

Will new appraisal mode improve govt services?

Shaddad al Musalmi
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) rolled out a new programme called Individual Performance Measurement and Institutional Proficiency System (Ejada) - an appraisal system - starting on Sunday covering 175,000 employees in 57 state units.

According to MoL, it has 565 trainers to develop job plans in government institutions to achieve the goals of the appraisal system and raise performance of employees. It organised 2,312 training workshops that benefited more than 130,000 employees.

"The programme aims to improve the quality of services provided to citizens, and enhance the community's confidence in the government's capabilities, in addition to setting employees' duties and responsibilities in line with Oman Vision 2040," Abdulaziz Darwish al Zadjali, assistant director of communications at MoL, told *Muscat Daily*.

Zadjali informed that evaluation in the new system will be done quarterly, half-yearly and annually. "Productivity will be measured electronically based on



Productivity will be measured electronically based on objectives and key results employing a well-defined methodology

ABDULAZIZ
AL ZADJALI

MoH launches Ejada system

Ejada for measuring performance - 'a system to measure individual performance and institutional proficiency' - was launched under the auspices of H E Dr Ahmed Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, in the presence of H E Dr Fatima

Mohammed al Ajmi, Undersecretary for Administrative, Financial and Planning Affairs, several senior ministry officials, and members of the Ejada team at the Ministry of Health (MoH) headquarters on Sunday.

objectives and key results employing a well-defined methodology; it will be transparent and fair. Employees will be evaluated as per given assignments and their delivery," he said.

The new system will not punish under-performing employees, but will work to raise their efficiency, develop their capabilities,

and address the challenges they face. "Specifically, the system will give every employee a chance to achieve their goal in the required time. If the system gives you work and you finish in time, you will be rewarded. Everyone will monitor his or her work," Zadjali said, adding that it links human capital governance with produc-

tivity and incentives.

To measure institutional proficiency, the main criteria include leadership, strategic planning, human capital, institutional culture, partnerships, resources, innovation, customer satisfaction, governance, environment and society. There are 21 sub-criteria to measure institutional proficiency, including job satisfaction, beneficiary satisfaction and reports of other government units.

With the new programme in place, citizens are likely to have fewer complaints of non-accomplishment of given tasks. "There are basic issues faced by people who contact government organisations for their services. The new programme will make the work quicker because employees would want to meet their deadline and prove their sense of responsibility towards their tasks," said Mohammed al Balushi, a public relations officer of a private company.

Muscat-based Hilmi al Kindi is hopeful that the system will enhance government services. "Appraisals, evaluations and assessments are required in all aspects of our lives and time will tell if the new system improves government services," he said.



OCCI sets up international company to attract investments in Musandam

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Musandam branch of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) has announced the setting up of Musandam International Investment Company. It is the largest Omani joint stock company in terms of the number of shareholders.

The Board of Directors of OCCI's Musandam branch launched an electronic form on Sunday allowing shareholders to register with the company. Registration will be open for a month.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Raed bin Mohammed al Shehhi, chairman of OCCI's branch in Musandam, said, "The company aims to develop the private sector by creating a strong entity that leads the progress of the local economy in the governorate. It will become an investment source for the people of the province and maximise the local added value of the projects implemented and investment in



many sectors that the governorate needs."

The company will be the first closed joint stock company in the sultanate and all procedures for its establishment, registration of shareholders, electronic signature on legal documents and payments will be done electronically.

The company will target several projects, involving food security, natural resources, heavy equipment, contracting and building materials, fisheries, transportation and more.

In August 2021, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) announced that it will allocate 31

plots of land in Musandam to attract foreign investment and signed usufruct agreements to set up three 3-star hotels in the wilayats of Madha and Bukha.

According to MoHT, Omran has recently implemented the first phase of an adventure centre in Musandam to set up a 1,800m zipline beginning from the top of a mountain at a height of 250m above sea level.

Other projects undertaken by MoHT in the northernmost governorate include a visitor centre at an archaeological site of Dibba with funding from OQ company. The project will also include a museum.

RO1,000 fine for violating dishdasha specifications

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, has issued Ministerial Decision No 209/ 2021 related to an Omani standard.

The decision confirmed that the Omani standard specification No 1639/2021 OS is binding for specifications of the Omani dishdasha.

The decision indicated that there is an administrative fine not exceeding RO1,000 for anyone who violates the provis-

ions of this decision, and the fine can be doubled in the event of a repetition of the violation.

The decision was issued in December 30, 2021, and takes effect three months after the date of its publication in the Official Gazette.



Forum to support persons with disabilities in June



MSX gains 13% in 2021, but lags behind GCC markets

Portal for endowment partnerships launched

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Imam Jabir Bin Zaid Waqf Foundation (JBZF) launched an Omani endowment partnership portal named 'Waqf' on Sunday. It aims to enhance the concept of community-based endowment service and offer digitalised solutions to streamline humanitarian donations.

The portal was unveiled during the first endowment forum organised by JBZF in cooperation with the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. The event was held under the auspices of Sheikh Al Fadhli Mohammed al Harthi, Secretary General of the

Council of Ministers.

Waqf will serve as a platform for endowment establishments in the sultanate. The portal will streamline donations made through Omani endowment organisations.

Commenting on the launch of the portal, His Eminence Sheikh Ahmed Hamad al Khalili, Grand Mufti of the sultanate and founder of JBZF, said, "While Infaq - spiritual spending for the sake of the Almighty Allah - is deemed one of the tasks that brings one closer to Allah, the best Infaq is the type of endowment that lasts even after one passes away."

COVID-19 UPDATE

Muscat - The Ministry of Health (MoH) registered 343 new cases of COVID-19 on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, in addition to one related death. This takes the total number of positive cases in Oman to 305,832. The number of deaths has increased to 4,117, and the total number of recoveries to 300,488. According to MoH data, 119 new cases were recorded on Thursday, 102 cases on Friday and 122 cases on Saturday.

**343
NEW
CASES**

H H SAYYID BEL'ARAB OPENS ASTRONOMY EXHIBITION 2022



H H Sayyid Bel'Arab bin Haitham bin Tarik presided over the opening of the Astronomical Photography Exhibition 2022 on Sunday. It was organised by Oman Astronomical Society in cooperation with the History of Science Centre at German University of Technology in Oman. The exhibition included astronomy images by 20 photographers, at the end of which, H H Sayyid Bel'Arab felicitated the participants (ONA)



NEW YEAR, NEW BEGINNING

How was 2021 and what are your expectations from 2022?

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Sajid al Hooti
Businessman

2021 was not a good year for me for business. Sales were poor as people were scared to come to shop and also the city was under frequent lockdowns. However, I remain optimistic for 2022 and I think that my business will flourish once again. Now, we are all vaccinated and things will definitely get better.



Abhirup Roy
Private sector employee

The last year was bad globally but fortunately I didn't suffer any major losses. I look forward to 2022 with major changes in both personal and professional lives. My startup got held up due to lack of funds. I hope things will fall back in place once again.



Sultan al Rawahi
Private sector employee

2021 was a difficult year for all of us because of COVID-19. A lot of people were affected both socially and professionally. For me personally, my house was burgled thrice. I hope in 2022 things will be great and the government adopts strong measures to strengthen the economy.



Govind Arjan
Private sector employee

The last year witnessed lives being lost, livelihoods destroyed, and the world upended. Now, with cases rising once again, a feeling of deja vu is creeping in. However, quite the eternal optimist, I feel 2022 will be far better than 2021. People have to learn to 're-live' their lives and adjust to the 'new normal'.



Sulaiman Abdullah
Private sector employee

I am glad to say that 2021 was not as scary as 2020 and I am hopeful things will be better in 2022. I believe the government is doing its best to do all it can for the betterment of people and 2022 looks brighter economically since all businesses are open.



Farooq Ahmed
Private sector employee

I am a little worried about COVID-19 cases rising once again but I am sure that the authorities are monitoring the situation, so I am optimistic that the pandemic's impact on 2022 will not be as bad as it was in 2021.



? **NEXT ON
YOUR SAY**

Will the new appraisal system for public sector employees introduced by the Ministry of Labour improve government services?

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

Seeb records 102mm rain in 3 days



RECOMMENDATIONS DURING HEAVY RAINS

- ▶ Do not risk crossing flooded wadis.
- ▶ Stay away from valleys, streams and low-lying areas.
- ▶ Avoid going close to the edge of wadis and heights.
- ▶ Monitor children and do not allow them to go near water bodies.
- ▶ Switch off any unnecessary electrical appliances and switches.
- ▶ Stay away from streetlight poles and watch out for any hanging wires.
- ▶ Follow the weather forecasts from official sources.
- ▶ Avoid leaving the house if you are suffering from any respiratory diseases (like asthma).



Our correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has stated that Seeb wilayat in Muscat governorate recorded the highest rainfall in the sultanate in the period from December 30, 2021, to January 1, 2022.

MAFWR weather stations registered 102mm of precipitation in Seeb, 75mm in Mahdah,

51mm in Amerat, 49mm in Shinas, 46mm in Ibra, 44mm in Liwa and 43mm in Khabourah.

In the wilayats of Nakhal and Bidbid, 40mm rainfall was recorded, 37mm in Sahem, 33mm in Buraimi, 32mm in Samail, and 30mm in Quriyat and Suwaiq.

The wilayats of Rustaq, Yanqul, Jalan Bani Bu Ali and Khasab recorded 25mm of precipitation.

Clean-up operations

Several teams of Muscat Municipality engaged in clean-up operations in various wilayats of the governorate, while the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) urged citizens and residents not to risk crossing valleys.

CDAA called on parents to monitor children and keep safe from water bodies in order to prevent accidents. Over 22 people

have been rescued during the recent rains, according to the authority.

The weather is expected to be cloudy over most governorates with the trough of low pressure continuing until January 5, according to the latest weather update from the National Multi Hazard Early Warning System.



National Museum unveils 4 postage stamps on its fifth anniversary

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The National Museum, in cooperation with Oman Post (a member of Asyad Group), inaugurated four postage stamps celebrating the fifth anniversary of its public opening. The postage stamps have images of unique artefacts dedicated to various epochs of the glorious history of Oman, the land and its people.

H E Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism and chairman of the board of trustees of National Museum, signed the first day covers.

The stamps include a picture of the oldest incense burner discovered in the sultanate dating back to about 2,000 years BC, one of the main findings of the Majan civilisation, as well



as a Saidi-style dagger belonging of Sultan Turki bin Said al Busaidi, bearing its authenticity made of pure silver with a sheath that preserves tradition and remains a noble symbol. In addition, the throne of the Late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, which bears the engraved letter 'Qaf' on top and finally



the original will letter of the Late Sultan Qaboos, which illuminates a bright future to the sultanate under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

Jamal bin Hassan al Moosawi, secretary-general of the National Museum, said, "The inauguration of the



postage stamps are to celebrate five years full of achievements that we are proud of as we make our way with young Omanis to the bright places of the renewed Renaissance of the sultanate. The inauguration of these stamps is the result of a cooperation between the National Museum and



Oman Post in order to perpetuate the treasures of Omani heritage that are preserved by postage stamps, and to convey the depth of the Omani cultural heritage to the farthest corners of the earth."

Sayyid Nasr al Busaidi, general manager of Customer Experience at

Oman Post and Asyad Express, said, "Through these commemorative stamps, we aim to highlight the beauty of Omani history and civilisation for future generations. At Oman Post, we have always been proud of our national role in documenting history in a distinctive way and immortalising national personalities and achievements. We hope that stamp collectors and lovers of history and culture will enjoy this new set of stamps."

The stamps are part of a series of commemorative stamps in denominations of 500bz and 100bz, with dimensions of 3cm x 5cm, printed in offset.

The postage stamps and commemorative cards will be displayed in the Stamps and Collectibles shop of Oman Post at Opera Galleria.

Two new dams being built in N Sharqiyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has started construction work on two groundwater recharge dams in North Sharqiyah governorate with the objective of achieving self-sufficiency in water and supporting farmers.

An official from MAFWR said, "Construction works have begun on the two groundwater recharge dams. The first will be built in Wadi al Qafifa and the second in Wadi al Wrayed in the wilayat of Ibra, North Sharqiyah."

According to the ministry official, the first dam will be 122m long and 24m tall with a storage capacity of 927,000 cubic metres. The second dam will be 255m long and 18.5m tall with a storage capacity of 702,000 cubic metres.

"The project aims to raise the water level in wells and aflaj irrigation systems, support farmers and livestock breeders in these areas, and increase water sources," the official said.

He informed MAFWR is working to enhance the underground water table and preserve water resources from waste and depletion. It is also continuing water exploration and working on finding new water resources to meet the increasing needs of drinking water and water used for other indirect purposes.

Additionally, MAFWR is continuing to improve evaluation mechanisms for water resources, monitoring availability and water use data, and



The project aims to raise the water level in wells and aflaj systems and support farmers (Supplied photo)

strengthening hydrometric monitoring systems.

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), 169 dams were

registered in the sultanate at the end of 2020. These include 115 surface storage dams, 51 underground recharge dams and three protection dams.

Average rainfall in the sultanate increased by 9.2 per cent in 2020, recording precipitation of 103mm compared to 94.3mm in 2019, according to NCSI.



Forum to support persons with disabilities in June

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To create sustainable projects for persons with disabilities and support their entrepreneurial efforts, the Ministry of Labour (MoL), in cooperation with ASAAS Muscat, will organise the second edition of a forum titled Kaderoon (Able) in June 2022.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Mohammed Mustafa al Shamali, CEO of ASAAS Muscat, said, "This edition of the forum aims to assist persons with disabilities create sustainable projects and manage their own businesses. It will facilitate 250 small and mid-size enterprises (SMEs), including one to set up a factory to make chairs for persons with disabilities, a workshop to sew flags, and providing outlets in malls to sell perfumes and such items."

The first edition of Kaderoon was held in 2019 and organisers plan to hold the forum every year in cooperation with MoL, private sector companies and educational institutions to provide jobs and scholarships to persons with disabilities.

According to H H Sayyida Hujaija Jaifer al Said, chairperson of Association for the Welfare of Handicapped Children and hon-



The forum aims to create opportunities for persons with disabilities and support their projects, integrate them into the labour market, and establish an institution that will create sustainable projects for them

H H SAYYIDA HUJAIJA AL SAID

orary chairwoman of the forum, the first edition of the forum offered job opportunities to 70 persons with disabilities, training opportunities for 100, and four scholarships to pursue diplomas and graduate programmes.

"The second forum aims to create opportunities for persons with disabilities and support their projects, provide job opportunities, integrate them into the labour market, and establish an institution that will create sustainable projects for them," said H H Sayyida.

The forum will witness wide participation of government

agencies, private sector and associations engaged with people with disabilities to benefit from their capabilities in the field of education or rehabilitation.

Focused on people with physical, visual and hearing disabilities, besides MoL, several government agencies will support the forum, including the Ministry of Education and Royal Oman Police.

"We hope to obtain financial and moral support to train and rehabilitate persons with disabilities to establish SMEs and become businessmen," H H Sayyida informed.

Work starts on new fish market in Dhahirah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR), with funding from Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), has started implementing a fish market in the wilayat of Yanqul in Dhahirah governorate.

In a statement, MAFWR said the project is part of its plan to build and provide infrastructure for fish markets in all governorates of the sultanate.

Salim Ali al Omrani, director general of Directorate General of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in Dhahirah Governorate, informed that the fish market will be constructed over

1,366sqm and the project will spread over 5,329sqm.

"The project includes 24 tables for selling fish and a closed hall with 12 tables for cutting fish. It will also have a waiting room, a special hall for wholesale activities, a cold storage room equipped with modern technologies and an ice production plant of five-tonne capacity," he said.

Additionally, the market will have a special platform for loading and unloading fish and administrative offices.

"The market will provide fishermen a healthy environment to display and sell fish, and create opportunities for jobseekers in Yanqul and neighbouring areas," Omrani said.

Advanced device for cancer treatment inaugurated

The Royal Hospital recently inaugurated a heated chemotherapy infusion device for treatment of cancerous tumours



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Royal Hospital recently inaugurated a heated chemotherapy infusion device - the first advanced device in Oman for treat-

ment of cancerous tumours. It is considered one of the most important scientific discoveries to eliminate cancerous cells in the abdominal cavity after a tumour removal operation.

Dr Rashid Mohammed al

The Royal Hospital has performed 13,821 surgeries. This achievement comes in an exceptional period after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic

DR AMED AL ARAIMI

Alawi, head of the General Surgery Department at The Royal Hospital, said, "The device will replace the traditional method of injecting drugs into the abdominal cavity after an operation to remove cancerous tumours. It



will contribute to the treatment of cancerous tumours, especially colon tumours, tumours in the ovaries, and appendix. It is used for treatment of dozens of cancer cases annually. Research is ongoing to determine its effective-

ness in treating other abdominal cancers."

Dr Amed bin Khamis al Araiimi, director of the Department of Surgery, said, "The Royal Hospital has performed 13,821 surgeries including gastrointestinal, liver, glands, breast, obstetrics and gynecology, urology, dental, pediatric and vascular surgery. These numbers reflect the great role The Royal Hospital plays in dealing with various surgical cases."

Dr Araiimi stressed that this achievement comes in an exceptional period after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and mutant strains emanating from it, to confirm the hospital's readiness to deal with various surgical cases.

MARKET WATCH	
MSX30	4,146.81
FOREX RATES (RO1 equals)	
Indian Rs	193.55
Pakistani Rs	463.00
Bangladeshi Taka	222.70
Philippine Peso	132.47
Sri Lankan Rs	527.08
*Rates as on January 02 Source: xe.com	

BRIEFS

Gas platform in Iran's South Pars field out of service

A platform in Iran's largest natural gas field is out of service following a pipeline leak in Gulf waters, the Pars Oil and Gas Company reported on Saturday.

Gas leaking to the surface some 15km away from the platform had caught fire after a lightning strike, but the blaze was extinguished, it said.

'The gas transmission pipeline of platform 16 of South Pars gas field started leaking on the seabed on Friday,' said a company statement published by Shana news agency, which is affiliated with Iran's Oil Ministry.

'The location of the leak was found, all the outlets of the platform were closed, and the leak was completely contained,' said the Pars Oil and Gas Company's statement.

The platform was now 'not operational', the statement said, adding that repairs were underway.

It will take some time to get the seabed pipeline fixed, the production manager at South Pars, Alireza Ebadi, told state TV.

Iran's South Pars field, part of the world's largest natural gas condensate field, is shared with Qatar, where it is known as the North Dome field. There are 24 platforms on the Iranian side.

Iran has the world's second largest proven natural gas reserves after Russia.

MSX gains 13% in 2021, but lags behind other GCC markets

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) waved goodbye to 2021 with nearly 13 per cent annual gains, recording its first positive yearly performance since 2016.

The benchmark MSX30 index finished 2021 up by 12.87 per cent at 4,129.54 points. Amongst the sub-indices, Industrial index gained the most, closing up by 41.45 per cent for the year. Financial index rose 16.4 per cent and Services index closed up by 1.82 per cent. The MSX Shariah index ended the year up by 1.56 per cent.

Total market turnover of MSX rose to RO818mn during 2021, a sharp increase of 85.5 per cent compared with RO441mn turnover recorded in 2020. The MSX's total market capitalisation in 2021 increased by 9.1 per cent to around RO22.09bn compared with RO20.2bn a year earlier.

'The MSX30 index closed in the positive territory after having fallen for four consecutive years, from 2017 through to 2020. As



is the case with its Gulf peers, Oman's economic prospects are closely dependent on oil price movements, and this correlation is also visible in the country's stock market performance,' Ubhar Capital said in its MSX Yearly Report published on Sunday. All the GCC markets ended in the green territory for 2021 on year-on-year basis. Oman's MSX

posted relatively lower gains than all other GCC markets except for Qatar.

Within the GCC markets, the Abu Dhabi Stock Exchange gained the most, at 68.23 per cent during 2021, distantly followed by the Saudi Stock Market which rose by 29.83 per cent. Dubai Financial Market gained 28.25 per cent, Kuwait Stock Ex-

Total market turnover at the MSX rose by more than 85 per cent to RO818mn in 2021 compared with RO441mn recorded in the previous year

nine months of 2021, largely supported by financial and industrial sectors. These developments have resulted in the appreciation of the MSX30 index which rose 12.87 per cent during the year,' Ubhar Capital said.

During 2021, the Muscat Stock Exchange witnessed several fluctuations, in addition to several events during the last few months, including economic and geopolitical events affected by the fluctuations in oil prices.

Market outlook positive for 2022

In 2022, the Muscat Stock Exchange is expected to continue

moving in an upward trajectory, given the expectations that Oman's economy will improve further this year, Ubhar Capital noted.

The International Monetary Fund has forecasted Oman's real GDP to grow by 2.9 per cent in 2022 against an expected 2.5 per cent growth in 2021.

'Continued opening of the economy, rising vaccination coverage, and economic stimulus and initiatives undertaken by the government in the recent past are expected to lead to an acceleration in the economic activity,' Ubhar Capital said.

It noted that the MSX30 index will continue to stabilise in the first half of 2022 at the level of 4,000 points, technically exposing the market for corrective periods.

'In 2022, especially in the first half, we expect the main index to remain at 4,130 level (its first resistance). Once the index breaks this level, it will face the second resistance level at 4,300 points,' the report added.

Energy costs soar in 2021, fuelled by political tensions

London, UK - Energy prices soared in 2021 - with gas, oil, coal, electricity and carbon all shooting higher in large part owing to a resurgence of geopolitical tensions between producers and consumers.

The "steep rise in prices was probably the most dramatic development on the commodities markets in 2021", noted Commerzbank analyst Barbara Lambrecht.

The most spectacular surge was that of Europe's reference gas price, Dutch TTF, which hit €187.78 per megawatt hour in December - 10 times higher

compared with the start of the year. The spike has been fuelled by geopolitical tensions surrounding Russia, which supplies one third of Europe's gas.

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

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

Russian energy giant Gazprom has strongly rejected Western accusations that Moscow is limiting gas deliveries to Europe, already hit by low stocks as economies reopen from pandemic lockdowns.

Reliance on gas increased as calmer weather has reduced the availability of wind power.

Crude oil prices rocketed also in 2021, gaining more than 50 per cent as demand recovered and oil producing nations led by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies including Russia modestly boosted supplies.

It came after OPEC+ drastically slashed output in 2020 as the pandemic began to unfold, and virus-related restrictions caused demand and prices to crash.

Although crude prices have shot back up, trading above US\$75 per barrel heading into the new year, the jump 'seems almost moderate by comparison' with gas, noted Lambrecht.

US oil benchmark contract, West Texas Intermediate, reached a seven-year peak at US\$85 per barrel in October, before easing.

Soaring gas and oil prices have pushed up the cost of coal, one of the most polluting fossil fuels, at a time when countries are under pressure to increasingly switch to cleaner energy sources.

Electricity prices have also surged. Electricity for delivery in France next year rose above €450 per megawatt hour in December, four times more than in early September.

The surge in energy prices is fuelling high inflation worries as soaring costs badly affect businesses and consumers globally.

Record cargo shipped through Suez Canal last year

Cairo, Egypt - Egypt's Suez Canal Authority said the key waterway netted record revenues last year, despite the coronavirus pandemic and a six-day blockage by giant cargo ship the Ever Given.

Connecting the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, the canal accounts for roughly 10 per cent of global maritime trade and is a source of much-needed foreign currency for Egypt.

In 2021, some 1.27bn tonnes of cargo were shipped through the canal, earning US\$6.3bn in transit fees, 13 per cent more than the previous year and the highest figures ever recorded, Suez Canal Authority (SCA) chief Osama Rabie said.

The number of ships using the canal rose from 18,830 in 2020 to 20,694 in 2021, or more than 56 ships per day, the SCA said in a statement.

In March, the Ever Given super tanker - a behemoth with deadweight tonnage of 199,000 - got stuck diagonally across the canal during a sandstorm.

A round-the-clock salvage operation took six days to dislodge it, and one employee of the SCA died during the rescue operation. Egypt lost some US\$12mn to US\$15mn each day during the canal closure, according to the SCA. The Ever Given safely returned back through the canal without a hitch in August.

In November, the SCA said it will hike transit tolls by 6 per cent starting in 2022, but tourist vessels and liquefied natural gas carriers are exempted.

AFP

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EU moves to label nuclear and gas energy as 'green'

Brussels, Belgium – The European Union (EU) is planning to label energy from nuclear power and natural gas as ‘green’ sources for investment despite internal disagreement over whether they truly qualify as sustainable options.

The proposal, seen by AFP, aims to support the 27-nation bloc’s shift towards a carbon-neutral future and gild its credentials as a global standard-setter for fighting climate change.

But the fact the European Commission quietly distributed the text to member states late Friday, in the final hours of 2021 after the much-delayed document had been twice promised earlier in the year, highlighted the rocky road to draft it.

If a majority of member states back it, it will become EU law, coming into effect from 2023.

The commission confirmed on Saturday that it has started

consulting with member states on the proposal where it covers nuclear and gas energy.

‘The activities covered in this complementary Delegated Act would accelerate the phase out of more harmful sources, such as coal, and in moving us towards a more low-carbon greener energy mix,’ it said.

It said it ‘considers there is a role for natural gas and nuclear as a means to facilitate the transition towards a predominantly renewable-based future’.

France has led the charge for nuclear power – its main energy source – to be included, despite robust opposition from Austria and scepticism from Germany, which is in the process of shutting all its nuclear plants.

Germany’s Environment Minister Steffi Lemke told German media group Funke on Saturday that including gas and nuclear would be ‘a mistake’, arguing

that atomic power ‘can lead to devastating environmental catastrophes’.

Austrian Environment Minister Leonore Gewessler also criticised the project, denouncing nuclear power as ‘an energy of the past’ that was ‘too expensive and too slow’ to combat climate change.

Conditions attached

Fossil-reliant countries in the EU’s east and south have defended the use of natural gas, at least as a transitional source, even though it still produces significant greenhouse emissions.

‘It is necessary to recognise that the fossil gas and nuclear energy sectors can contribute to the decarbonisation of the Union’s economy,’ the commission proposal says.

It added that, for nuclear power, appropriate measures should be put in place for radioactive waste management and disposal.

Its proposal calls for the building of new nuclear power plants to be conditioned on permits given out before 2045, and work to extend the functioning of existing plants would need to be authorised before 2040.

For gas, it said that carbon-emission limits should be set to well below those produced by coal-burning plants, and it should only be a transitional source with plants needing building permits given before 2031.

The member states and experts consulted by the commission have two weeks to demand revisions to the proposal before a final draft is published in mid-January.

The European Parliament would then have four months to either approve or reject the text with a simple vote.

AFP

Bitcoin faces uncertain 2022 after record year

London, UK – The price of bitcoin hit record highs in 2021 thanks to support from traditional finance, but cryptocurrency specialists are struggling to predict next year’s outcome for the volatile sector.

Having more than trebled in value to US\$60,000 between December 2020 and April, bitcoin has lost some shine to trade at under US\$50,000 heading into the new year.

“The current choppy and directionless price action with a possibility of further pressure to the downside has introduced a lot of uncertainty to the digital asset market,” noted Loukas Lagoudis, executive director at cryptocurrency investment fund ARK36.

He added, however, that ‘sustained adoption of digital assets by institutional investors and their further integration into the legacy financial systems will be the main drivers of growth of the crypto space’ during 2022.

Bitcoin’s rise in 2021 coincided with Wall Street’s growing appetite for cryptocurrency. The record high in April occurred with the stock market debut of cryptocurrency exchange Coinbase.

October’s peak above US\$66,000 followed the launch of a bitcoin futures exchange-traded fund (ETF), or type of financial instrument, on the New York Stock Exchange.

Tesla boss Elon Musk helped the market rise – and fall – with controversial tweets about cryptocurrencies. The move by El Salvador in September to make bitcoin a legal tender also made an impression.

But pressure has come from China’s crackdown on the trad-



ing and mining of cryptocurrencies, while the risk of wider regulatory action, from the likes of Europe and the United States, weighs on bitcoin.

“There is no certainty in crypto, never mind regulation,” said Huong Hauduc, general counsel at digital assets exchange Bequant.

Pressure has come from China’s crackdown on the trading and mining of cryptocurrencies, while the risk of wider regulatory action, from the likes of Europe and the US, weighs on bitcoin

“However one thing is certain, the voices calling for crypto regulation, whether it be for tighter consumer protection or just clarity of the rules for institutions, are getting much louder.”

Created following the 2008 global financial crisis, bitcoin ini-

tially promoted a libertarian ideal and aspired to overthrow traditional monetary and financial institutions such as central banks.

In more recent times, climate change watchers have shone a spotlight on the huge amount of electricity used to power computers required to unearth new bitcoin tokens.

Bitcoin is at risk of increased competition as it enters 2022, especially from its closest rival ethereum, according to some analysts.

In November, Twitter co-founder and CEO Jack Dorsey announced his departure from the social media platform, leaving him to concentrate on his digital payments firm as it looks to expand into cryptocurrency.

For now, bitcoin remains the dominant player.

According to the specialised site CoinGecko, the cryptocurrency sector has a market value totalling US\$2.36tn, with bitcoin worth a combined US\$900bn.

For analyst Frank Downing, ‘bitcoin’s reluctance to evolve its design’ compared to the likes of ethereum, is in fact ‘a feature that provides the stability and consistency required to serve as a true global money’.

AFP

Telecom giant Huawei’s revenues fall 29% in 2021

Beijing, China – Chinese telecom giant Huawei said on Friday its annual revenue had fallen by nearly a third from the previous year, as it continued to be weighed down by US sanctions that have hit its smartphone sales.

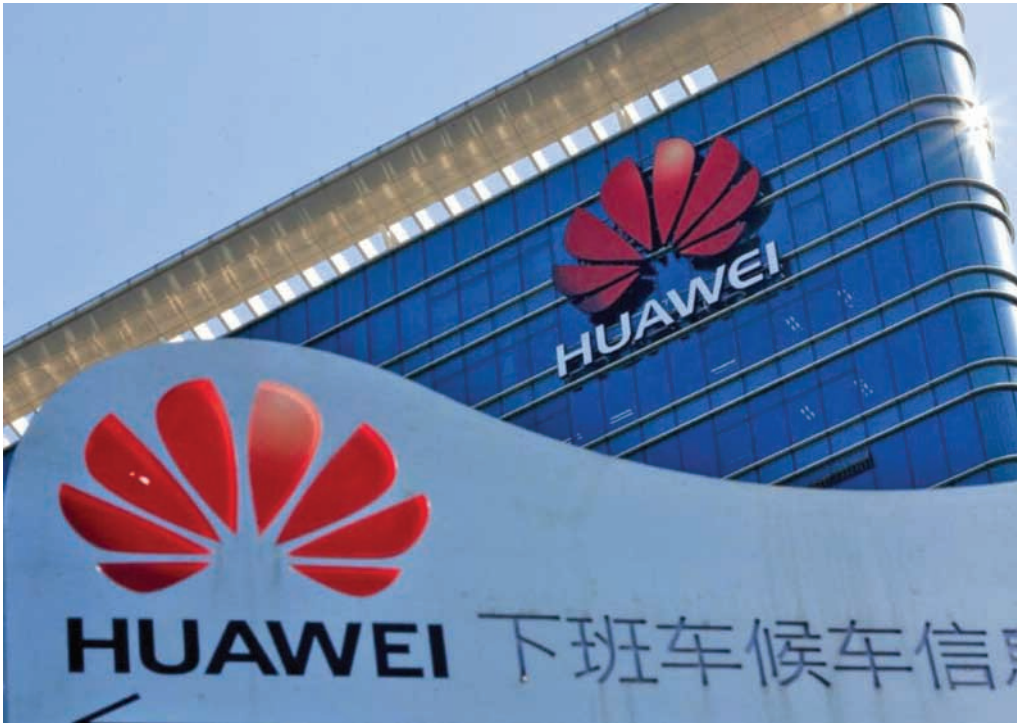
Huawei has been caught in the crossfire of a US-China trade and technology rivalry after the administration of former president Donald Trump moved to cripple the company over concerns it could pose a cybersecurity and espionage threat.

The firm’s revenue for this year fell by 29 per cent year-on-year to 634bn yuan (US\$99.5bn), said rotating chairman Guo Ping in an annual new year message.

“In 2021, despite all the trials and tribulations, we worked hard to create tangible value for our customers and local communities,” Guo said.

“We enhanced the quality and efficiency of our operations, and expect to round off the year with a total revenue of 634bn yuan.”

He added that the telecom carrier segment had ‘remained



stable’ and ‘overall performance was in line with our forecasts’.

Huawei’s revenue has fallen in 2021 due in part to the offloading of its budget phone brand Honor, which was sold late last year.

Huawei is not publicly listed, and the message did not give any other financial specifics.

Guo said the company was on a ‘bumpy, but rewarding’ road, adding that 2022 will come with ‘its fair share of challenges’.

Huawei’s travails have forced it to quickly pivot into new business lines including enterprise computing, wearables and health tech, technology for intelligent

vehicles, and software.

The United States has barred Huawei from acquiring crucial components such as microchips and forced it to create its own operating system by cutting it off from using Google’s Android operating system.

This month, the company

launched a new foldable phone and said 220mn Huawei devices were running its HarmonyOS system.

The group is the world’s biggest supplier of telecoms network gear and was once a top-three smartphone producer along with Apple and Samsung.

But it has fallen well down the smartphone ranks owing to US pressure.

In October, the group said its January-September sales volume had fallen 32 per cent.

But a major complication for the company was solved this year with the return to China of chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou, the daughter of Huawei founder Ren Zhengfei.

She spent nearly three years under house arrest in Canada on a US extradition warrant, which China said was motivated by politics.

Meng was released a month ago after US prosecutors announced an agreement under which fraud charges were to be suspended and eventually dropped.

AFP



Bank Muscat's Baituna home finance, customers' first choice



Abdullah Tamman al Maashani

Every New Year comes with new plans and dreams, like owning a house that can warmly bring together family members. Throughout all these years, Bank Muscat, the leading financial institution in the sultanate, managed to help turning thousands of dreams into reality through Baituna home finance.

It has been steadily attracting large numbers of customers across Oman for its competitive features and offers that go in line with Bank Muscat's customer-centric vision.

The bank has been providing financing products to a wide range of customers, both Omanis and residents, facilitated by its large network of 174 branches.

Thus, customers can easily visit any branch or apply for home finance through any of the dedicated Baituna Sales Centres at Qurum, Ma'abela, Nizwa, Salalah, Barka, Sur, Saham, Sohar, Ibra, Buraimi and Ibra.

In line with the vision 'To serve you better, everyday', Bank Muscat has attractive offers aligned to the customers' unique needs.

It should be noted that Bank Muscat offers very attractive in-



terest rates and a tenor up to 25 years.

Omanis employees of government and semi-government institutions as well as Tier 1 companies are eligible to apply for home finance products and enjoy the banking facilities.

Baituna home finance is available for salaried government employees with a minimum salary of RO250 and minimum service of 3 months for up to 25 years of home financing, while employees of Tier 1 private sector companies with a minimum salary of RO500 and minimum 6 months service, are eligible for

home loans having a tenure of up to 25 years. Loans of up to RO500,000 are available through Baituna, subject to the applicant fulfilling the relevant criteria. Easy and convenient credit approval can be obtained at any of the dedicated Baituna Sales Centres or at branches across Oman.

Speaking about Baituna, Abdullah Tamman al Maashani, general manager - Products, Bank Muscat, said, "Since its launch, we have seen the demand for Baituna home finance and it became the customers' first choice when they think of

buying a house or a land."

"During this season and the active movement in real estate sector, we anticipate a higher demand for our home finance. The bank is fully prepared to receive its customers' application for our product and we hope that they will enjoy the benefits it provides."

"We call upon our valued customers to utilise these benefits and fast processing procedures to finance their dream homes," Maashani added.

Bank Muscat is always committed to supporting the real estate sector, which contributes

substantially to the sultanate's economic growth.

Customers can use the bank's Baituna financing facilities to construct or purchase new homes as well as land for residential use. Bank Muscat customers can take advantage of the fast processing of applications across the bank's extensive network of branches and dedicated Sales Centers and the excellent insurance coverage for their financing.

Flexible payment options and simple documentation makes Baituna the leading home finance facility in the sultanate.



CCED takes part in Oman Energy Forum

CC Energy Development (CCED) managing director Walter Simpson participated in the 8th Oman Energy Forum 2021, which brought together a host of experts to discuss the water-energy-food (WEF) nexus in Oman under the theme 'How to find Sustainable and Holistic Solutions for Oman to Achieve Water-Food-Energy Security?'. During the virtual workshop, participants discussed how all sectors should work towards the common goal of efficiently managing the WEF nexus.

The discussions highlighted the importance of the nexus at the national and Governorates levels in Oman. In addition, participants discussed the reciprocal effects between the nexus and long-term growth trends.

Another key topic the forum explored is the need to set the right incentives for foreign direct investment and how to create an environment conducive to the formation and/or transformation of enterprises on a sustainable basis.

Speaking during the forum, Simpson highlighted that the energy industry has a key role to play and it is right in the centre of change and what is required is real intention and ownership from all stakeholders to come together, work as one team to address challenges and leverage opportunities.

Simpson said, "The hydrocarbons sector is resourceful and brings a lot of value to the table. We need to build trust with all stakeholders and we can achieve that by reducing our emissions and being transparent about the fact that we are working hard to do that."

"It's about managing water sources effectively, and that may

be reusing it or ensuring that saline water doesn't contaminate areas."

"It's also about being responsible with these resources and above all, I think it's about working with the community and implementing solutions. This will ultimately help all industries across different areas of Oman."

By 2050, experts anticipate the world's population to reach 9bn. By then, the demand for water is expected to raise by 55 per cent and demand for food by 60 per cent.

Experts also expects the world economy to be four times larger than today and that could be using up to 80 per cent more energy. According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), access to WEF is linked throughout the world and play an important role in sustainable development, poverty reduction and human well-being. The Water-Energy-Food (WEF) Nexus Index is a global composite indicator that aggregates 21 globally available indicators. The WEF Nexus Index value for Oman is 54.8, placing the nation in the 85th position for the countries assessed in 2021.

Simpson concluded, "Undoubtedly, as an industry we've been very creative and we've solved some very difficult problems over the years. One of the biggest tools available to us and I don't think it's really being explored to its full potential is digitisation and using that data to get the needed efficiency when managing the WEF nexus and this will in turn secure and manage the supply of these resources by strengthening synergies and reducing trade-offs amongst various sectors."

Omani business delegation to visit Pakistan

A 30 member high powered business delegation headed by Eng Redha Juma Muhammad Ali al Saleh, chairman, Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry will be visiting Pakistan from January 4-9, 2022.

The high powered business delegation comprises leading Omani as well as Pakistani businessmen representing sectors such as livestock and meat, textile and garments, fruits, vegetables/food stuff, pharmaceutical and surgical instruments, real estate, furniture

and furnishing and marble, tourism etc.

During their stay in Pakistan, the delegation will be calling on Federation of Pakistan Chamber of Commerce & Industry (FPCCI), Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI), Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP), Islamabad Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Lahore Chamber of Commerce & Industry and will also hold B2B meetings with their Pakistani counterparts.

In addition to their meetings with chambers and business leaders, the delegation will also call on Pakistan's leadership.

Pakistan and Oman enjoys highly cooperative, friendly and brotherly relations, which are spread over centuries and the visit is aimed at promoting bilateral trade, commercial and investment cooperation between Pakistan and Oman.

Oman being our maritime neighbour holds immense importance from trade, commerce, investment and connectivity as envisioned by our leadership. In order to enhance private sector cooperation, a MoU for setting up of Joint Business Council (JBC) was signed between Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce & Industry and OOCI on November 16, 2015. Under this MoU, both sides agreed to nominate members for JBC.

A high powered business delegation is arranged as part of Mission's efforts to promote economic diplomacy.

As per vision of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, there is a paradigm shift from geo-strategic to geo-economic cooperation. Connectivity being an important pillar of Prime Ministers' vision, Pakistan and Oman are strategic partners to connect each other with the region through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Exchange of such delegation will certainly assist in promoting trade, commercial and economic cooperation with Oman.

Chevrolet Traverse: Most spacious and comfortable family SUV

Offering the ultimate in space, convenience and style, the Chevrolet Traverse resonates with large families, drawn by its 3-row configuration that can accommodate eight passengers in plush comfort. Roominess aside, this popular offering from the renowned Chevy stable also comes with bold, refined looks, advanced connectivity technologies, high-class entertainments and top-of-the-line safety features - trappings that are unmatched for a mid-size SUV in its segment.

With EMI starting as low as RO225 for SLT trim which has features like leather seats and panoramic sunroof standard, the Traverse offers great value for money.

From its expansive size to its striking looks, every facet of the revamped Traverse is designed to impress.

With an overall length of 204.3 in, width of 78.6 in and height of 70.7 in, the SUV ex-



udes regal strength. These purposeful proportions are supplemented by the brand's premium

cues such as chrome accents, LED signature lighting and D-Optic LED headlamps.

Standard with the Traverse is a 3.6ltr V6 engine with nine-speed automatic transmission,

delivering 305 horsepower and 260 Nm of torque. A key feature is the new Traction Mode Select,

which allows the driver to make real-time adjustments to the vehicle's driving mode to account for varying road conditions.

If the exteriors are inspirational, the interiors are luxuriously comfortable and accommodating. With its longer wheelbase, the Traverse has few peers in its segment.

The cabin is ergonomically optimised to enhance convenience and versatility, both in terms of passenger volume and cargo room. Third-row legroom is the most spacious in its segment.

The Traverse is also designed and equipped to keep passengers connected and entertained on the road. Latest connectivity technologies include available 8-inch-diagonal MyLink infotainment systems designed to support Apple CarPlay. Passengers also have access to USB charging ports in all three seating rows, available wireless charging and steering wheel-mounted

phone and audio controls.

As with all Chevrolet models, safety takes top priority.

Traverse comes fitted with a comprehensive suite of safety technologies. Available features include Surround Vision, D-Optic LED headlamps, Lane Keep Assist with Lane Departure Warning, Front Pedestrian Braking, Rear Cross Traffic Alert, Side Blind Zone Alert and Rear Seat Reminder.

"Ample space, comfort and safety combine to make the Chevrolet Traverse a favourite with families whose lifestyles include weekend getaways or extended trips into the countryside," said Mandeep Singh, general manager, exclusive distributors of Chevrolet in the sultanate. "Coupled with a very attractive pricing, it is great value for money."

Customers can check out the stylish Traverse at any of OTE Group's Chevrolet showrooms around the sultanate.

Bank Nizwa participates in Waqf Forum

Continuing its efforts to contribute to social development, Bank Nizwa, the leading Islamic bank in the sultanate, participated in and sponsored the first Waqf Forum, which was organised by Imam Jabir Bin Zaid Waqf Foundation in cooperation with the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs at Sheraton Hotel Muscat. Aiming to empower the role of Waqf foundations in the Sultanate of Oman, this initiative comes in alignment with Bank Nizwa's commitment to support Islamic Awqaf (endowments) and develop the endowments sector in Oman, which is regarded as one of the most effective Sharia'a-compliant tools, contributing to the economic growth and social welfare.

The forum was held under the auspices of H E Sheikh al Fadl bin Mohammed al Harthy, Secretary General of the Council of Ministers, in the presence of a host of industry experts and representatives from the public and private sectors. The event focused on key topics related to Islamic endowments, including activating the partnership between endowment foundations, the mechanism of managing endowment foundations, and adopting the best practices to organise awqaf in the country, as well as reviewed regulatory and framework of Waqf investments and its related challenges.

Commenting on the forum, Khalid al Kayed, chief executive officer of Bank Nizwa said, "The Islamic Awqaf sector in the Sultanate of Oman is witnessing re-



markable developments thanks to the efforts made by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs to expand the role of community participation in developing endowments in accordance with specific governance and controls. The annual forum of Waqf foundations is an ideal and great platform that brings together industry stalwarts and experts to discuss the significance of Waqf foundations

and its roles in promoting societal development. Certainly, this forum contributed at bridging communication between the endowment foundations across the sultanate through exchanging experiences and knowledge, as well as developing some aspects related to the endowments administration and compliance in Oman."

The event witnessed the participation of Kayed in a panel discussion on the topic of 'Waqf Partnership - Cooperation and Integration', addressing the role of private sector in general and Bank Nizwa in specific in developing Waqf foundations.

The panel discussion also highlighted Bank Nizwa's efforts in developing Waqf foundations and promoting awareness on the concept and principles of Islamic Waqf, as well as discussing the challenges faced to enhance integrated roles between Waqf foundations and other entities.

The forum also carried out workshops covering a wide array of topics related to the endowment sector, including governance of endowment foundation, feasibility studies for endowment investment projects, and promotion of endowment across the country.

"Guided by the principles of Sharia'a and a firm dedication to-

wards CSR activities that serve the local community, Bank Nizwa remains at the forefront of promoting social development and investment through our impactful partnerships and programmes."

"Our sponsorship of the First Waqf Forum translates our Bank's business philosophy. As Waqf foundations have an immense impact on humanitarian causes and wellbeing of the so-

ciety at large in the recent time, it is imperative to activate the complementary role between the private sector and institutions to support and invest into Waqf foundations. We remain at the forefront in supporting the efforts of Waqf foundations endeavours to create awareness about Waqf and its role in building a sustainable society and economy."

It is noteworthy that Bank Nizwa actively fosters the sector of Waqf in the sultanate by supporting foundations through providing facilities related to opening accounts, investing funds and providing financial advice in investment projects, as well as assessing risks prior the foundations enter into Waqf investment projects.

The bank is further expanding its endeavors to invest into Islamic Waqf projects. Bank Nizwa signed MoU with Imam Jabir Bin Zaid Waqf Foundation to launch an educational platform that provides a comprehensive understanding on Waqf concepts and principles, enhancing community awareness on endowment.

As the first Islamic bank in Oman, Bank Nizwa maintains a long-standing commitment to raising awareness of the concept and principles of Islamic finance and sharing its multifaceted benefits with people across the sultanate.

The bank seeks to enhance the Islamic economy, contributing to the socio-economic development through integrated efforts between the various institutions.

NBO offers customers exclusive 10% cashback offer with OOMCO

Continuing to reward customers with convenient solutions, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has partnered with Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) to offer a 10 per cent cash back on fuel transactions.

From January 2-15, NBO customers can get up to RO5 cash back per day when topping up their tanks using NBO credit cards at Omanoil filling station across the country.

Maha al Raisi, head of Retail Products at NBO, said, "We are always looking at new ways to reward our customers for their loyalty and to add value to our range of products."

"For the next two weeks, customers can earn cash back on fuel purchases with Omanoil simply by paying conveniently



and securely using any NBO chip and pin or contactless credit card and receive 10 per cent

back by the next working day following an approved transaction."

NBO offers a range of credit cards to suite every requirement, each with unmatched benefits and lifestyle features loaded with exclusive discounts and offers which allow customers to save, earn nuqati loyalty points and win every time they use their NBO credit card.

Every NBO credit card is equipped with cutting-edge technology and leading security features to give customers a convenient and safe alternative to cash.

More details about NBO's range of products and services can be found online at www.nbo.om, by using the award-winning NBO digital banking app or in-branch at any of the 60 conveniently located branches across the sultanate.

Lord of Sipán's exhibition shows legacy of Peru at Expo 2020

The Commission for the Promotion of Peru (PROMPERÚ) announced that the Peru Pavilion installed at Expo 2020 Dubai is dazzling the world with the temporary exhibition called 'The Mochicas, masters of the desert'.

At the exhibition, international visitors can witness the replicas of the Lord of Sipán and the Old Lord of Sipán jewels made by artisans from the Lambayeque region, as well as having access to valuable information and a life-size representation of the Mochica culture's elite.

The exhibition was inaugurated on December 15, 2021 and will be held until January



31, 2022. This joint effort is organised by PROMPERÚ and the Patronato de Sipán - a non-profit association that works on research, conservation, and promotion of the archaeological heritage of northern Peru - to promote the riches found in the tomb

of the Lord of Sipán, a discovery considered one of the most significant archaeological finds of the twentieth century. To convey the spirit of this culture and its extraordinary development, six of the mannequins created by the renowned artist Edilberto Mérida Pilaes are based on physiognomic models of the descendants of the Mochica people. This work is displayed at the Peru Pavilion.

The Peruvian pavilion is presented with the concept 'Timeless Peru', which seeks to connect the present with the future and build bridges between our country and the world.

Yasir al Rumayyan appointed as president of Arab Golf Federation

Yasir al Rumayyan, who has spearheaded the meteoric growth of golf in Saudi Arabia since his appointment as the chairman of both Golf Saudi and the Saudi Golf Federation in 2018, has been announced as the president of the Arab Golf Federation (AGF).

The Arab Golf Federation was founded in 1974 and represents the collective interests of 19 member nations, whose mission, which is recognised by The R&A and Arab Olympic Committee, is to streamline governance of the game in the Arab world and enhance the overall development of golf by creating more and better playing opportunities for its members.

Speaking about his appointment to the AGF, Rumayyan said, "It is an honour for me to take on the role as AGF president. First of all, I would like to congratulate my predecessor

Sheikh Fahim bin Sultan al Qasimi on the fantastic job he has done in leading the Arab Golf Federation and thank him personally for his success in bringing the great game of golf to the Arab people. I am not only a passionate golfer, but recognise the true value the sport can deliver, across all our societies. I pledge my full commitment to focussing on how the AGF can support the game's governing bodies, in their mission to develop the game around the world, as well as mobilising our collective resources to maximise opportunities for Arab nations in our growing participation in game's global future."

Sport has been a cornerstone of Rumayyan's career and as the governor of the Public Investment Fund (PIF) - the sovereign wealth fund of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - he is responsible for the multi-billion-dollar investment in sporting events forming part of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's transformative economic and social reform blueprint



opening up the kingdom to the world. With a Harvard Business

school education and subsequent experience in wealth management and investment banking, the organisation stands to benefit from Rumayyan's business acumen as well as a passion for, and substantial professional expertise in, the development of Saudi golf.

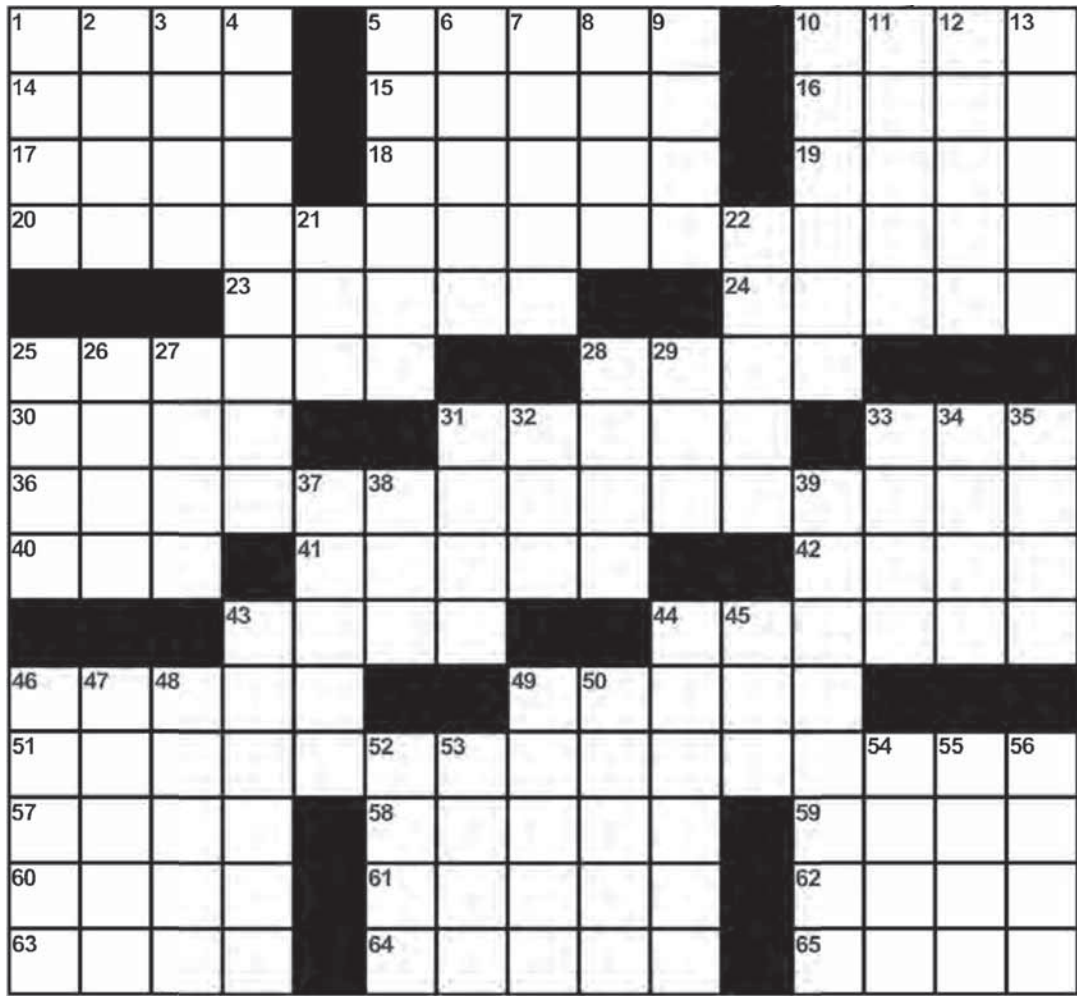
Underlining the strength and growth of golf in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the CEO and deputy chairman of both Golf Saudi and the Saudi Golf Federation, Majed al Sorour, was also appointed the AGF's secretary general. A keen golfer himself, Sorour will be looking to bring his widespread business and sporting expertise in his new role at the AGF.

Rumayyan added, "The Arab Golf Federation represents one of the most important regional clusters in not only global golf development, but worldwide professional golf. Since as far

back as the late eighties, the Middle East has become a catalyst for the game's growth and enjoys a rich heritage in promoting the sport. This is something I know all members take great pride in and is a driving force in our vision for the future."

Following his appointment as the AGF's new secretary general, Sorour said: "Thanks must go to Adel Mohammed al Zarouni, who I take over from as the Arab Golf Federation's new secretary general. I am incredibly proud to take up this new position, given the ever-increasing prominence of Saudi Arabia in the global golf industry and having already worked closed alongside His Excellency Rumayyan at Golf Saudi, I am confident that we will be able to deliver an inspired strategy for golf in the Middle East which sees the sport's continued growth in the region."

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

1) One of the common people

5) Horse habitat

10) Goalie's wear

14) Freight car hopper of old

15) "Sesame Street" resident

16) Cain's victim

17) Clickable item

18) Church tenet

19) Emulate a drunkard

20) Times 3?

23) Short choral composition

24) The nine of some batteries

25) Back out on a promise

28) King of the jungle

30) Brilliant thought

31) Emotionless, as a stare

33) Mr. Potato Head part

36) Times 3?

40) Ambulance letters

41) Tadpoles, in time

42) Lofgren who rocks with Springsteen

43) Friendly ground-up bait?

44) Shape learned in pre-school

46) Video game giant, once

49) Where babies grow

51) Times 3?

57) Remove, as a knot

58) Rugged box

59) One named in a will

60) Angler's equipment

61) Extreme hardship

62) Cogito-sum link

63) "... quam videri" (North Carolina motto)

64) Board for a manicurist

65) "General Hospital" e.g.

DOWN

1) Punxsutawney ...

2) Mathematical sets of points

3) Black, in poesy

4) Source of some fertiliser

5) Put under

6) Figurative expression

7) Gut-wrenching feeling

8) Certain citrus fruit

9) "Able to... tall buildings ..."

10) Paying customer

11) Bubbling on the stove

12) Bus station

13) Cold-weather coasters

21) "Put another _ on the fire"

22) Conjure up, as a memory

25) Customary observance or practice

26) Dutch cheese

27) Beaks

28) Scottish miss

29) Pen filler

31) "... me up, Scotty"

32) "Acid" used in some trips

33) Film with many extras

34) What cheerleaders do

35) Emerald Isle language

37) Body of values

38) Costello of old comedy

39) Betters or improves

43) Louisiana cuisine

44) Crunchy vegetable

45) Anger

46) Cloudless sky color

47) Firms up, as muscles

48) Chilean range

49) Electric bill listing

50) One-on-one teacher

52) 4,840 square yards

53) Straitlaced

- 54) "Bies" or "dynamics" prefix
- 55) Baltic port
- 56) Let slip from one's hands

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Your blunt, impetuous nature will take over now, but you won't hear any complaints from loved ones, that's for darned sure. You have a knack for saying whatever you absolutely must in such entertaining fashion that no one minds at all. And now you have the element of surprise to help you be even more interesting. As if you ever needed help in that department.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You wrote the book on loyalty, and that applies to anyone you care about, whether they're family, friends, or someone you just met who asked for your advice. You might need to exhibit that quality on the spur of the moment today, and you'll rise to the occasion beautifully. Does this mean that you'll get overly involved? Maybe, but isn't that just how you do business? All or nothing, right?

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

It's a little-known fact that you are an expert caretaker. It's not just because you can make anyone laugh at any time (and laughter really is the best medicine); you're also quite intuitive, so you know what they need and oftentimes before they do. So when a dear friend comes to you obviously worn out and in need of a helping hand, you'll be more than happy to do whatever you can to help.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The term of office of the UN Secretary-General

- a. three years
- b. four years
- c. five years
- d. six years

2. The Newspaper Paravada is taken out in

- a. London
- b. Beijing
- c. Jakarta
- d. Moscow

3. The Olympic Symbol (Summer Games) comprises five rings or circles linked together to represent

- a. the sporting friendship of all people
- b. the five continents
- c. both (a) and (b)
- d. None of the above

Answers: 1. c 2. d 3. c

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You have two options at this point. First, you can hang on to the plastic and the checkbook, even if someone is begging for them, especially if it's someone who you're sure won't give them back even upon fear of death, or even worse, being exiled from your life permanently. Second, you can resolve to set yourself a limit, stick to it, and trust only yourself to do that. Better stick with option one. Money may not be everything, but it certainly helps.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Surprises are en route. Big ones. They'll be coming to you via your career and the people involved in it. This could mean the higher-ups you've been dealing with have been less than honest about your situation, but the chances of that happening are slim, to say the least. What's more likely is that someone in a position of authority has been working a bit of magic for you from behind the scenes. Either way, get ready for a surprise.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You're a born leader. You always have been and you always will be. You always know how to handle a difficult situation. So when someone comes to you now asking that you help take charge of a difficult project that just isn't getting off the ground properly, you'll be more than happy to do it. Just be sure that what you're doing isn't interfering with your real job. Paychecks are a wonderful thing too.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

All that peace, quiet, and privacy was nice while it lasted, and you needed it, but you're on a different page now. You're ready for some excitement, and even though you have to get up tomorrow, you really won't care how late you have to stay up to have some excitement. It's a good thing you're well rested, because you'll definitely connect with at least one someone who'll help you find what you're after: Adrenaline.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

The phone will probably start ringing bright and early this morning, and you really shouldn't ignore it. Make sure your phone is not in the silent mode. There's someone due to call you who has some news to share and maybe even a romantic question to ask. Oh, and if the phone doesn't ring, don't just sit there. Make the call yourself. Who cares who makes the first move? Good connections are about to be made today.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Someone interesting, even fascinating, is right around the corner and just dying to meet you. You, of course, are always game for different folks, especially those who have a brain. So when this new person arrives, you'll probably want to clear your schedule and make sure you have time to spend with them. Do it! Oh, and don't be surprised if this thing goes on well into the next few days too.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Today's astrological menu calls for a great big helping of intrigue, mystery, and secrets of only the most delicious kind. If you're asked to keep quiet about a certain issue, you'll definitely do it. You're a pro at that sort of thing, after all and you do enjoy keeping secrets. No one says you can't enjoy being in the loop. Just try to control your facial expressions. You never were much good at poker.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

If you're in doubt about how to handle a financial situation (which means it's quite a tough situation, because you're a whiz at this type of thing), there's really only one thing to do about it: Contact the one person on this planet you trust most implicitly. Even if they're not a financial genius, you can at least be sure they'll find you someone who is. It's going to be tough at first but you will definitely find the right solution.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You're going to have to learn the delicate art of multitasking over the next couple of days, but you're as flexible as anyone could possibly be, so that won't be much of a problem. The good news is that all the lovely things you'll be juggling might include arranging to spend time with someone you cross paths with under quite "coincidental" circumstances. Of course, as you know, there really is no such thing as a coincidence.

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

R	G	U	O
K	G	E	S
F	A	E	Y
E	R	A	H

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

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

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

Victims turned activists: Iraqi women battle domestic abuse

Baghdad, Iraq - After a day's work in an Iraq public sector job, Azhar offers legal support to women who are victims of domestic abuse, something she knows well given her experience with a brutal husband.

After she was forced into marriage by family pressure, Azhar (56) battled in court for almost a decade to divorce the man who would beat her up.

"I believed I was going to die," she said, recalling one attack and showing pictures of purple bruises on her arms and legs.

"That was the moment when I decided to break my chains."

She eventually won her freedom, and the ordeal prompted her to study law.

"I felt I was weak in the face of the justice system," recalled Azhar, who heads a non-government organisation that offers legal support to victims of violence and is part of the Iraqi Women's Network coalition.

"I help any woman who is a victim of violence or in need of legal aid, so that these women become aware of their rights and can defend themselves," she said.

From marriage of minors to economic coercion, feminists and lawyers struggle to defend the rights of women in the overwhelmingly patriarchal country.

They cite regressive laws and the indifference of authorities as key obstacles.

In a country of 40mn, about 17,000 complaints of domestic violence were registered in 2021 by the Interior Ministry's family protection unit, said media official General Saad Maan.

'Victims pay the price'

The marriage of minors is on the rise in Iraq, according to a gov-



This file photo shows demonstrators in cross-out masks attending a rally for International Women's Day, in Basra on March 8 last year (AFP)

ernment survey.

For females under 18 it jumped to 25.5 per cent last year, up from 21.7 per cent in 2011.

Azhar, who did not wish her surname to be published for security reasons, was around 20 when she first got married.

But she was soon widowed and forced again into marriage seven years later.

She eventually left her abusive second husband with her eight children and filed for divorce.

The first judge knew the man and rejected the request, despite three medical certificates proving her injuries, she said.

"I will not break up families on the basis of certificates," she recalled the judge telling her.

"So what if a man beats his wife?," she quoted the judge as saying.

In cases of domestic abuse, judges often push for 'reconciliation', said the head of the family protection unit, Brigadier Ali Mohamed.

But "it is the victim who pays the price," said Hanaa Edwar who heads the Al-Amal organisation and has worked for 50 years as a rights defender.

"The justice system's considerations for affairs involving

women is much weaker than the machismo that dominates the minds of judges."

Iraq has no specific law dealing with violence against women, and the 1969 penal code contains an article that allows rapists to escape punishment if they agree to marry their victims.

Rights groups are seeking parliament's endorsement of a draft law on domestic abuse, but it has been blocked by various parties since 2010.

A key provision of the bill is the creation of shelters for victims of domestic violence, said

lawyer Marwa Eleoui.

'Leaving a prison'

Mobilising public opinion is often the only way to make headway and score the smallest of victories in Iraq, as in the case of Mariam, 16.

The teenager was disfigured by a man who broke into her home and sprayed her with acid, after her family spurned his offer of marriage, media quoted her parents as saying.

Mariam's story drew sympathy nationwide when it was reported by Iraqi media in December, seven months after

I help any woman who is a victim of violence or in need of legal aid, so that these women become aware of their rights and can defend themselves

AZHAR

the acid attack.

Authorities say two suspects have been arrested over the assault. "If it weren't for media pressure, Mariam's case would have taken two years before it went to court," said Eleoui.

In the northern province of Kirkuk, Lina was among the young women for whom the Al-Amal organisation became a critical lifeline.

At just 13 years of age, she was married off against her will to a man she said was violent.

"I was 25 when I told myself I'd had enough," she said. "He would beat me up in a way I cannot describe."

When she complained, her husband - and her father - tried to obtain a certificate from a doctor saying she was mentally unstable, eager to avoid a social scandal.

"The doctor saw the bruises and put me in contact with the association," said Lina, who uses a pseudonym, fearing for her safety.

Now she works with Al-Amal and makes house calls to tell women about their rights.

"Leaving the courtroom after I got my divorce was like leaving a prison," she said.

AFP

9 killed in shootout, says Iran Guards

Tehran, Iran - Iran's Revolutionary Guards said they killed six 'armed bandits' in a shootout in the country's southeast that also left three members of a Guards-linked paramilitary force dead.

The latest clashes in Sistan-Baluchistan broke out around a hideout of militants near a village in the centre of the province, the Guards said late on Saturday on their Sepah News website.

Sistan-Baluchistan, bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan, is a flashpoint for clashes with smuggling gangs as well as separatists from the Baluchi minority and extremist militant groups.

"Six bandits were killed and five others wounded," the Sepah News report said, while three members of the Basij, a paramilitary force linked to the Guards, also died. No arrests were announced.

On Friday, the Guards said they had 'targeted and killed the perpetrators' behind an attack that left two of their members dead on December 25 in the same province.

On November 18, three police, including a colonel, were killed and six wounded in fighting with an armed group in an area bordering Sistan-Baluchistan.

In recent years, the most active rebel group in Sistan-Baluchistan has been Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice), which has carried out several high-profile bombings and abductions.

In February 2019, 27 Guards were killed in a suicide attack on their bus.

AFP

Israel strikes Gaza after rocket attacks: Army

Gaza City, Palestinian Territories - Israel targeted Hamas positions in southern Gaza late on Saturday after rockets were fired from the Palestinian enclave, security sources and the army said.

"Fighter jets, helicopters and tanks struck a rocket manufacturing site, and military posts belonging to the Hamas organisation," Israel's army said.

Palestinian sources told AFP the army had targeted 'a site of the al-Qassam Brigades, west of Khan Yunis' in southern Gaza, referring to the military wing of Hamas, the Islamist movement controlling the territory.

The sources also reported Israeli artillery fire on a Hamas observation base in northern Gaza.

Hamas condemned the Israeli strike, with a spokesman vowing 'to defend our Palestinian people and liberate our land and our holy sites from the occupation and its colonial settlers until achieving the inevitable triumph'.

The Israeli strike came after two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip on Saturday morning, falling into the Mediterranean Sea off Tel Aviv.

No warning sirens sounded and Israel's Iron Dome rocket interception system did not deploy, the army said in a statement.

Sources in Hamas told AFP that 'the firing of the two rockets on Saturday morning was a technical problem due to the bad weather'.



Smoke and fireball rise following an airstrike in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, on Sunday wee hours (AFP)

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett addressed the Hamas explanation on Sunday morning.

"All of Hamas' stories about lightning and thunder, that repeat themselves winter after winter, are no longer relevant," he said at the beginning of the weekly Cabinet meeting.

"Whoever aims missiles at the State of Israel will bear the consequences."

Israel has maintained a blockade on the impoverished enclave since 2007, the year Hamas

took power.

Last year Hamas fired barrages of rockets towards Israel during an 11-day conflict sparked by tensions in Jerusalem.

A fragile ceasefire came into force in late May.

Since then, only five rockets or mortar rounds were fired from Gaza towards Israeli territory, the military had said in an annual report released at the end of December, before the latest launches.

AFP

International concern over 'critical' Palestinian prisoner on hunger strike

Jerusalem - A Palestinian prisoner languishing in hospital after an extensive hunger strike teetered close to death on Sunday, sparking international concern and Palestinian demands that Israel release him from detention without charges.

Hisham Abu Hawash, a 40-year-old member of the Islamic movement, began refusing food in August to protest Israel holding him without charges or trial.

The married father of five from Dura in the south of the Israeli-occupied West Bank was being held under administrative detention, a practice of arresting suspects for renewable six-month terms without allowing them to view the charges or evidence against them.

"His condition is difficult and complex," Liad Aviel, spokesman of the Shamir Medical Centre in central Israel where Abu Hawash is being held, told AFP.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said medical teams that visited Abu Hawash had found him 'in critical condition requiring expert clinical monitoring'.

According to the ICRC, Abu Hawash has been refusing food for around 140 days.

It issued a statement warning of 'potentially irreversible health consequences and possible tragic loss of life'.

His wife, Aisha Hrebat, told AFP on Sunday he was in a 'very dangerous' situation, adding that 'since yesterday he can't talk at



This file photo shows Palestinians participating in a solidarity rally for Palestinian detainee Hisham Abu Hawash in his hometown Dura, near Hebron, on December 7 (Wafa)

all and doesn't know what's going on around him'.

"Even after he ends his strike, he will have difficult problems," she said, adding their lawyer was submitting an urgent appeal against his detention to Israel's supreme court.

An Israeli security source said Abu Hawash was arrested due to 'involvement in terror activity'.

Israel says the protocol prevents crimes while authorities continue to gather evidence, though Palestinians say it denies

them of their rights.

"The way Israel has used administrative detention is arbitrary," said Shawan Jabarin, head of the Al-Haq rights group based in Ramallah on the West Bank.

He said Abu Hawash was one of about 550 Palestinians held by Israel in administrative detention.

Abu Hawash's plight has ignited Palestinian support.

Palestinian civil affairs minister Hussein al-Sheikh called on Israel via Twitter to 'release Abu Hawash immediately', with his

appeal echoed by protesters who gathered over the weekend in Ramallah.

At a rally in Gaza, Ismail Radwan, an official with the Islamist movement Hamas that rules the enclave, said Israel must understand that prisoners constitute a 'red line' for the Palestinians.

The Islamic Jihad, the second largest group in Gaza, said it holds 'the Israeli occupation fully responsible for the deteriorating health' of Abu Hawash.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Nurses work in the ICU of the Delafontaine AP-HP hospital's COVID-19 unit, in Saint-Denis, on the outskirts of Paris. Health Minister Olivier Veran brandished the record of over 200,000 infections in 24 hours as 'dizzying figures' to defend the introduction of vaccination pass (AFP)

France to soften rules; Curbs 'last resort': UK

Paris, France - France announced an easing of COVID-19 restrictions from Monday and Britain's health minister said curbs were an 'absolute last resort', as governments face tough choices between controlling the virus and keeping economies open. Coronavirus cases have surged globally in recent weeks, fuelled by the emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, and the pandemic dampened New Year's celebrations yet again.

Europe crossed 100mn known cases on Saturday, and governments there are keen to prevent healthcare systems from becoming overwhelmed by COVID-19 while also avoiding punishing restrictions.

Fully vaccinated people in France who test positive will only have to isolate for seven days, and can leave quarantine after five days if they show a negative test.

The change in rules should allow a 'benefit-risk balance aimed at ensuring the virus is controlled while maintaining socio-economic life', the French health ministry said.

According to an AFP tally of official figures, 17 out of 52 countries or territories in Europe beat their previous record of most

Fully vaccinated people in France who test positive will only have to isolate for seven days, and can leave quarantine after five days if they show a negative test

FRENCH HEALTH MINISTRY

cases in a single week.

The countries with the highest ratio of infections per 100,000 inhabitants in the world were all in Europe too, with Denmark showing the worst figure of 2,045.

However, some studies have sparked hope that Omicron does not cause COVID-19 as severe as the Delta variant, with some governments factoring that into their decisions to ease curbs. But the World Health Organization has warned of trying times ahead, saying Omicron could lead to a 'tsunami of cases' because of its high transmissibility.

'Absolute last resort'

The virus surges dampened New Year's celebrations around the world, with events cancelled and tens of millions spending the holidays under some form of restrictions.

The British government, which is responsible for health policies in England only, has put

in place some precautions but so far refused to curb socialising and large events despite record case numbers last week.

It has pointed to the less dramatic rise in hospitalisations compared with case numbers as justification.

'Curbs on our freedom must be an absolute last resort and the British people rightly expect us to do everything in our power to avert them,' Health Secretary Sajid Javid wrote in the *Daily Mail* newspaper.

"I've been determined that we must give ourselves the best chance of living alongside the virus," he added, noting the 'enormous health, social and economic costs of lockdowns'.

Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have all rolled out new rules since Christmas limiting gatherings.

Parties, protests and prayers

Despite virus concerns, popula-

tions in many parts of the world have grown increasingly weary of restrictions, sparking regular protests and defiance in some countries.

Dutch police on Saturday broke up a rave in breach of COVID-19 rules that was attended by hundreds in a disused factory, local media reported.

Dozens of police officers entered the makeshift venue in the central town of Rijswijk with hundreds more mobilised to shepherd people away, NOS television said.

The illegal rave attracted people from far and wide with locals saying they had seen vehicles come in from France and Germany but also as far away as Spain and Italy.

And in Stuttgart, Germany, about 100 activists attempted to stage an unauthorised protest against COVID vaccines and restrictions.

The virus was also on the minds of some worshippers who hiked to the summit of Mount Mitake in Japan to pray at a shrine and watch the first sunrise of 2022.

"Naturally, I prayed for a new year to be one in which the coronavirus goes away," said visitor Rie Mogi.

AFP

100mn cases: Europe becomes epicentre

Paris, France - Europe has recorded over 100mn coronavirus cases, more than a third of all infections worldwide, since the start of the pandemic, an AFP tally on Saturday showed.

The continent has once again become the pandemic's epicentre in recent months, and is battling an upsurge of cases spurred on by the highly transmissible Omicron strain of the virus. The European region, including 52 countries and territories from the Atlantic coast to Azerbaijan and Russia, has recorded 100,074,753 infections of COVID-19 over the past two years, an AFP tally of official figures showed at 1845 GMT.

That is equivalent to more than a third of the 288,279,803 cases declared worldwide since the outbreak of the pandemic in late 2019 in China.

Of the European infections, more than 4.9mn have been reported over the past seven days alone, with 17 out of 52 countries or territories beating their previous record of most cases in a single week.

France alone has recorded more than one million new cases over the past week, which is



A bus drives past a directional sign for a COVID-19 test centre on Hoe Street in Walthamstow, north London last Thursday (AFP)

equivalent to ten per cent of all positive cases it has announced since the start of the pandemic.

The countries with the highest ratio of infections per 100,000 inhabitants in the world were all in Europe. Denmark scored worst with 2,045, followed by Cyprus with 1,969 and Ireland with 1,964.

AFP's calculations are based on official figures, but some infections could have gone undetected, for example if patients were asymptomatic.

COVID-related deaths are however decreasing in Europe.

Europe recorded on average

3,413 coronavirus deaths a day over the past week, a seven per cent drop from the previous week. At its worst, that average saw 5,735 deaths a day in January last year.

People on the European continent are now, on the whole, more vaccinated than the worldwide average.

Sixty-five per cent of Europeans are partially vaccinated, while 61 per cent are fully vaccinated - more than 58 and 49 per cent respectively worldwide, according to the Our World in Data website.

AFP



Residents queue up for nucleic acid tests for the coronavirus, in China's Xi'an city last Thursday (AFP)

China says 'positive' signs as Xi'an cases fall lowest

Beijing, China - New COVID-19 cases in the locked-down Chinese city of Xi'an fell to their lowest in a week, health officials said on Sunday, as residents face their eleventh day under strict home confinement.

China has followed a 'zero COVID' approach involving tight border restrictions and swift, targeted lockdowns since the virus first surfaced in a central city in late 2019 - but this strategy has been put under pressure in recent weeks with a number of local outbreaks and

cases remaining stubbornly high. There were 122 fresh infections reported on Sunday in the historic northern city - the lowest since December 25, and down from 174 on Saturday.

Zhang Canyou, from China's disease control agency, told state broadcaster CCTV that after several rounds of testing in Xi'an and the impact of the lockdown, they had started to see 'some positive changes'.

"We will also make some adjustments to the prevention and control measures in a timely

way," he said. However, there are 16 patients in a 'severe' condition, according to the National Health Commission.

While low compared to numbers elsewhere, new infections in recent days have reached a high not seen in China since March 2020.

Since December 9 there have been more than 1,500 cases of the Delta strain reported in Xi'an, and health officials said on Saturday that two patients are in a critical condition.

AFP

US seeks new 5G delay to study interference with flights

Washington, US - US authorities have asked telecom operators AT&T and Verizon to delay for up to two weeks their already postponed rollout of 5G networks amid uncertainty about interference with vital flight safety equipment.

The two companies said on Saturday they are reviewing the request.

The US rollout of the high-speed mobile broadband technology had been set for December 5, but was delayed to January 5 after aerospace giants Airbus and Boeing raised concerns about potential interference with the devices planes use to measure altitude.

US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and the head of the Federal Aviation Administration, Steve Dickson, asked for the latest delay in a letter sent on Friday to AT&T and Verizon, two of

the country's biggest telecom operators.

The US letter asked the companies to 'continue to pause introducing commercial C-Band service' - the frequency range used for 5G - 'for an additional short period of no more than two weeks beyond the currently scheduled deployment date of January 5'.

Asked by AFP for comment, Verizon spokesman Rich Young replied, "We've received the government's letter after 6 pm on New Year's Eve. We're in the process of reviewing it."

AT&T also said it was reviewing the government request.

In the letter, the US officials assure the companies that 5G service will be able to begin 'as planned in January with certain exceptions around priority airports'.

The officials say their priority



The US rollout of high-speed mobile broadband technology had been set for December 5, but was delayed to January 5 after concerns about potential interference with the devices that planes use to measure altitude

has been 'to protect flight safety, while ensuring that 5G deployment and aviation operations can co-exist'. Last February, Ver-

izon and AT&T were authorised to start using 3.7-3.8 GHz frequency bands as of December 5, after obtaining licenses worth

tens of billions of dollars.

But when Airbus and Boeing raised their concerns about possible interference with airplanes'

5G service will be able to begin in January with exceptions around priority airports. Our priority have been to protect flight safety, while ensuring that 5G deployment and aviation operations can co-exist

US OFFICIALS

radio altimeters - which can operate at the same frequencies - the launch date was pushed back to January.

The FAA requested further information about the instru-

ments, and it issued directives limiting the use of altimeters in certain situations, which sparked airline fears over the potential costs.

When Verizon and AT&T wrote to federal authorities in November to confirm their intention to start deploying 5G in January, they said they would take extra precautions beyond those required by US law until July 2022 while the FAA completes its investigation.

The conflict between 5G networks and aircraft equipment led French authorities to recommend switching off mobile phones with 5G on planes in February.

France's civil aviation authority said interference from a signal on a nearby frequency to the radio altimeter could cause 'critical' errors during landing.

AFP

Massive fire destroys South Africa's parliament

Cape Town, South Africa - A massive fire has completely destroyed South Africa's national assembly, officials said, as the blaze at the historic legislature continued to rage.

While a suspect was due in court on Tuesday, an investigation has been opened into the fire which started at around 0300 GMT on Sunday in the parliament complex's oldest wing, which was completed in 1884 and has wood-panelled rooms.

As day dawned, smoke could be seen billowing from the building against a blue sky.

"The entire chamber where the members sit... has burned down," parliamentary spokesman Moloto Mothapo said, adding that the blaze had still not been extinguished and two fires had apparently been sparked in two separate areas of the precinct.

No casualties had been reported but President Cyril Ramaphosa told reporters at the scene a man had been held and that sprinkler systems had apparently failed.

Later Sunday, police said a suspect was due in court.

"A man has been arrested inside the parliament, he's still being interrogated. We have opened a criminal case. He has been arrested and will appear in court on Tuesday," police spokeswoman Thandi Mbambo said.

The historic parliament building houses a collection of rare books and the original copy of the former Afrikaans national anthem *Die Stem van Suid-Afrika* (*The Voice of South Africa*), which



Smoke billows from the roof of a building in the South African Parliament precinct, in Cape Town on Sunday (AFP)

was already damaged.

"The roof of the Old Assembly building has collapsed and is gone," Jean-Pierre Smith, Cape Town's mayoral committee member for safety and security, told reporters earlier.

"The entire building has suffered extensively smoke and water damage," Smith said, adding 'the fire has not been contained'.

After ravaging the older wing of the building, the flames spread to newer parts of the complex which are currently in use.

"Firefighters are currently trying to control the fire in the New Wing, where the fire has affected the National Assembly Chamber," Mothapo said earlier in the day.

The imposing red and white building was still shrouded in a thick cloud of black at midday.

A team of firefighters who were first to arrive at the scene battled the flames for several hours before being forced to retreat and call for reinforcements.

Around 70 firefighters were later deployed, some using a crane to spray water on the blaze. Former Cape Town mayor and current minister Patricia de Lille warned it would still be several hours before the fire was brought under control.

Inside the rooms, fine showers of grey ash fell from the ceiling to the floor, which was already littered with debris.

Emergency services said they feared the fire could spread swiftly through the old rooms, which are decorated with wood, thick carpets and curtains.

AFP



A snow covered car destroyed by the fire is seen near destroyed homes in the Rock Creek neighbourhood of Superior in Colorado on Saturday (AFP)

3 people missing, 1000 homes gutted in Colorado fire

Superior, US - Three people are missing after a wildfire tore through several Colorado towns, quickly destroying nearly 1,000 homes as part of the latest in a string of US natural disasters.

"We're very fortunate that we don't have a list of 100 missing. But unfortunately we do have three confirmed missing people," Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle told a press conference.

At least 991 homes are thought to have been destroyed as the blaze raced through the towns of Superior and Louisville on Thursday, just outside the state's biggest city Denver, forcing tens of thousands of people to flee with little notice.

Shocking aerial footage showed whole streets as little more than piles of smoking ash, destruction that appeared almost total but somehow left a few homes oddly untouched.

Pelle said the search for the missing had been hampered by the destruction and snow.

"The structures where these folks would be are completely destroyed and covered with about 20cm of snow right now."

Investigators found no credible evidence to back earlier reports that downed power lines

may have caused the fire, with Pelle stating that some residents may have been confused by downed telecom lines.

However, investigators have 'executed a search warrant in one particular location' as part of an ongoing investigation that Pelle described as 'very active' and comprising federal and state partners.

The fire, which was sparked in a tinder-dry landscape, was then fanned by winds gusting at more than 160km an hour on Thursday.

"This was a disaster in fast motion... over the course of half a day. Many families having minutes to get whatever they could - their pets, their kids - into the car and leave," Governor Jared Polis said, 'just as in the blink of an eye'.

At least 33,000 people in Superior and Louisville were told to flee, many doing so with little more than the clothes on their backs.

Pelle said he spoke to the granddaughter of one of the missing on Saturday morning.

"They're trying to find grandma. And we're trying to find grandma for her," he said.

AFP

Elephants breaks into Bangladesh safari park

Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh - A herd of endangered wild elephants are rampaging through a safari park in Bangladesh, with officials warning on Sunday the creatures were acting aggressively and posed a serious safety threat.

The herd of at least 13 elephants knocked down a seven-foot (two-metre) concrete wall to break into the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Safari Park, north of the resort city of Cox's Bazar, earlier this week.

"They are very restless, frightened and acting as if they are cornered. They are now very dangerous for other animals and our visitors," said park official Mazharul Islam.

The reserve is home to over 1,300 animals - including Bengal tigers, hippos and other threatened species - and sees around 5,000 visitors each day in winter.

"We are worried for the park's visitors," Islam said. "Night patrolling is getting difficult as the elephants are very agitated and they go wild very easily."

Fewer than 100 elephants remain in the South Asian country, where shrinking habitats and dwindling food supplies have resulted in growing conflict with humans.

Another official said the elephants were frightened because of increasing encroachment on their land by farmers and the killing of a dozen members of their herd in the past two years.

Scarcity of food has driven elephants to invade rice fields where they were often killed by electric fences, he added.

AFP

US airport chaos as more than 2,700 flights cancelled

Washington, US - Air travel continued to be severely disrupted in the United States on Saturday, with bad weather in parts of the country adding to the impact of a massive spike in COVID-19 infections fuelled by the Omicron variant.

The United States had 2,723 cancelled flights, more than half of the 4,698 cancelled worldwide, around 11.00pm (0400 GMT Sunday), according to tracking website FlightAware.



Travellers make their way through Miami International Airport on Friday (AFP)

In addition, 5,993 domestic flights were delayed on Saturday, out of a total of 11,043 worldwide for the day.

The worst affected US airline was SkyWest, which had to cancel 23 per cent of its flight schedule, according to the site.

In the United States, airports in Chicago were particularly hard-hit because of bad weather, with a snowstorm expected in the area on Saturday afternoon and into the night.

The global air travel industry is still reeling from the highly contagious Omicron variant.

Many pilots, flight attendants and other staff are absent from work after contracting COVID-19, or because they are quarantining after coming in contact with someone who has the infection.

Some 7,500 flights were cancelled by airlines worldwide over the Christmas weekend.

AFP

Archbishop Tutu's ashes buried in Cape Town cathedral

Cape Town, South Africa - South Africa's spiritual father Archbishop Desmond Tutu, hero of the anti-apartheid struggle, was laid to rest at dawn on Sunday in the Cape Town cathedral where he once preached against the brutal white-minority regime.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Tutu died a week ago, aged 90, after a life spent fighting injustice.

His ashes were 'interred at St. George's Cathedral in a private family service early today', an Anglican Church statement said.

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba placed his remains under an inscribed memorial stone before the high altar.

He urged South Africans to 'use this opportunity to turn a new page'. "Let us commit ourselves... to the radical, the revolutionary change that he advocated," Makgoba said.

"Let us live as simply as he lived, exemplified by his pine coffin with rope handles."

Some 20 members of Tutu's family, led by his widow 'Mama Leah' were present.

Famed for his modesty, Tutu had left instructions for a simple,



Naomi Nontombi Tutu, daughter of South Africa's anti-Apartheid icon Archbishop Desmond Tutu, prays during the requiem mass of Tutu at St George's Cathedral in Cape Town on Saturday (AFP)

no-frills funeral with a cheap coffin, followed by an eco-friendly flameless cremation.

Family, friends, clergy and politicians had attended a requiem mass on Saturday with

President Cyril Ramaphosa leading the tributes.

"Our departed father was a

Our departed father was a crusader in the struggle for freedom, for justice, for equality and for peace, not just in South Africa... but around the world as well. Achbishop Tutu was the spiritual father of our new nation our moral compass

CYRIL RAMAPHOSA

crusader in the struggle for freedom, for justice, for equality and for peace, not just in South Africa... but around the world as well," said Ramaphosa.

"While our beloved (Nelson Mandela) was the father of our democracy, Archbishop Tutu was the spiritual father of our new nation", lauding him as 'our moral compass and national

conscience'.

Under apartheid, the white-minority government cemented its grip imposing laws based on the notion of race and racial segregation, and the police ruthlessly hunted down opponents, killing or jailing them.

With Mandela and other leaders in prison for decades, Tutu in the 1970s became the emblem of the anti-apartheid struggle.

He campaigned relentlessly abroad, administering public lashings to the Western world for failing to slap sanctions on the apartheid regime.

After apartheid was dismantled and South Africa ushered in the first free elections in 1994, Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which exposed the horrors of the past in grim detail.

He would later admonish the ruling African National Congress for corruption and leadership incompetence.

Tutu's moral firmness and passion went hand-in-hand with self-deprecatory humour and a famously cackling laugh.

AFP

Trumpism without Trump: The Republican playbook for 2022?

Washington, US - As US Republicans cheered impressive gains in state elections in the fall, their leader may not have been so delighted as he followed the results from his fiefdom in southern Florida.

For the results of the gubernatorial races - victory in leftward-trending Virginia and an unexpectedly narrow defeat in deeply Democratic New Jersey - proved one thing beyond doubt: Republicans can win without Donald Trump.

Whisper it, but five years after submitting entirely to the will of its mercurial leader, and one year ahead of the crucial midterm elections, the Republican Party is tentatively picturing life after Donald.

"At this stage, he would be the frontrunner if he chose to enter the 2024 presidential race," Matt Lacombe, an assistant professor of political science at New York liberal arts school Barnard College, said.

"But it's also very possible that coordination among potential candidates and party officials... would be sufficient to prevent him from pursuing or succeeding in a second run."

After Trump secured the Republican presidential nomination in May 2016, the party abandoned its policy platform at its next two conventions, instead opting to simply declare fealty to its rambunctious chieftain.

The consensus remains that all paths to Congress go through Mar-a-Lago - that to succeed in Washington you had to kiss the ring in Palm Beach, flattering Trump and his ultra-loyal base of tens of millions of ardent devotees.

Republican politicians who fail to toe the line know they risk a public dressing down and primary challenge at best and death threats to their families if his supporters were particularly inflamed.

"Despite losing his social media megaphone, his endorsements still energise grassroots supporters, drive donations, and in some cases clear away competitors and force retirements," Tommy Goodwin, a Washington-based political consultant and lobbyist, told AFP.

Some prominent Republicans are seizing on the recent governors' races to call for a course correction, however, navigating around Trump and his 'big lie' that the 2020 election was stolen from him by the Democrats.

All-time low

In Virginia, Republican multimillionaire Glenn Youngkin won by far exceeding Trump's 2020 showing in the suburbs, especially among independents and women.

Trump immediately took credit but in reality, Youngkin soft-pedaled the former reality



This file photo shows the then US president Donald Trump arriving to deliver a speech on the stock market during an unscheduled appearance in the Brady Briefing Room of the White House in Washington, DC, on November 24 last year (AFP)

TV star's support and did all he could in the final weeks to keep his high-profile endorser at arm's length.

In New Jersey too, Republican Jack Ciattarelli started out very pro-Trump, even speaking at a 'Stop the Steal' rally in 2020, but distanced himself from the ex-

his supporters stormed the US Capitol to stop lawmakers certifying Joe Biden's victory.

Trump has since issued a number of statements praising the insurrectionists and defending their threats on the life of his vice president, Mike Pence.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch

other children," Peter Loge, an associate professor at George Washington University, said.

"It is difficult to imagine him demurring so that others can have their turn in the spotlight."

'The past is never dead'

Trump's bully pulpit isn't what it was before social media bans effectively curbed his day-to-day influence and, in any case, his electoral secret sauce was never as powerful as he claimed.

Republicans did fairly well down-ballot in 2020 - keeping their Senate loss to the narrowest possible margin and almost taking the House - but stumbled at the presidential level.

And Trump is the first president since Herbert Hoover nearly a century ago to lose the House, the Senate and the White House during a single term. "So far, Trump-endorsed candidates haven't fared particularly well," said Sam Nelson, associate professor and chair of the University of Toledo's political science department.

"While Republican primary candidates actively seek his endorsement, valuable in Republican races, that same endorsement can be somewhat dangerous in a general election in that it motivates Democrats to turn out to vote against the

Trump-supported candidate."

Loge believes challengers who think they have nothing to lose may emerge, alongside others concerned about the future of the Republican Party and the country.

"The 2022 midterm elections will also go a long way to determining Trump's level of support in 2024," Loge told AFP.

"If Trump-backed candidates win primary and general elections, Trump's stock will go up. If Trump-backed candidates lose primary and general elections, Trump's stock will go down."

But Trump remains a hero to the millions of disaffected new voters he brought to the Republican cause in 2016, and is credited with remaking the federal judiciary in the image of his right-wing backers.

His deficit-busting tax cuts remain popular among the working classes, although they tilt increasingly toward the mega-rich over the longer term.

"William Faulkner famously wrote 'The past is never dead. It's not even past,'" Mark Bayer, a former chief of staff in the Senate and the House, told AFP.

"The same can be said about Trump's trance-inducing influence over the Republican Party. His grip... is as strong as it was when he was president."

AFP



Pedestrians walk past the European Union flag under the Arc de Triomphe, on the Place de l'Etoile in Paris on Saturday (AFP)

France removes EU flag from Arc de Triomphe after rightwing opposition

Paris, France - French authorities removed a temporary installation of the European Union flag from the Arc de Triomphe monument in Paris on Sunday, after rightwing opponents of President Emmanuel Macron accused him of 'erasing' French identity.

The giant blue flag was raised in place of the French flag on New Year's Eve to mark France's turn at the rotating presidency of the EU Council, which it will hold for the next six months.

The arch, a monument to war dead, and other landmarks including the Eiffel Tower and the Pantheon are also being illuminated with blue lights for the remainder of this week.

But Macron's right-wing rivals for presidential elections in spring seized on the removal of the tricolour flag, calling it an affront to France's heritage and its veterans.

"Preside over Europe yes, erase French identity no!" tweeted Valerie Pécresse, the conservative candidate who polls indicate could be the main challenger to Macron in the upcoming vote.

She urged him to restore the French flag, saying, "We owe it to our soldiers who spilled their blood for it."

Far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, who had vowed to file a complaint with the State Council, France's high-

Preside over Europe yes, erase French identity no. Restore the French flag. We owe it to our soldiers who spilled their blood for it

VALERIE PECRESSE

est court for administrative matters, called the removal of the EU flag 'a great patriotic victory,' claiming on Twitter that a 'massive mobilisation' had forced Macron to backpedal.

But an official in the French presidency said on Sunday that the flag's removal before dawn was 'in line with the planned schedule', insisting that unlike the blue lights for monuments, it was only supposed to be at the Arc for two days.

Europe Minister Clement Beaune had accused the right on Saturday of 'desperately chasing after the sterile controversies of the far right.'

The presidency official, who asked not to be named, could not say when the massive French flag would fly again under the Arc, but noted that it was not a permanent feature for the monument.

AFP

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Inaugurated in 1930, the Hotel Nacional de Cuba in Havana is one of Cuba's historic buildings in eclectic style, where American mafia figures of the 50's, Hollywood actors and actresses, as well as presidents of many countries stayed. After the triumph of the Revolution, it was used as a school, hostel and military command post until its final destination as one of the main hotels for tourism (AFP)



CUBA'S HISTORY AND HOTEL NACIONAL



In its 91 years, Havana's majestic Hotel Nacional has borne witness to some of the biggest events of Cuban history. It was once bombed as part of a conflict between rival units of Cuba's military, hosted a summit of mafia dons, was a key site of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and a holiday jaunt for Hollywood's most eccentric figures.

Yet for 20 months ending in mid-November, this building that mixes Art Deco and neoclassical elements along with Moorish tiles was deserted because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Far from a death knell for the hotel, it was an opportunity to restore the facade, and put in new floors and windows in the rooms.

"A lot of work was done so that when the tourists returned they would find the 1930s hotel, although with greater comfort ... reliving the past," said Arleen Ortiz, a specialist in the hotel's history.

Now guests will often specifically request to stay in certain rooms, like number 211 where the Italian-born gangster Lucky Luciano sojourned in December 1946 during the mafia bosses summit.

That was an incident immortalised in the 1974 film by Francis Ford Coppola, 'The Godfather II'.

As the mobsters meet on a terrace at the hotel, they divide up a cake in the

shape of the island nation - a metaphor for their sharing out control of lucrative illicit businesses.

The real summit opened on December 22, 1946, with Luciano seated at the head of a large rectangular table.

"Las Vegas didn't exist and Cuba was

the perfect place for gambling due to its proximity to the United States, the climate, the beaches, the rum," said Ortiz.

Havana was ideally placed to become the gambling capital of the world.

The entire hotel had been booked by the dons for their families to spend Christ-

mas in the city, with Frank Sinatra a special guest for the occasion.

Peasant dormitory

Perched on a hill overlooking the Straits of Florida, the Hotel Nacional - with its brand new English china, clocks imported from Germany and chandeliers hanging from the ceilings - was opened on December 30, 1930, allegedly financed partly with mob money.

Just three years later, 400 army officers loyal to the deposed president Gerardo Machado hunkered down in the hotel as government troops bombarded it from land and sea.

Outnumbered and with ammunition running out, they were soon forced to surrender.

The hotel survived, bearing the pockmarked signs of the siege, but would soon be attracting a very different kind of attention.

The halls and rooms are filled with photos, objects and letters of the celebrities

that have stayed at the hotel.

Five-time Olympic swimming champion and former Tarzan actor Johnny Weissmuller was one such guest, impressing staff by jumping from a second floor window into the swimming pool below.

In the 1950s, Ava Gardner drank daiquiris for breakfast at the hotel after a night of partying in Havana's cabarets alongside the likes of Ernest Hemingway.

The Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Winston Churchill, Marlon Brando, Errol Flynn, Rita Hayworth and Nat King Cole all stayed at the hotel.

But following Fidel Castro's communist revolution of 1959, the hotel was converted into a dormitory for 900 peasant women who went to the capital to learn to sew.

"Those young women, who had never before left their homes with no electricity and dirt floors," suddenly found themselves in the plush hotel's elegant rooms, said Ortiz.

'Beautiful, magical'

Tensions would soon mount again with the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, when soldiers dug trenches and tunnels underneath the hotel grounds as the United States and Soviet Union teetered on the brink of nuclear war.

But it is for star-gazing that it is best known. "The foreigners know this place and what they want is to sit where so many celebrities did before them," said Tania Fernandez, a Cuban doctor from Sancti Spiritus province who brought her children to explore the tunnels.

The hotel underwent another makeover in the 1990s, a time when the headline communist regime barred locals from staying there.

"It's beautiful, it's magical being here. I love the Cuban people and I love the energy. It's incredible," Sierra (39), an American teacher, said while sipping wine with her boyfriend and looking out to sea.

AFP



FOOTBALL ROUND-UP



Lionel Messi tests positive for COVID-19

Paris, France - Lionel Messi has tested positive for COVID-19 and entered self-isolation, his club Paris Saint-Germain announced on Sunday.

The seven-time Ballon d'Or winner was one of four PSG players to test positive for the virus ahead of a French Cup match against Vannes.

Messi tested positive while on holiday in his hometown of Rosario in Argentina.

"He is constantly in contact with our medical service. When he is negative, he will be able to return to France," PSG coach Mauricio Pochettino told a press conference.

The Argentinian star has endured a difficult start to life in the French capital since an emotional exit from Barcelona last

summer.

Messi has scored only one goal in 11 league appearances for PSG, although he has netted five times in the Champions League.

He will miss Monday's cup tie and Pochettino said he did not

We have been living with the virus for almost two years, everyone knows what to do in order not to be infected. But we can still catch it, there are things we cannot control

MAURICIO POCHETTINO

know if he would also be sidelined for PSG's first Ligue 1 match since the winter break, at Lyon next Sunday.

The other players to test positive were full-back Juan Bernat,

back-up goalkeeper Sergio Rico and teenage midfielder Nathan Bitumazala.

"They are currently respecting isolation and are subject to the appropriate health protocols," PSG said.

Pochettino added: "We have been living with the virus for almost two years, everyone knows what to do in order not to be infected. But we can still catch it, there are things we cannot con-

trol."

Bernat tested positive after reporting for training.

"This is the risk with which we live, on a global scale," said Pochettino. "In football, contact is inevitable, we share the dressing room.

"The risk of contamination is there, but we take all the necessary measures to try to prevent a player from infecting others."

The number of COVID-19 cases in France has topped 200,000 a day this week.

PSG also said that Neymar, who suffered an ankle injury in November, is continuing treatment in his native Brazil.

"He is still scheduled to return to training in about three weeks," the club said.

AFP

Real Madrid 'still on holiday' in shock Getafe defeat, says Ancelotti

Madrid, Spain - Carlo Ancelotti admitted Real Madrid were 'still on holiday' as they suffered a shock 1-0 loss at relegation-battling Getafe in La Liga on Sunday.

Madrid's surprise defeat is their first in three months and gives fresh hope to the beleaguered chasing pack in Spain, after Eder Militao's early error allowed Enes Unal to score the winner at the Coliseum Alfonso Perez.

Sevilla, Madrid's closest challengers, will be five points behind the leaders with a game in hand if they win at Cadiz on Sunday. Getafe stay 16th after recording only their fourth league victory of the season.

"We were on holiday for an extra day," said Ancelotti afterwards. "The team was not the same team that played before Christmas - less commitment, less concentration.

"We didn't deserve to lose but we ended up with a defeat that could be a wake-up call."

Madrid have taken command of the Spanish title race after a superb run of form that included ten consecutive wins and 15 matches without defeat, their last loss coming at Espanyol on October 3.

But Ancelotti's side were woefully out of sorts in their first outing of 2022 and, aside from a brief spell in the first half, struggled really even to threaten the Getafe goal.

Eden Hazard came on at half-time but again failed to shake his team into life while Karim Benzema was unusually quiet up front. Madrid certainly missed the penetration of Vinicius Junior, who was absent after testing positive for COVID-19.

Ancelotti's mood was summed up in the second half



when the deflated Italian on the bench slumped over and dropped his head after a Toni Kroos free-kick drifted harmlessly out of play.

"To say we were still on holiday isn't a criticism, it's the same thing that I've said to the players," Ancelotti said. "We accept responsibility, because the coach was maybe still on holiday as well. We are still top, so we look forward."

Getafe lost eight games in a row earlier in the season but came in on the back of an upturn in form under Quique Sanchez Flores, having gone five games unbeaten, including a pair of wins over Cadiz and Osasuna. Unal gave them the lead in the ninth minute after the usually dependable Militao was caught napping.

The Brazilian went to clear on the edge of his own area but instead took an extra touch, engaging in a tussle with Unal, who robbed the ball and finished past Thibaut Courtois.

Madrid dominated for 20 minutes, with Luka Modric increasingly influential, but a dogged Getafe preserved their lead for the rest of the first half and were relatively comfortable in the second.

Hazard and Marcelo both came on at half-time but neither made much of an impact, with Hazard unable to muster a single attempt on goal. Benzema had a shot blocked, Casemiro saw a half-volley saved and Mariano Diaz headed over, but Getafe deserved their victory.

AFP

Believe and you will conquer Africa: Former star Diouf tells Senegal

Johannesburg, South Africa - Former Senegal star El Hadji Diouf has told the current national squad they will win the Africa Cup of Nations for the first time if they believe in themselves.

"You possess talent, you are preparing impressively, now believe and you will conquer Africa," was his message ahead of the January 9 tournament kick-off in Cameroon.

Two-time African Footballer of the Year Diouf missed a shootout penalty when Senegal lost the 2002 final to Cameroon and the Teranga Lions reached the title decider again in 2019 only to fail against Algeria.

Here, is the spotlight on the four Group B contenders with the winners and runners-up assured of last-16 places while the best four third-placed teams from six groups also qualify.

Senegal

Senegal have topped the African

rankings for three years, but the star-stacked side have no trophies or medals to show off.

There is a belief that it is now or never for a team boasting a 'spine' of Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy, Napoli centre-back Kalidou Koulibaly, Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Idrissa Gueye and Liverpool forward Sadio Mane.

Captain Koulibaly and Watford forward Ismaila Sarr were chosen by coach and former star Aliou Cisse despite still recovering from injuries and could miss some group matches.

The Lions are in arguably the weakest of the six groups and with a last-16 match against a third-place finisher likely to follow, the first serious challenge they face could be in the quarter-finals.

Guinea

As if rookie national coach Kaba Diawara did not have enough



problems trying to fix a dysfunctional squad, junta leader Mamady Doumbouya has thrown a spanner in the works.

Addressing the Syli Nationale (national elephants), he told the squad they must repay state-

funded preparation costs if they do not return to Conakry with the Cup of Nations trophy.

That is highly unlikely as Guinea fared dismally in recent 2022 World Cup qualifying, failing to win in six matches against

Morocco, Guinea-Bissau and Sudan.

Midfield has been a particular problem and Diawara, in his first head coach role, hopes Liverpool midfielder Naby Keita can trigger the dramatic improvement nec-

essary to make any impact.

Malawi

Malawi were another team to perform woefully in the recently completed group phase of World Cup qualifying, losing five matches and finishing last of four nations.

Like Guinea, they reacted by changing coaches, demoting local Meck Mwase and hiring Mario Marinica, a 56-year-old Romanian who holds a UEFA pro diploma, the highest coaching qualification in Europe. As the country prepares for a third Cup of Nations appearance, his message to the underperforming Flames emphasised speed: "Think fast, act fast, move fast."

While many teams heading to Cameroon are packed with Europe-based professionals, Malawi have only two, midfielder Charles Petro plays in Moldova and forward Francisco Madinga in Georgia.

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe could be barred on Monday from competing at the Cup of Nations unless a state umbrella sports body reinstates the board of the national football association.

The Sports and Recreation Commission sacked the officials in November, alleging mismanagement, lack of financial accountability and the sexual harassment of female referees.

FIFA says a ban may have to be imposed on Zimbabwe unless the board regains control of the sport by January 3.

Add the absence of three key players - injured Marvelous Nakamba and Marshall Munetsi and retired Khama Billiat - and the outlook for the Knowledge Musona-captained team is bleak, if they get to play.

Predictions: 1. Senegal, 2. Guinea, 3. Malawi, 4. Zimbabwe

AFP

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Qatar's Attiyah wins first Dakar special

Hail, Saudi Arabia - Qatari Nasser al Attiyah won the first special of the Dakar Rally on Sunday to extend his race lead after victory in the prologue.

The 51-year-old, looking to win the race for the fourth time, finished the stage 12 minutes and seven seconds quicker than nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb in second place.

"It feels steady. We'll do our best, but today was a good stage for us. This is no time to race conservatively," said Toyota's Attiyah, a former Olympic shooting medallist.

The 333km loop around northern Saudi Arabia saw several competitors suffer navigational difficulties, resulting in large time gaps.

Record 14-time Dakar winner Stephane Peterhansel, nicknamed 'Monsieur Dakar', lost a lot of time after losing a wheel of

his Audi. The Frenchman could now decide to withdraw from the race after having to wait for six hours for assistance.

Loeb is now 12mins and 44secs behind Attiyah in the early standings after battling back from a difficult start which saw his car suffer two punctures.

"It really wasn't simple, we messed up and started with two punctures before the neutralisation," he said. "There was no room for error in the second part."

"The first part of the day dented our confidence, but everything turned out fine," he added.

Australian Daniel Sanders extended his early advantage in the bikes category, beating Chilean Pablo Quintanilla by 3mins and 7secs on Sunday.

"In the end, a lot of guys got lost and, luckily, we got onto the right track," said Sanders.

AFP



President of the International Automobile Federation (FIA) Mohammed ben Sulayem (right) greets Nasser al Attiyah of Qatar at the end of the Stage 1A of the Dakar 2022 rally in Saudi Arabia on Saturday (AFP)



Kilde in the hunt for more Norwegian Olympic ski gold



Aleksander Aamodt Kilde celebrates on the podium after winning the men's FIS Ski World Cup Super G event in Bormio, Italy (AFP)

Paris, France - Aleksander Aamodt Kilde has a huge task to follow in the ski tracks of an illustrious trio of fellow Norwegians but he hopes to emulate their Olympic success in Beijing in February.

The 29-year-old is one half of alpine skiing's golden couple with his girlfriend, US star Mikaela Shiffrin.

While Shiffrin has two Olympic titles to her name, Kilde has a bare medals cupboard, though with three successive super-G wins on the World Cup circuit this season he is in the perfect form to set that right.

If he needs motivation he need look no further than the now-retired Kjetil Andre Aamodt, who dominated at the Olympics, winning the event a remarkable three times in 1992, 2002 and 2006.

Kilde's form - he also has a downhill victory this season - is all the more creditable given he tore cruciate ligaments in his right knee last January.

The 2020 overall World Cup champion is relaxing back in Innsbruck before the season re-

sumes and has had time to contemplate if his third Olympics will indeed be lucky for him.

"It's big shoes to fill though," he told AFP in a phone interview, referring to Aamodt, 2010 Olympic super-G champion Aksel Lund Svindal and Kjetil Jansrud, who won the event at the 2014 Sochi Games.

"When you mention these names it's crazy to think about it.

"It's incredible how they managed to do that. Of course I want to try to keep that a Norwegian thing, but it's easier said than done."

Kilde also competed in the 2018 downhill in PyeongChang, won by Svindal with Jansrud taking the silver medal, but despite finishing 15th he said it remained the most inspiring sporting moment for him because of his country's success.

"Aksel and Kjetil being one and two... that was a little bit unexpected because the preparation for that race did not go well. But they found their rhythm. I remember this being such an amazing day for the team."

AFP

Medvedev, Berrettini suffer shock ATP Cup losses

Sydney, Australia - Daniil Medvedev and Matteo Berrettini both slumped to shock defeats in their opening matches of the season at the ATP Cup on Sunday, but there were no mistakes from Alexander Zverev.

US Open champion Medvedev is leading a Russian team in Sydney depleted by injuries and COVID-19 as they look to defend the teams title won against Italy last year.

But the world number two, who captured four tour-level crowns in 2021, was stunned by impressive 35th-ranked Frenchman Ugo Humbert despite leading by a set and 3-0.

The Frenchman rallied to pull off a big upset 6-7 (5/7), 7-5, 7-6 (7/2) in a gruelling 2 hours 55 minutes as Medvedev, red-faced from the heat, ran out of steam.

"It was very tough today, but I'm very happy," said Humbert after one of the biggest wins of his career.

"I had some opportunities in the first set, and I just tried to stay relaxed, stay focused on what I had to do and it was a great match."



Daniil Medvedev



Matteo Berrettini

With fifth-ranked Andrey Rublev missing after contracting coronavirus at an Abu Dhabi exhibition last month, unheralded Roman Safiullin was drafted in as Russia's second singles player.

He saved 15 of 19 break points to earn a 2-6, 7-5, 6-3 win over France's Arthur Rinderknech to set the stage for Medvedev, who could be the top seed at this month's Australian Open if defending champion Novak Djokovic fails to show up.

Djokovic has refused to confirm if he has been vaccinated

against COVID-19, a requirement at the opening Grand Slam of the year, and pulled out of the ATP Cup.

The tie went to a deciding doubles rubber with Medvedev backing up with Safiullin to win and seal the points.

Russia are in a tough group that also includes hosts Australia and 2021 runner-up Italy, led by world number seven Berrettini, who was also beaten, crashing to 34th-ranked Alex de Minaur 6-3, 7-6 (7/4).

"I've worked really hard to be

here, I'm in the best shape of my life and ready to have a big year," said de Minaur, in front of a noisy home crowd.

Earlier, Italian number two Jannik Sinner crushed Australia's Max Purcell 6-1, 6-3.

Happy

Only the winning nations progress to the semi-finals from each of the four groups in the event, which runs until January 9.

In the other night match, Zverev's Germany were up against a British team led by

Cameron Norrie, who had a breakout 2021 season that saw him storm through the rankings to end at 12.

But he was no match for the world number three, who shook off first set rust to overwhelm the Briton 7-6 (7/2), 6-1.

"It's the first match of the season and it's never going to be the best match of your life, but I'm happy," said Zverev, who captured his second ATP Finals title in November - his sixth trophy of the year.

Britain's Dan Evans won the opening singles match against Germany's Jan-Lennard Struff 6-1, 6-2.

The United States, meanwhile, won their clash against Canada, with big-serving veteran John Isner thrashing Brayden Schnur 6-1, 6-3 after he stepped in at short notice for 14th-ranked Denis Shapovalov, who is still fatigued after testing positive for COVID-19 on his arrival in Sydney. "I'm disappointed not to be able to play the first match, but I just didn't feel ready physically yet," said Shapovalov.

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Joy, Shanto build on to give edge to Bangladesh



New Zealand celebrate the wicket of Najmul Hossain Shanto on day two of the first Test at the Bay Oval, in Mount Maunganui on Sunday (AFP)

Century stand for the second wicket brings visitors to within 153 runs of New Zealand’s first-innings total

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand - Bangladesh were desperate to have their batters go about their work in a shanto (calm) way, and find some joy in the process after a tough 2021. Appropriately, Najmul Hossain Shanto and Mahmudul Hasan Joy, with a patient 104-run second-wicket stand, did the needful in the first Test against New Zealand in Mount Maunganui.

New Zealand are the Test world champions, especially formidable at home. Therefore, to bowl them out for 328 and then finish the second day on 175 for

2 - just 153 short - with the runs coming from two young batters means a lot for a struggling Test side like Bangladesh.

“The younger guys today played phenomenally,” Neil Wagner, who has picked up both the Bangladesh wickets to fall so far, said after the day’s play.

“I thought they played patiently. They didn’t really give too many opportunities. They hung in there. They were prepared to dig in. They left the ball quite a lot. It made us ask more questions, and take wickets. It gave them the opportunity to score.

“I thought that they played really well. Full credit to them. I thought when the ball was there to be scored, they scored. They also left well and defended well.”

But, to make it Bangladesh’s day, it needed more than just those runs. Shoriful Islam, the 20-year-old left-arm quick, added Rachin Ravindra’s wicket to the two he had on the first day to get Bangladesh going on the second morning, and offspinner Mehidy Hasan Miraz, very experienced despite being just 24, got rid of most of the tail. This was the first time New Zealand were bowled out for less than 350 by Bangladesh on home turf.

That put the onus on the batters. If they failed to build on the bowlers’ work, the pressure would be right back on the top four, who were woeful at home against Pakistan recently.

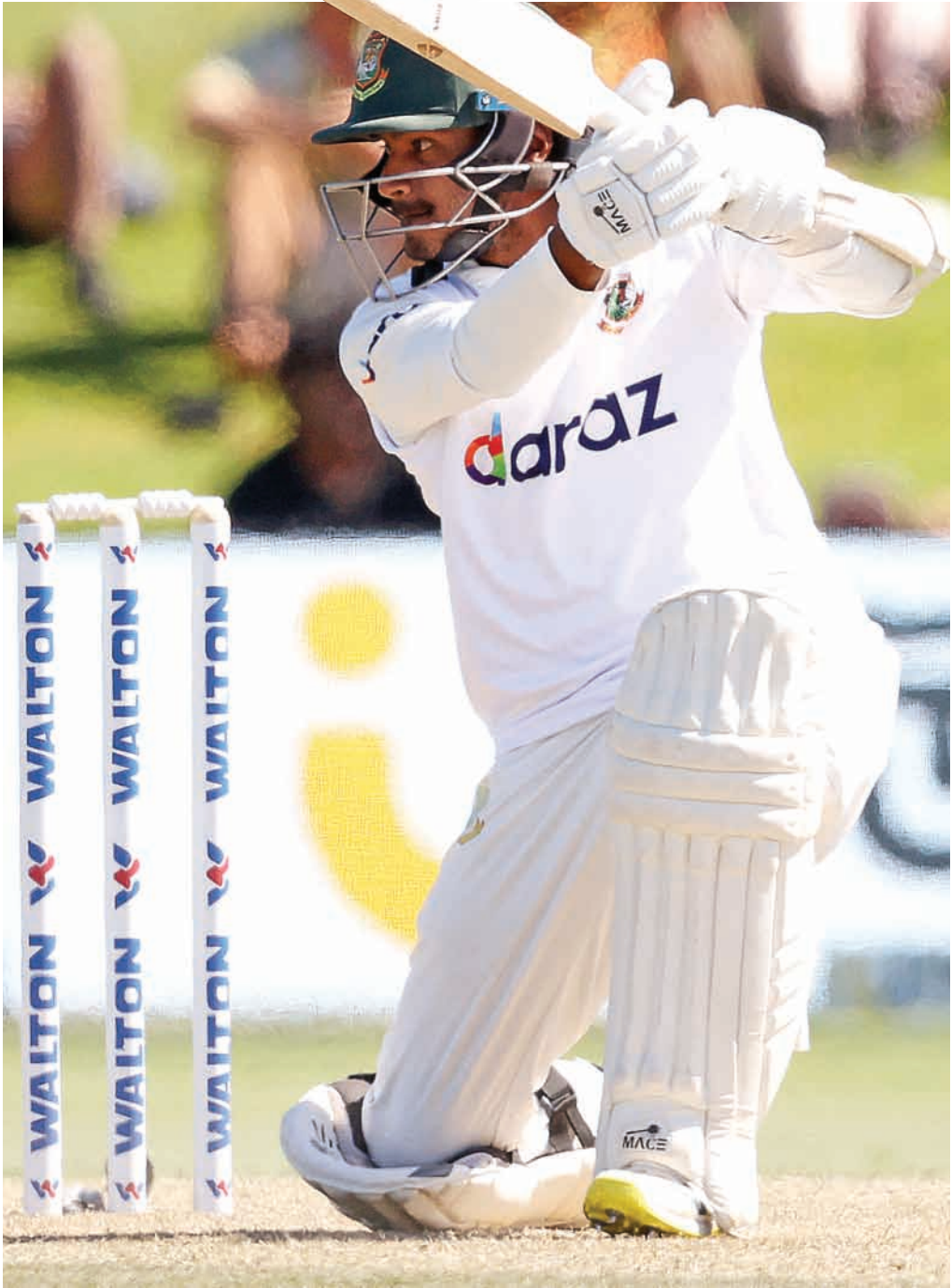
Shadman Islam, older than the

others at 26, 23-year-old Shanto and 21-year-old Joy were part of the top four that looked incapable of buying a run against the likes of Shaheen Shah Afridi and Hasan Ali, and were expected to be under fire against New Zealand’s quicks. On the day, they were not.

The younger guys played phenomenally. I think they played really well

NEIL WAGNER

Shadman and Joy added 43 for the first wicket to set a platform, but Shanto batted like the ideal No 3, mixing defence and attack smartly. He was the aggressor of the two during their



Bangladesh's batsman Mahmudul Hasan Joy plays a shot on day two of the Test match in Mount Maunganui (AFP)

big stand, driving beautifully - he hit Neil Wagner, Trent Boult and Kyle Jamieson for fours straight down the ground.

“Joy and Shadman gave us a nice platform. It was handy for me. When I joined Joy at the crease, we just focused ball-by-ball, over-by-over and then on to the number of hours,” Shanto said. “We didn’t want to force the issue. We didn’t set big goals, like runs or overs. Joy batted well, but I think it would have been a better day had I remained unbeaten at the end too.”

Joy did survive a close lbw shout off Wagner - the New Zealanders thought he had inside-edged the ball, but a review would have sent the batter back. But otherwise, it was a chanceless 211-ball stay for Joy, who ended the day on 70. Shanto got out for 64, but he had done the job before that.

Mehidy, who has come up through Bangladesh’s Under-19 system like Joy, Shanto, Shadman and Shoriful, said that the batting performance had given the team a lot of confidence.

“It was a very good partnership,” he said. “Our top order wasn’t getting these partnerships recently, so this has given us a lot of confidence. We have to bat well in the first session tomorrow. I think we have a long way to go.”

Mehidy was particularly effusive in his praise for Joy’s performance.

“His innings is definitely a positive sign for our team,” he said. “His batting definitely helped the team. Joy batted well, took his time. He didn’t look like he was a new player. He adjusted well to the conditions and situation,” Mehidy said.

Cricinfo

SCOREBOARD			
NEW ZEALAND 1 ST INNINGS			
T Latham	c L Das b S Islam	1	
W Young	run out	52	
D Conway	c L Das b M Haque	122	
R Taylor	c S Islam b S Islam	31	
H Nicholls	c S Islam b M Haque	75	
T Blundell	b Ebadat Hossain	11	
R Ravindra	c S Islam b S Islam	4	
K Jamieson	c S Islam b M H Miraz	6	
T Southee	c M Haque b M H Miraz	6	
N Wagner	c L Das b M H Miraz	0	
Trent Boult	not out	9	
Extras:	(b 1, lb 4, nb 3, w 3)	11	
TOTAL:	328 all out in 108.1 overs		
Fall of wickets: 1-1, 2-139, 3-189, 4-227, 5-258, 6-265, 7-297, 8-316, 9-316, 10-328			
Bowling: T Ahmed 26-7-77-0, S Islam 26-7-69-3, E Hossain 18-3-75-1, M H Miraz 32-9-86-3, N H Shanto 2-0-10-0, M Haque 4.1-0-6-2			
BANGLADESH 1 ST INNINGS			
S Islam	c & b Wagner	22	
M H Joy	not out	70	
N H Shanto	c Young b Wagner	64	
M Haque	not out	8	
Extras:	(lb 4, w 2, pen 5)	11	
TOTAL:	175 for two in 67 overs		
Fall of wickets: 1-43, 2-147			
Bowling: T Southee 15-2-41-0, T Boult 14-5-37-0, K Jamieson 13-4-35-0, N Wagner 16-5-27-2, R Ravindra 9-1-26-0			

India can improve on first Test performance: Dravid

Johannesburg, South Africa - India coach Rahul Dravid said that his side had room for improvement ahead of the second Test against South Africa starting at the Wanderers Stadium on Monday.

At a pre-match press conference on Sunday, Dravid sent out a clear message that there was no room for complacency following India’s 113-run win in the first Test in Centurion.

Dravid praised the Indian bowlers for twice bowling out South Africa for under 200 and gave credit to the top-order batsmen for setting up the game with their batting on the first day.

“It’s not very often you come to overseas conditions and get to 272 for three on the first day,” he said. “We know we could probably have got more (runs). To get bowled out for 327, that’s something we’d like to improve.”

Dravid added that India could also have batted better in the second innings, when they were dismissed for 174.

“It was a good Test match but there are areas where we can learn and improve because



Rahul Dravid

we know we are going to have to do it in this game.”

India’s recently-appointed coach said there was an awareness in the team that in the past that ‘maybe we’ve slipped up a little after winning a game. We’re going to work very hard because I expect South Africa to respond tomorrow’.

Dravid gave credit to Virat Kohli’s role as captain and said it was ‘just a matter of time’ before Kohli started making big scores again. “Virat has been a phenomenal leader on and off the field. I thought the team was in a really good space leading into the first Test and a lot of that was due to Virat.”

AFP

Dravid said he expected a typical Wanderers pitch. “There might be something for the bowlers, as there usually is, and then for it to flatten out a bit, although it does get a little harder for batsmen towards the end.” Dravid said India were aware of the need to improve their over-rate after being docked a world championship point for failing to bowl their overs in time in Centurion.

Elgar ‘shocked’ by De Kock retirement

South African captain Dean Elgar said Kyle Verreynne would replace the now-retired Quinton de Kock as wicket-keeper-batsman and hinted that there might be ‘other combinations’ that would change in the home team’s line-up.

Elgar said he was ‘pretty shocked’ by De Kock’s decision to retire from Test cricket, which was announced after the first Test. “I wasn’t aware that it was going to happen,” said Elgar. “Sitting down with Quinny he explained the reasons for it and I very much respect his decision.”

AFP

Kohli eyes historic series victory for India over South Africa

Johannesburg, South Africa - Indian captain Virat Kohli has every reason to be confident his team can seal an historic Test series win in South Africa when they face the hosts in the second Test at the Wanderers Stadium on Monday.

“It’s a ground we all loving playing on and we are looking forward to it,” said Kohli after India won the first Test at Centurion by 113 runs on Thursday.

The numbers bear out Kohli’s optimism.

India have yet to be beaten in a Test match at South Africa’s premier cricket stadium and have a record of two wins and three draws since their first tour of South Africa in 1992/93.

Despite the Wanderers being renowned as a ground favouring fast bowlers - which should have put India at a disadvantage on some of their earlier tours, before the emergence of their potent current pace bowling attack - India have performed consistently well in Johannesburg.

The ground holds particularly happy memories for some of the Indian touring party.

New coach Rahul Dravid made his first Test century in a



drawn match in 1996/97 and ten years later captained India to their first Test win in South Africa.

Kohli gave a batting masterclass when he made 119 and 96 in a high-scoring draw in 2013/14 to enable India to set the hosts a seemingly impossible target of 458 runs to win.

In that match, though, South Africa came close to beating India for the only time in Johan-

nesburg, making 450 for eight in a dramatic draw.

Kohli then led India to victory on a sub-standard pitch four seasons ago, a win he has highlighted as a ‘milestone’ which gave the side the belief to follow up with a series win in Australia last January.

They also lead England 2-1 with the final Test - called off last year due to COVID-19 in the Indian camp - to be played

later in 2022.

Kohli, Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane all made crucial runs on a pitch which was halted at one stage because conditions were regarded as dangerous, while Mohammed Shami, one of the heroes of the win in Centurion, took five for 28 in the second innings.

A series win in South Africa remains a final frontier for India, who now have the opportunity to wrap up an historic triumph with a match to spare.

Likely teams:

South Africa: Dean Elgar (capt), Aiden Markram, Sarel Erwee, Keegan Petersen, Rassie van der Dussen, Temba Bavuma, Kyle Verreynne (wkt), Ryan Rickelton, Wiaan Mulder, Marco Jansen, Keshav Maharaj, Kagiso Rabada, Duanne Olivier, Lungi Ngidi, Glenton Stuurman.

India: Virat Kohli (capt), KL Rahul, Mayank Agarwal, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane, Risabh Pant (wkt), Ravichandran Ashwin, Shardul Thakur, Mohammed Shami, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj.

AFP