellers to Hong Kong from Britain will have to initially quarantine in a government camp from Tuesday, joining 12 African nations and the United States on the city's strictest entry tier.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, Hong Kong has maintained some of the world's toughest quarantine restrictions, measures that have kept infections at bay but left the finance hub isolated.

Those policies have been tightened further since the emergence of the Omicron coronavirus variant, which has spread rapidly around the world in the last few weeks.

Most people arriving in Hong Kong must undergo 21 days of hotel quarantine and frequent testing before being allowed out.

But people from countries deemed to have high Omicron infection rates must spend the first four days of quarantine in a government-run camp before seeing out the rest of their isolation in a hotel.

Britain was added to that list from midnight on Tuesday.

The other countries on the highest tier are Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, the United States, Zambia and



Most people arriving in Hong Kong must undergo 21 days of hotel quarantine and frequent testing

Zimbabwe.

Hong Kong has also further tightened aviation rules.

Any airline that brings in four or more passengers with the coronavirus over a seven day period on a route will be hit with a 14-day ban.

The rules create fresh headaches for airlines ahead of the once-peak Christmas travel period.

Some airlines such as British Airways and Swiss Air have begun avoiding Hong Kong altogether as they are afraid that their crew getting trapped in quarantine.

Earlier this month, AFP reported that Cathay Pacific has

been hit by a wave of resignations by pilots, with employees citing exhaustion and growing resentment.

Over the weekend, the boss of Qatar Airways, one of Cathay's main shareholders, warned Hong Kong was 'killing' its aviation industry with its rules.

Hong Kong has tied its fortunes to China's zero-COVID strategy and made clear that resuming travel with the mainland must come before the rest of the world.

Thanks to the strict rules, the city has not recorded a local outbreak in months.

AFP

Mosul museum in Iraq restores treasures destroyed by radicals

Mosul, Iraq - Left in ruins by extremists, Iraq's once-celebrated Mosul museum and its 2,500-year-old treasures are being given a second life thanks to restoration efforts backed by French experts.

Ancient artefacts in the museum were smashed into little pieces when Islamic State group fighters seized the northern city of Mosul in 2014 and made it their seat of power for three years.

"We must separate all the fragments... It's like a puzzle, you try to retrieve the pieces that tell the same story," said restoration worker Daniel Ibled, commissioned by France's famous Louvre museum, which is supporting Iraqi museum employees.

"Little by little, you manage to recreate the full set."

When the IS extremists were in control, they filmed themselves taking hammers to pre-Islamic treasures they deemed heretical, proudly advertising their rampage in a video published in February 2015.

The largest and heaviest artefacts were destroyed for the sake of their propaganda, but smaller pieces were sold on black markets the world over.

The scars of their destruction remain today.

On the ground floor of the museum, the twisted iron bars of the foundation poke through a gaping hole.

In other rooms, stones of various sizes are scattered, some bearing etchings of animal paws or wings. Others show inscriptions in cuneiform script.

The smallest of these fragments - no bigger than a fist - are lined up on a table, and experts are hard at work sorting through them.

For now, their efforts are focused on a winged lion from the city of Nimrud, jewel of the Assyrian empire, two 'lamassu' - winged bulls with human heads - and the base of the throne of King Ashurnasirpal II.

Giant jigsaw puzzle

These pieces, many dating back to the first millennium BC, are being revived with financing from the International Alliance for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH).

Alongside the Louvre, efforts are also being made by Washington's Smithsonian Institution, which provides training for the museum's teams, as well as the New York-headquartered World Monuments Fund, which is tasked with restoring the building. The base of the Assyrian king's throne, covered in



The destroyed remains of the mihrab (prayer niche) of the Mosque of Banat al-Hassan undergoing restoration at the Mosul Museum (AFP)



A worker tries to reassemble the broken fragments of a larger artefact bearing cuneiform inscriptions (AFP)



A larger fragment of a statue of the ancient Mesopotamian 'lamassu' human-headed winged bull (AFP)

cuneiform writing, appears almost fixed.

Some pieces are held together by elastic bands or small metallic rings. "The base of the throne was pulverised into more than 850 pieces," said museum official Choueib Firas Ibrahim, an expert in Sumerian studies.

"We have reassembled two-thirds of them."

For some pieces, writing fragments or straight lines help the teams put them together like a giant jigsaw.

"We read the inscriptions on this base, and we were able to restore the pieces to their place,"

said restorer Taha Yassin.

But other pieces without 'a flat surface or inscriptions' make them virtually indistinguishable and are more complicated, Yassin added.

Empty spaces

One year after Iraqi troops re-

captured Mosul in 2017, the museum received an urgent grant in a bid to restore it to its former glory.

After delays due to the coronavirus pandemic, museum director Zaid Ghazi Saadallah said he hopes the restoration works will be finished within five years.

But many gaps will remain, and posters on walls identify the lost artefacts.

"Most pieces are destroyed or looted," Saadallah said.

Iraq has suffered for decades from the pillaging of its antiquities, particularly after the US-led invasion in 2003, as well as during the later IS takeover.

But the current government says it has made the repatriation of artefacts a priority.

The Louvre has tasked 20 people to help the restoration efforts, said Ariane Thomas, director of the Louvre's Department of Near Eastern Antiquities.

After three missions this year, seven French experts will take turns visiting Iraq to help guide the restoration process, undertaken with about 10 museum employees.

Once the restoration work is complete, an online exhibition will be held to unveil the work.

"When we said that with time, money and know-how, we could revive even the most damaged of works, this proves it," Thomas said.

"Works that were completely destroyed have started to take form once again."

AFP



A file photo of Egyptian activist and blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah gives an interview at his home in Cairo (AFP)

Egypt sentences key revolutionary figure for 5 years

Cairo, Egypt - Egypt on Monday sentenced Alaa Abdel Fattah, a leading figure in the 2011 revolution, to five years in jail, with two others receiving four years, his sister and a judicial source said.

A computer programmer, blogger and high-profile activist who mobilised youths in the uprising that unseated autocrat Hosni Mubarak, Abdel Fattah had been in pre-trial detention since September 2019.

Abdel Fattah, his lawyer Mohamed al Baqer and blogger Mohamed 'Oxygen' Ibrahim were convicted of 'broadcasting false news' in their trial in Cairo.

'Alaa was sentenced to five years, Baqer four years and Mohamed Oxygen four years,' his sister Mona Seif said on Twitter.

'The judge was too cowardly to even inform us,' she said after the sentencing at the State Security Misdemeanours Court in the capital.

A judicial source, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed the verdict and sentencing to AFP. Rulings in the court cannot be appealed. They require final approval by President Abdel Fattah al Sisi.

Washington, which has already frozen ten per cent of its aid to Egypt over repeated rights violations, said it was 'disappointed' by the sentence.

'Journalists, human rights defenders, and others seeking to peacefully exercise their freedom of expression should be able to do so without facing criminal penalties, intimidation, harassment, or any other form of reprisal,' said State Department spokesman Ned Price.

The Committee to Protect Journalists decried Monday's ruling as 'unacceptable'.

The verdict 'demonstrates the lengths to which authorities are willing to go to punish these journalists for their work,' said Sherif Mansour, CPJ's Middle East and North Africa Coordinator.

CPJ considers bloggers as engaging in journalism.

"Both journalists have already

spent several years in prison on bogus charges, and authorities must release them immediately and unconditionally," Mansour added.

Behind bars again

Pre-trial detention can last two years under Egyptian law, but in practice detainees are often kept waiting behind bars longer.

Abdel Fattah was arrested in the wake of rare night-time protests prompted by an exiled construction contractor calling for the removal of Sisi on claims of corruption.

Baqer and Ibrahim were also detained in a massive crackdown.

Abdel Fattah has spent most of the past decade in jail at Tora, one of the country's most notorious prisons, after previous convictions.

His mother, mathematics professor Laila Soueif, wrote in a *New York Times* opinion piece published on Saturday that 'the outside world, once so inspired by the Egyptian revolutionaries, is looking away'.

"His crime is that, like millions of young people in Egypt and far beyond, he believed another world was possible."

"And he dared to try to make it happen."

Prolific writer Abdel Fattah's critically acclaimed essay collection 'You Have Not Yet Been Defeated' was published in October.

"At its fundamental core, his writing is attached to justice," Soueif told AFP in October when the book was released.

'Fierce repression'

Ahead of the trial session, Egypt's Foreign Ministry lambasted the German government on Saturday for a statement calling for a 'fair trial' and the release of the three dissidents.

Cairo described the German foreign ministry's call as 'a blatant and unjustified meddling in Egyptian internal affairs'.

AFP

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Cheese craft

57 Brazilian cheeses - that won medals at the biennial 'Mondial du Fromage' in Tours, France in September - put unsung Brazil, not widely known for its cheese, second only to France on the podium of the world's best

Good luck finding a GPS signal or sign to get to Rita de Cassia's secluded farm in the mountains of southeastern Brazil.

The best bet for food-lovers chasing her award-winning handmade cheese is to stop and ask for directions.

Cassia's 'Garrafo' is one of 57 Brazilian cheeses that won medals at the biennial 'Mondial du Fromage' in Tours, France in September.

That put unsung Brazil, a country not widely known for its cheese, second only to France on the podium of the world's best.

What do your cows eat that makes the cheese so delicious? - That is the question Brazil's representative at the event, Debora de Carvalho, says she got time and again from French colleagues.

The bucolic region where Cassia's farm sits, in the longtime 'queijo' (cheese) producing state of Minas Gerais, harbours a few answers.

Settled three centuries ago by colonists digging for gold, the area started producing cheese when an Italian shoemaker, Paschoal Poppa, arrived in the village of Alagoa in the early 20th century with a recipe for parmesan.

Today, the municipality of 2,700 people is home to no less than 135 cheese-makers, several of whom have won prizes at recent editions of the festival in Tours.

That is generating a nascent gastronomy tourism industry in Alagoa, whose sleepy streets are now decorated with mini-Eiffel Towers at cheese shops, celebrating the town's newfound status as a foodie destination.

Old-school methods

The prizes 'have changed our lives', says Dirce Martins, who has been making cheese here for 39 years.

"Nobody used to come here. Buyers basically paid whatever price they wanted for our cheese.

Now we have all these visitors," she says, giving a tour of the small room where she ages her multi-award-winning 'Fumace' on wooden shelves.

Her cows graze at an altitude of 1,500 metres, on otherwise untouched land rich in soil nutrients.

Working alongside her husband and son, Martins produces at most 60

smoked cheeses a day.

Cassia (32) has a similarly small operation: she and her husband, Marcos, make around 15kg of cheese a day with their 15 dairy cows, who sport names like France, Spain and Denmark.

"It's hard work - 6.00am to 10.00pm every day, rain or shine, or even pregnant," says Cassia, who is expecting her second child.

"And the competition is tough," she adds, as she shows how she and her husband artificially inseminate the cows themselves.

She learned the trade from her father-in-law.

"It became a passion," she says. "Cheese is almost a living being."

She and her husband credit the silver medal they won in France with luring the big-city suppliers who now brave the rocky valley road to their farm to buy their cheeses at 45 reais (US\$8 approx) apiece.

"It gave us a lot of visibility," she says.

'Legalise' cheese

"For a French cheese, winning a prize boosts its value by up to 20 per cent. In Brazil, the increase is 300 to 400 per cent," says Carvalho, the director of SerTao-Bras, an association that promotes Brazilian craft cheeses.

World-famous or not, small cheese producers in Brazil say they are hampered by tough regulations on animal-based food products, modeled after those in the United States, where nearly all cheese is pasteurized.

"You have to meet 900 different conditions," says Carvalho.

As a result, most cheese producers in the Alagoa region are only allowed to sell locally.

"We're pressuring the government to legalise craft cheese nationwide," says Carvalho.

In Brazil, 'you could never get a permit to make a cheese like Cabrales, from Spain, which is aged in natural caves', says Juliana Jensen, research director for booming craft cheese producer Cruzilia.

The company won a 'super gold' in France with its 'Santo Casamenteiro', a blue cheese with apricots and nuts that looks like a wedding cake.

Cruzilia, which has a line of more than 90 products, has increased production by 30 per cent in three years.

"Brazilians are starting to look within our own borders and value our flavours and traditions," says Jensen.

AFP



Marcos Rodrigo and Rita de Cassia milk cows in Alagoa, southern region of Minas Gerais. Cassia produces one of the 57 Brazilian cheeses that won medals at the biennial 'Mondial du Fromage' (AFP)



Businessman Osvaldo Martins de Barros Filho, holds an Alagoa Fumace cheese in Alagoa, southern region of Minas Gerais, Brazil (AFP)



Championship leaders Fulham stumble against Sheffield United

London, UK - Fulham missed the chance to go five points clear at the top of the Championship as they suffered a surprise 1-0 loss at home to Sheffield United on Monday.

Iliman Ndiaye's early goal at Craven Cottage meant the Blades remain unbeaten under new manager Paul Heckingbottom.

They moved up to 11th place in the table, three points off the play-offs, with their fourth win in a row.

Despite Fulham suffering their first defeat since October 2 to end a run of 11 unbeaten matches, the London club remained two points clear of Bournemouth at the top of the table.

Only the top two teams at the end of the regular season are guaranteed promotion to the Premier League.

The decisive moment of the game came in just the third



Sheffield United's Iliman Ndiaye (centre) scores his side's first goal of the match against Fulham, at Craven Cottage in London on Monday

minute when Ndiaye, receiving the ball in his own half, advanced as Tosin Adarabioyo and Tim Ream back-tracked before the forward struck an accurate shot into the bottom corner.

Sheffield United then protected their lead with aggressive defending that denied Fulham room to play.

Aleksandar Mitrovic was forced to drop deeper to get possession but the Fulham favourite did latch onto a Kenny Tete pass in the 19th minute only for his shot on the run to go wide of the target.

Fulham brought on Tom Cairney at half-time but the presence of an extra playmaker did not lead to any clear chances.

With 15 minutes left, Mitrovic's shot was easily dealt with by Blades keeper Wes Foderingham before the Serb went close with another shot that hit the underside of the bar.

AFP

Manchester United reopen training ground

London, UK - Manchester United on Tuesday reopened their Carrington training ground following a coronavirus outbreak that forced the postponement of two Premier League matches.

United closed Carrington for an initial 24 hours eight days ago and their matches at Brentford and at home against Brighton were subsequently called off.

'Manchester United's players have started a return to training at Carrington on a staggered basis,' the club said.

'The complex was closed for first-team operations last week due to a COVID-19 outbreak at the club but opened again (on Tuesday) morning. Hence, this will now give interim manager Ralf Rangnick and his squad time to prepare for our next fixture - the Premier League meeting with Newcastle United at St James' Park on Monday, December 27.'

The Premier League announced that it would continue with its schedule despite widespread coronavirus outbreaks.

AFP

Shiffrin cruises to victory in giant slalom

Courchevel, France - Mikaela Shiffrin won Tuesday's giant slalom in Courchevel, France, to take the overall World Cup lead from Italian Sofia Goggia.

After taking her career World Cup win haul to 72 the American then warned: "We're just starting."

Shiffrin, who led by almost three-quarters of a second after the first run, was able to ski conservatively as she closed the second run, finishing with a combined time of 2 min 15.35 sec to finish 0.86sec ahead of Swede Sara Hector.

Swiss Michelle Gisin, who was second after the first run, finished third at 1.08sec.

Goggia, who started the day leading both the overall and giant slalom standings, skied out on



Mikaela Shiffrin in the finishing area of the FIS Ski World Cup Giant Slalom event on Tuesday (AFP)

the second run. Austria's double world ski champion Katharina Liensberger and Swiss star Lara Gut-Behrami both missed the race after being sidelined by positive coronavirus tests.

Shiffrin's victory at Courchevel last year was her first after the death of her father.

"Today was really quite a difficult day," she said at the finish.

For Shiffrin, who is skiing in the speed disciplines as well as the slaloms this season, it was a 14th race in just over a month.

"After the last weeks, pushing the schedule hard, it's been a lot just to get here. I'm not full tank just now," she said, adding: "We're just starting."

"I felt like a skier some of my best skiing and some of my toughest skiing today and that's really incredible."

For both Gisin, who wept as she crossed the line, and Hector it was a first podium place of the season.

AFP

Napoli's Osimhen 'available' for Nigeria at AFCON in Jan



Napoli's Nigerian forward Victor Osimhen shoots to score a goal during the UEFA Europa League match against Legia Warsaw (AFP)

Milan, Italy - Victor Osimhen said on Tuesday that he will be available to play for Nigeria at the Africa Cup of Nations despite currently being out of action while recovering from a smashed cheekbone.

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

But the 22-year-old insisted he would be ready to travel to Cameroon with the Super Eagles.

"I will be available for AFCON unless I am not among the players picked to represent NIGERIA," Osimhen said on Twitter.

Osimhen is currently training for Napoli while wearing a protective facemask and waiting for the go-ahead to recommence playing earlier than expected.

He suffered the fractures following a clash of heads with

Inter defender Milan Skriniar, and had titanium implants placed in his cheekbone and eye socket.

The Cup of Nations is gearing up for its start next month against a backdrop of persistent rumours that it could be called off or postponed after already having been delayed by a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last week Europe's top clubs threatened to refuse to release their African players for the event due to concerns over the

COVID-19 health protocol.

Many of Africa's leading players are based at clubs in Europe, with Napoli also having Senegal captain Kalidou Koulibaly and Cameroon midfielder Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa on their books.

On Sunday night Napoli coach Luciano Spalletti described the Cup of Nations as an 'invisible monster' that 'makes your players vanish from the dressing room'.

AFP

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1000 athletes from all over the world to take part in Oxy Mountain Run in Wadi Bani Awf

The Oxy Mountain Run in Wadi Bani Awf in the Wilayat of A'Rustaq will be flagged off on Friday with 1000 participants from all over the world taking part in this big event.

The race will start from Wadi Bani Awf School and follow the dirt road of Wadi Bani Awf. The participants will go through a mountain track and then return to the starting point covering 50km.

The race is organised by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in cooperation with Occidental Oman.



The Ministry aims to organise such races in each governorate taking advantage of the

topographical diversity of each governorate, said a statement. Oman is among the best coun-

tries in the world in terms of environmental and terrain diversity.

The race is considered a long run marathon, which is among extreme sports of endurance for long distances that range between 50km to 200km, and sometimes extending up to 250km.

Such marathons can be continuous or divided into stop points. The races test the participants' endurance, vitality, as well as physical and mental fitness.

ONA

S African captain seeks to block out 'bad news' ahead of India series



Johannesburg, South Africa - South Africa captain Dean Elgar said on Tuesday that his players had turned a stream of 'bad news' about the country's cricket into an advantage by forming a strong bond within their dressing room.

The 34-year-old leads his Proteas team into the first Test against India on Sunday against a backdrop of administrative instability, accusations of racism and the loss of key strike bowler Anrich Nortje.

"We've kind of gotten used to some bad news around us, the last year, year-and-a-half," Elgar told a press conference.

"As a players group, we adapt to it accordingly.

"It's not ideal to have these headlines coming up, we just want to focus on our cricket, playing a really tough series against India."

Cricket South Africa (CSA) announced on Monday that director of cricket Graeme Smith and Proteas head coach Mark Boucher will face formal hearings into claims of racial discrimination.

CSA also said that the three-match series and the ODI series which follows will be played behind closed doors because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

"What happens off the field is irrelevant now," said Elgar who did not refer directly to the CSA announcement about Smith and Boucher.

"We've been through such bad times that we've formulated such a good bond within our group.

"Our culture has been tested



Injured Nortje out of series

Johannesburg, South Africa - The South African cricket team suffered a blow on Tuesday when fast bowler Anrich Nortje was ruled out of the three-match Test series against India.

Cricket South Africa announced that Nortje had not recovered from an unspecified 'persistent injury'.

Nortje, who is capable of bowling in excess of 150km/h, has taken 46 wickets in ten Tests since the start of the 2019/20 season, 16 more than any of his teammates. He was named South Africa's cricketer of the year in May.

Nortje's injury opens the door for Duanne Olivier to return to the Test team after an absence of more than two years during which he played English county cricket for Yorkshire as a Kolpak player.

With seven other fast bowlers in the squad for the series, no replacement will be called up for Nortje.

Jhye Richardson relieved with five-for after 'tough' first innings in Adelaide

Jhye Richardson's return to Test cricket could not have gone much better, taking a five-wicket haul in the fourth innings to help Australia claim a 2-0 Ashes series lead in Adelaide. But his reaction in the aftermath said a lot about his character.

"More of a relief than anything," Richardson said. "Especially after the first innings having a bit of a tough time of it out there, to come out again and most importantly get the win. It's nice to make a contribution as well, but there's no better feeling a Test win."

He also knows that a Test match five-for may not be enough to keep him in the team for the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne, with Pat Cummins certain to return and Josh Hazlewood pushing to be fit as he recovers from a side strain.

"The beauty of Australian cricket at the moment is we've got fast-bowling stocks for days," Richardson said. "I think that's a wonderful problem for the selec-



Australia's paceman Jhye Richardson (right) shouts an unsuccessful appeal, on the fourth day of the second Test at Adelaide Oval (AFP)

tors and JL [Justin Langer] to have. Whatever happens, happens. I had an unfortunate first innings and then bowled a little bit better second innings. I'm happy to go either way. As long as we're winning, then that's all we can ask for."

Richardson (25) marks himself harder than most young fast

bowlers. He is a deep thinker and a perfectionist in terms of his craft.

After nearly three years out of Test cricket following a shoulder dislocation that kept him out of the 2019 World Cup and the Ashes series that followed, and multiple surgeries thereafter that saw him nursed back through

I said to Starcy at mid-on [that] I'm just going to charge in here, [and] try and get some air-speed because I was getting annoyed at the speed gun

JHYE RICHARDSON

Sheffield Shield cricket while still being unable to throw with any venom in the field, Richardson could have forgiven himself for his first-innings figures in his first Ashes appearance.

But the disappointment was written all over his face. Having bowled superbly on the second night, repeatedly beating Haseeb Hameed's outside edge and bowling three consecutive maidens, he returned on the third afternoon to leak over four runs an

over without taking a wicket.

"I think getting back into the intensity of Test cricket, it's obviously a step above playing domestic cricket," Richardson said. "You can often find yourself - if you haven't played for a while - trying too hard because you feel like you need to impress. But having said that, I don't think I bowled too badly."

Richardson went away and came back a different bowler in the second innings, something which his stand-in captain Steven Smith noted having never played with him before.

"I think the way Jhye adapted throughout this match was really pleasing," Smith said. "First innings we made a concerted effort to try and get the ball a little bit fuller, and we went for quite a few runs in that first session but I wasn't too disappointed with that. We were still a long way in front of the game and we tried to bowl a lot fuller than England perhaps did."

Cricinfo



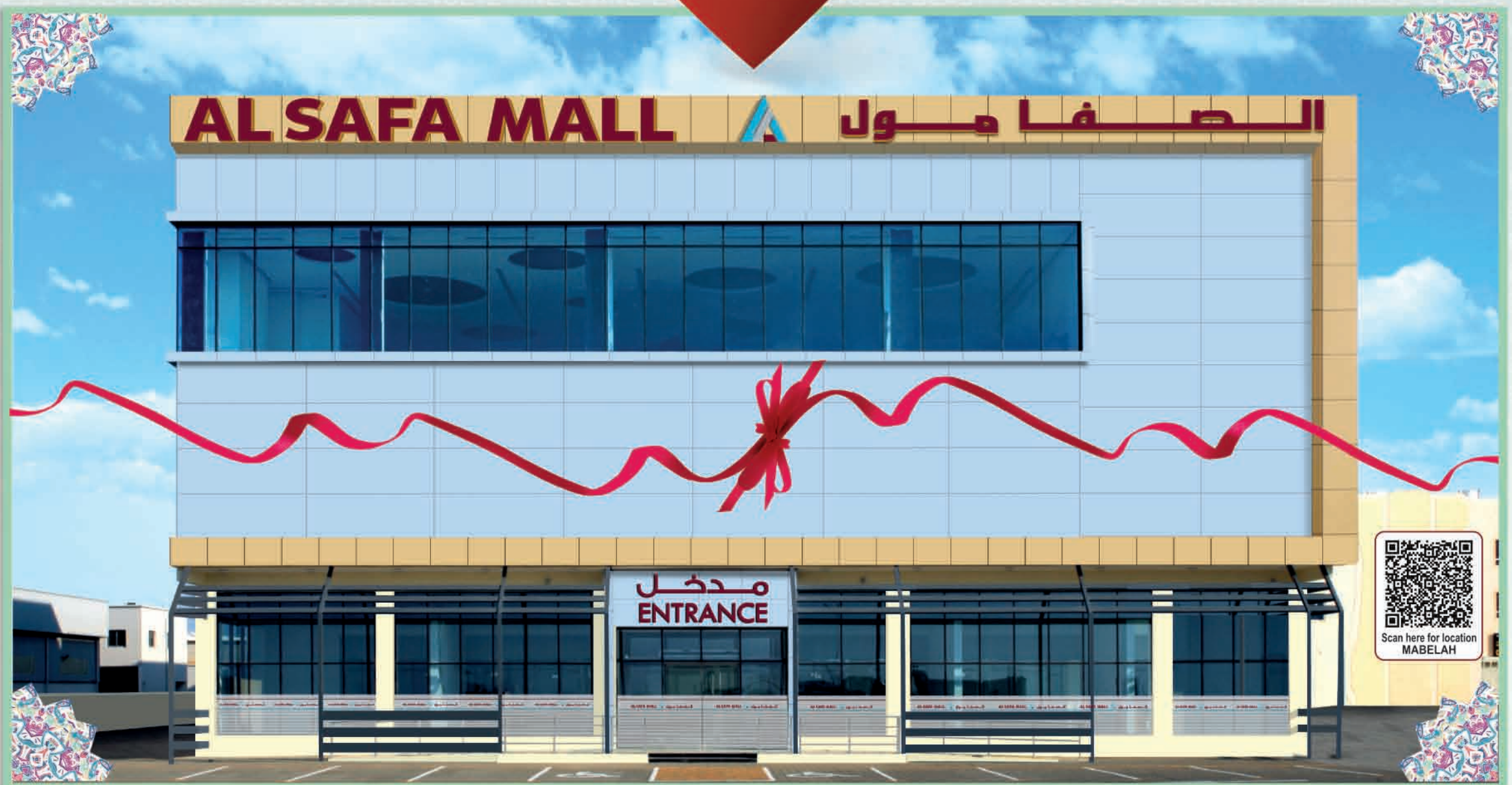


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