

SAYYID ASAAD BIDS FAREWELL TO SWISS AMBASSADOR



On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of HM the Sultan, received on Wednesday Balz Abplanalp, Ambassador of Switzerland to Oman, bidding him farewell at the end of his tour of duty

Monthly subsidy, benefits extended for laid off Omanis

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Council of Ministers has approved to extend the disbursement of job security benefit and monthly subsidy to Omanis who were terminated from their services in Oman and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The Government Communication Centre has stated that the period for disbursing the job security benefit and acceptance of late applications will be until the end of June 2022. There will also be an extension of the monthly subsidy disbursement for those who were terminated from their services in other GCC countries in civil, military and private sectors whose services were terminated in the period starting from May 26, 2021 and did not join work until the end of the year 2021, as per the conditions established for entitlement to the subsidy for the first time. The subsidy will be paid from the date of submitting the application until the end of June 2022. Also, it was decided to postpone the application of Article 12 of the job security system, which included the need for the subscription period to not be less than 12 months for entitlement to the benefit in November 2021. This article will be implemented starting November 1, 2022.

The period for disbursing the job security benefit will be until the end of June 2022

itary or private sectors from March 2020 and did not join work until May 25, 2021. The monthly subsidy payment for this category will continue until the end of June 2022. This is in addition to disbursing a monthly subsidy to Omanis

working in GCC countries in civil, military and private sectors whose services were terminated in the period starting from May 26, 2021 and did not join work until the end of the year 2021, as per the conditions established for entitlement to the subsidy for the first time. The subsidy will be paid from the date of submitting the application until the end of June 2022. Also, it was decided to postpone the application of Article 12 of the job security system, which included the need for the subscription period to not be less than 12 months for entitlement to the benefit in November 2021. This article will be implemented starting November 1, 2022.

RO170mn to boost digital transformation

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The sultanate will invest RO170mn over the next few years in the Digital Transformation Programme, which aims to enhance national competencies, Oman News Agency reported on Wednesday. The programme, being implemented from 2021 to 2025, is carried out by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, and will include investments in improving processes, re-engineering government services and improving digital infrastructure. The programme includes a roadmap for utilising modern techniques to develop public sector functioning, notably by creating digital platforms for services, as well as a legal and regulatory climate that empowers digital transformation. Digital transformation is an executive programme of the National Digital Economy Programme and one of the main enablers to fulfil the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 by creating a flexible and innovative government agency, which will provide high quality, smart government services. The vision of the Digital Transformation Programme stems from the need of enabling the government sector to work innovatively to provide smart services, adopt proactive measures, and offer a seamless digital experience to the electronic community.



The most important pillars of the programme are to simplify procedures and conduct proactive operations, including reviewing the current government services provided to beneficiaries - citizens, businessmen, employees and the government units. The programme takes into account classification of services, making information available, documenting procedures, and simplifying operations to ensure ease and speed of government response. The volume of investment in the programme is expected to be RO170mn to be utilised in automating basic services, propagation of services via the Internet, development of centralised digital solutions, improvement of the digital infrastructure and empowerment of national teams specialised in digital transformation skills.

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Foreign Minister meets honorary consuls



Muscat - H E Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, held a meeting with honorary consuls of the sultanate to Denmark, Frankfurt, Cyprus, Ireland, Armenia and Hungary on Wednesday.

The meeting was held within the framework of a visit programme set up by the Foreign Ministry for the honorary consuls of Oman.

The meeting reviewed cooperation and exploring investment opportunities between Oman and their respective countries.

The meeting was attended by Khalid Hashel al Musalhi, Head of the Minister's Office Department in the Foreign Ministry and a number of ministry officials.

Earlier, the honorary consuls visited Oman's pavilion in Expo 2020 Dubai and lauded its representation of the heritage and future vision of the sultanate.

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Sayyid Badr receives Lithuanian minister



Muscat - H E Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, received Dr Mantas Adomenas, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, on Wednesday.

The two sides reviewed bilateral relations and underscored their keenness to consolidate these ties in various fields.

It was attended by H E Sheikh Khalifa Ali al Harthy, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, and H E Renatas Norkus, Ambassador of Lithuania to Oman.

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ROP TO PARTICIPATE IN JOINT EXERCISE IN KSA



A unit of Royal Oman Police left for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to participate in a joint tactical exercise, called Arabian Gulf Security 3, on Wednesday (Supplied Photo)

Fish sculpture raises awareness on pollution

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omani artists Abdulkareem Abdullah al Rawahi and Yousef Saif al Rawahi have erected a sculpture of a fish made with waste material at Shatti al Qurm to spread awareness on the effect of pollution on marine life and the need to preserve the environment.

The sculpture is part of Oman Environmental Holding Services Company's (be'ah) Oman Tiista-hil campaign that aims to curb littering in the tourist areas.

Abdulkareem and Yousef had earlier created a sculpture on a similar concept in Sur, South Sharqiyah. The new creation unveiled last week is made with 1,000 discarded plastic bottles, 170 pieces of plastic



Abdulkareem Abdullah al Rawahi



Yousef Saif al Rawahi

pipes and 850kg of scrap metal which were collected by the two sculptors in their everyday life. "It depicts the damage to the marine environment and re-

minds us that pollution represents a real threat," Abdulkareem said. Measuring 370cm in height, 700cm in length and 230cm in width, the sculpture

took six months to make. be'ah will exhibit the sculpture in various wilayats.

"Finding the right waste materials for the sculpture was a

challenge. It was a painstaking process and needed a lot of patience. We collected the coloured plastic bottles and fishing nets from beaches. The plastic and the fishing nets represent how these are choking and suffocation marine creatures," Abdulkareem said.

His sculptures have been installed in other countries, too, including Italy, Tunisia, Qatar, Bahrain and Morocco.

"I urge other Omani sculptors to also do their bit to spread awareness of the importance of preserving the environment," Abdulkareem said.

be'ah estimates that the world loses more than 1mn marine birds, 100,000 marine mammals, turtles and fish due to plastic waste every year. By 2050, 99 per cent of marine birds will have ingested plastic.



(Supplied photos)

Experts hail formation of Royal Academy for Administration

Muscat - Following Royal Decree No 2/2022, which established the Royal Academy for Administration (RAA) under the honorary patronage of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, specialists in administrative and academia said that the academy constitutes a major step forward in boosting enhancing administrative training and qualification level in the sultanate.

Sayyid Zaki Hilal al Busaidi, CEO of the former Institute of Public Administration, told Oman News Agency that the establishment of RAA affirms the care and attention accorded to human resources by His Majesty the Sultan.

He added that the academy will upgrade the capabilities of Omani human resources in the public and private sectors in a manner that aligns with the requirements of Oman Vision 2040.

Yahya Khamis al Hussaini, CEO of Muscat Statistical Consulting Centre, said that RAA will contribute to the improvement of government performance by devising clear-cut plans for the development of leadership skills.

Dr Obaid Said al Shaqsi, Associate Professor of Mass Communications at Sultan Qaboos University, said that the establishment of RAA reflects the vision of His Majesty the Sultan to meet the requirements of the next stage of development in

RAA will upgrade the capabilities of Omani human resources in the public and private sectors in a manner that aligns with the requirements of Oman Vision 2040

SAYYID ZAKI
AL BUSAIDI

Oman, notably when the need arises for training of nationals in administrative fields.

Dr Rajab Ali al Owaisi, an expert in social and educational studies in the State Council, said RAA will be a national centre for expertise and provide consultancies to enrich the experience of the State's Administrative Apparatus.

Dr Humaid al Nofali, Director of the Culture Department at Oman National Committee for Education, Culture and Science, said RAA ushers in a new era of administrative development that fits with the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

According to Dr Mohammed Fayel al Araimi, associate professor at Sur University College, RAA has been established to help Oman transform into an advanced nation.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	24	13
Doha	24	16
Kuwait City	20	16
Manama	24	16
Muscat	24	16
Riyadh	27	14

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.31am
Sunrise	6.51am
Duhr	12.20pm
Asr	3.24pm
Maghrib	5.45pm
Isha	6.59pm

Al Madina Takaful extends its heartiest congratulations to its chairman Dr. Mohammed Ali Al Barwani on being conferred the Order of Royal Commendation, second class by **His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik** for his contribution to the society.



We wish our chairman continued success in serving the beloved nation. He was recognised for his work in the fields of labour market, recruitment and economy. The order was presented by Sayyid Khalid Hilal al Busaidi, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court.



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Hayy al Sharq project to be completed in 2024

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Minister of Heritage and Tourism has announced that the Hayy al Sharq project developed by Muscat National Development and Investment Company (ASAAS) in the wilayat of Barka will be completed in 2024.

H E Salim al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, visited the project site on Tuesday.

The ministry will also set up a museum of maritime history in the wilayat of Sur in South Sharqiyah, H E Mahrouqi announced.

"After the opening of the Fatah al Khair Centre, the ministry is preparing a plan to establish the Maritime History Museum. It will activate tourism movement in the province," the minister tweeted recently.



The Hayy al Sharq project and Omani Botanical Garden are in the process of adding a new dimension in the tourism and entertainment sector

H E SALIM AL MAHROUQI



In response to H E Mahrouqi's announcement, Omar al Balushi tweeted, "We thank you for your efforts in establishing various

projects. I hope Qurm Park will also be developed because it has a large area and good design. It needs to be developed to be able

to hold recreational events to stimulate domestic tourism and create spaces where people can relax."

Said al Maamari said "The ministry's tourism projects are in the right direction. I hope they develop more entertainment projects in various parts of the sultanate. I would also like to see residential towers being built on the Bastian coast near the sea."

According to Dawood al Jama'i, Omani youth need a world-class amusement park and a giant water park that also attracts tourists from other countries.

Hayy al Sharq is envisioned to be a one-of-a-kind destination, anchored by an integrated theme park with a wildlife park, water park and edutainment centre, while also featuring a collection of 3, 4 and 5-star hotels, residential clusters, and a wide array of dining and leisure options.

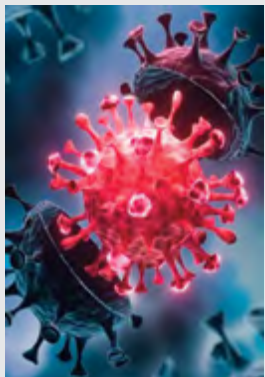
"The Hayy al Sharq project

and Omani Botanical Garden are in the process of adding a new dimension in the tourism and entertainment sector to meet demands of community members," said H E Mahrouqi.

In November 2021, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism inaugurated Fatah al Khair Centre in the wilayat of Sur, South Sharqiyah. The centre has on display more than 400 restored cultural pieces highlighting the heritage of Sur. The display items include shipbuilding and navigational tools, publications and jewellery.

"The project is in line with the priorities of Oman Vision 2040. Its strategic objectives and executive programmes are to enhance national identity and culture," a ministry statement said.

COVID-19 UPDATE



718 new cases

Muscat - The Ministry of Health (MoH) registered 718 new cases of COVID-19 on Wednesday. There was no new related death.

This takes the total number of COVID-19 cases to 309,588 in Oman. 'The total number of COVID-19-related deaths is 4,119,' MoH stated.

It added that 113 new cases have recovered, accounting for a total of 301,287 recoveries.

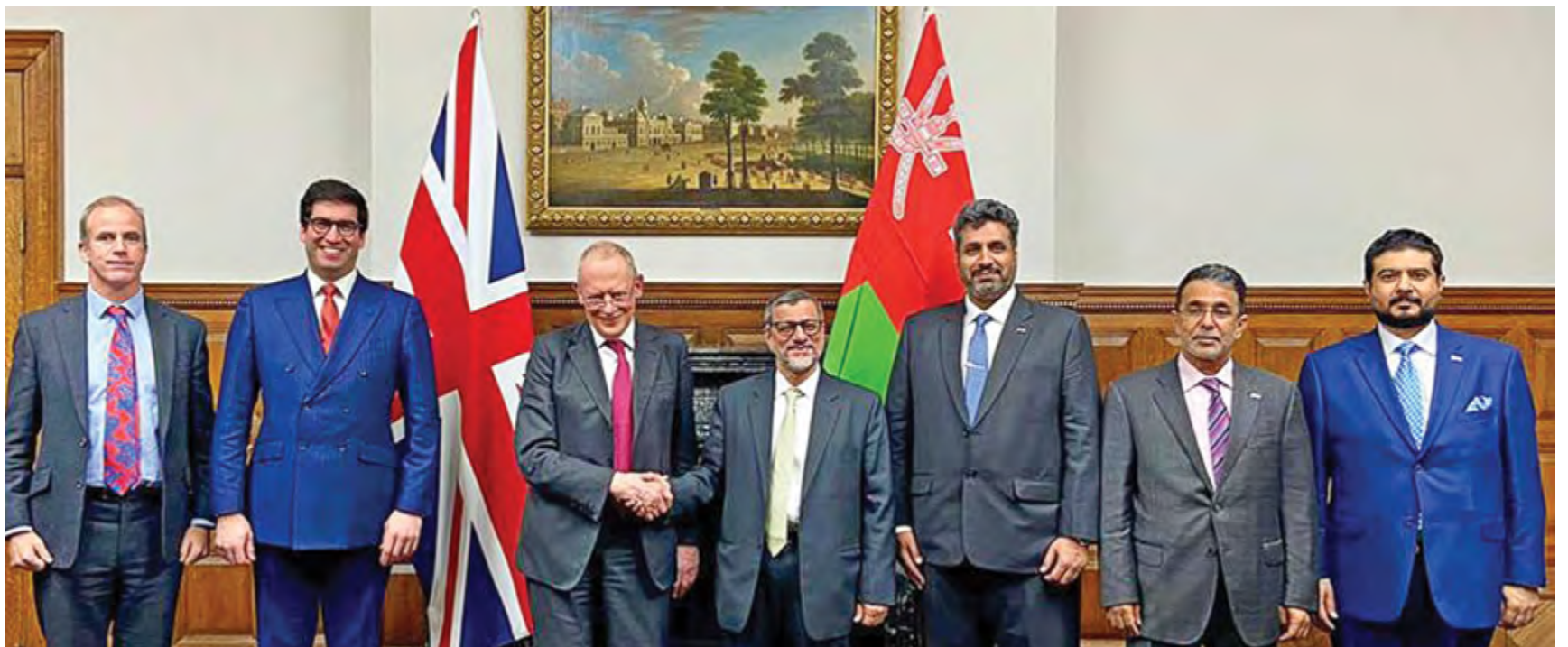
Oman, UK ink MoU to boost trade ties

London - An agreement of partnership was signed on Wednesday between the sultanate, represented by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), and the United Kingdom, represented by the British Office for Investment.

The agreement, signed in London, aims to bolster relations and high-value investment volume between the two countries. The agreement comes within the framework of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the British Office for Investment and OIA aimed to enhance joint economic relations.

The trade volume between the two countries has reached £1bn annually. Direct British investments comprised 50 per cent of the foreign investment volume in the sultanate over the past years.

The agreement of partnership aims to invest in specific fields, namely clean energy and information technology. The signing of the agreement comes after the meeting of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik with



Prime Minister Boris Johnson last month, which explored means of enhancing bilateral relations.

Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, said that the agreement is in line with the as-

pirations of the two countries to develop bilateral relations and enhance cooperation.

On his turn, Abdulsalam Mohammed al Murshidi, chairman of OIA, affirmed that the agreement embodies the goals of

Oman Vision 2040, especially in the areas of sustaining the financial situation and attracting foreign investments.

According to the British Minister of State for Trade and Investment, the sultanate is a

strategic partner in the Middle East. He added that the UK is keen to boost trade and investment relations with Oman.

The agreement is expected to contribute to the establishment of economic projects in Oman,

including ones in the fields of construction, industry and services. The agreement coincides with the current meetings being held by the strategic Omani-British advisory team.

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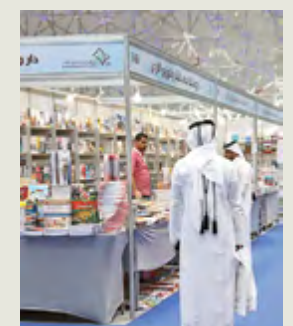
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Oman to participate in Doha book fair



Muscat - The sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and the Ministry of Information, will take part in Doha International Book Fair 2022.

This cultural event will kick off on Thursday and continue till January 22, 2022.

The participation aims at highlighting the cultural, civilisational, literary and historic aspects of the sultanate, as well as showcase Omani literary works.

The sultanate's pavilion in the book fair will include new and varied literary, artistic, historic, intellectual and scientific books for government institutions, besides several publications for Omani private libraries.

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FREE CLASSIFIED LISTING

Muscat Daily now offers free classified listings for individuals in the following categories: Situations Wanted/Accommodation Wanted or Available/Sale of Household Items/Car for Sale or Wanted/Matrimonial Alliances (Word limit is 35) Please email your listing to dailyclassifieds@apexmedia.co.om or call 99251604

GCC banks on recovery path in 2022: Report

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) banks are set to benefit from a regional economic recovery this year amid higher oil prices, still supportive government spending, and normalising non-oil activity, S&P Global Ratings said in a new report.

"We expect banks' asset quality indicators to deteriorate only slightly as regulatory forbearance measures have helped the corporate sector to deal with the negative effects of the pandemic," said S&P Global Ratings credit analyst Mohamed Damak. "In our view, the nonperforming loan ratio will rise in the next 12-24 months without exceeding 5 per cent, compared with 3.7 per cent at September 30, 2021," Damak added.

Furthermore, GCC banks should benefit from policy rate hikes in 2022 by the US Federal Reserve, which will prompt a similar reaction from GCC central banks given their currency pegs.



"Lower global liquidity is likely to have a limited impact on GCC banks thanks to their strong net external asset positions or limited net external debt positions. Qatar is more vulnerable than other countries due to its large and expanding net external debt position but there are some mitigants," he said.

"Moreover, strong capitalisation and government support will continue to reinforce regional banks' creditworthiness," Damak concluded.

S&P expects the Brent oil price to average US\$65 per bar-

rel in 2022. 'Improving economic sentiment and higher hydrocarbon production should lead to accelerated economic growth in the region. However, an uncontrolled resurgence in the pandemic that reduces mobility could hamper the global and regional economic recovery,' the report said.

Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates are the only two countries where nominal GDP at year-end 2022 will remain slightly lower than 2019.

This is because of the weight of the hospitality and real estate

sectors in their economies, the report further said.

Residential mortgage lending continues to drive strong growth in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is also seeing expansion, mainly spurred by retail lending and the oil sector.

UAE lending growth remains sluggish but S&P expects an acceleration as economic sentiment improves. "Bahrain's double-digit growth is explained by acquisitions and expansion outside the country while Oman is recovering slowly," the S&P report said.

Global growth could slow sharply on Omicron: WB

Washington, US - Global growth will 'decelerate markedly' this year, but the Omicron variant of COVID-19 that is spreading rapidly worldwide could make the situation worse and exacerbate labour shortages and supply chain snarls, the World Bank (WB) warned on Tuesday.

In its latest Global Economic Prospects report, the Washington-based development lender cut its forecast for world economic growth this year to 4.1 per cent after the 5.5 per cent rebound last year.

The forecasts for growth last year and this year were both 0.2 per cent lower than estimates released in June.

However, the bank warned, "Various downside risks cloud the outlook, including simultaneous Omicron-driven economic disruptions, further supply bottlenecks [and] a de-anchoring of inflation expectations," the report said.

That could further reduce global growth this year to as low as 3.4 per cent, a drop of 0.7 percentage points.

World Bank president David Malpass worries about the 'huge toll' the pandemic is inflicting on people in poor countries, which could have ramifications for the future.

"We're seeing troubling reversals in poverty, nutrition and health. The reversal and education or scope from schools closures will have a permanent impact," he told reporters. "I'm very worried about the permanent scar on development."

Ayhan Kose, head of bank's forecast unit, said the Omicron



David Malpass

strain is causing fewer restrictions than the initial outbreak, which means the overall impact could be more benign.

However, he cautioned, "If it stays around much longer, and cases remain elevated and continue pressuring health systems, under that scenario, the global growth will be lower."

That would exacerbate ongoing struggles with labour shortages and global production and transportation snarls that have fueled a wave of price increases.

"The Omicron variant shows us once again, the pandemic is still with us and we need to learn how to live with the pandemic," he said.

Faced with inflation at a 40-year high, the US Federal Reserve is expected to begin raising interest rates soon, and perhaps take more aggressive steps, which will raise borrowing costs for developing countries already burdened with record debt.

That, in turn, could erode business and household confi-

dence, lowering consumption and trade flows, a key engine of global growth.

US, China slowing

Kose stresses that vaccination remains crucial, since the threat of new, more transmissible or more virulent variants will persist until a substantial part of the world's population is vaccinated.

"The share of vaccinated population in many economies is expected to surpass 70 per cent by mid-2022, but the prospects for vaccination progress remain uncertain in some countries," especially in the poorest nations, the report said.

'At recent vaccination rates, only about a third of the LIC (low income countries) population will have received even one vaccine dose by the end of 2023.'

In its report, the bank sharply lowered its forecast for US growth this year to 3.7 per cent, 0.5 points lower than its previous estimate, following the country's 5.6 per cent expansion in 2021.

The World Bank notes that Washington's 10-year, US\$1.2tn infrastructure spending plan signed in November should provide a 'small boost' to the US economy in the near term, with more effects felt in later years.

However, the American economy faces "tenacious inflation, and an even faster tightening of monetary policy could lead to weaker-than-expected growth."

For China, growth is now expected to slow to 5.1 per cent in 2022, a 0.3 point downgrade, from 8 per cent last year.

AFP

CMA joins XBRL International and launches XBRL platform

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) joined the XBRL International concurrently with the launch of XBRL platform.

XBRL International is a global not-for-profit organisation which develops and maintains the XBRL standards and related specifications and prepare and issue XBRL taxonomies to upgrade and improve disclosure processes in the financial markets, a statement published on the CMA website said.

XBRL (extensible business reporting language) is the open international standard for digital business reporting.

This new partnership is part of CMA's strategy to prepare an



appropriate investment environment to enhance the performance of the capital market and insurance sectors through continued development of the legislative and technological systems related to disclosure of the issuers of securities and insurance companies. It is in line with

Oman vision 2040 to reach digital transformation which is a requirement to ease the services for all the parties as an important part of the national priorities.

XBRL International is a global consortium of approximately 650 public and private organisations working together to sup-

port the collection, sharing and use of financial data based on XBRL language to upgrade the efficiency of disclosure process in the capital markets to enhance the accuracy of financial data and avail to the investors on timely basis.

The CMA had earlier organised introductory sessions on XBRL reports in collaboration with the IRIS Business Services Limited, the project contractor.

The workshops were attended by capital market and insurance institutions and related parties such as the public joint stock companies, insurance firms, investment funds, the companies operating in the field of securities beside representatives of audit firms accredited by the CMA.

Hungarian, Saudi oil firms to buy Polish assets

Warsaw, Poland - Poland's state-owned refiner PKN Orlen announced on Wednesday plans to sell oil assets to Saudi Aramco and Hungary's MOL in order to meet EU conditions for its merger with domestic rival Grupa Lotos.

Saudi Aramco will buy a stake in Lotos's refinery and MOL will purchase several hundred Lotos petrol stations to fulfil the conditions.

"This is a historic moment... We're forming the strongest fuel and energy group in this part of Europe," PKN Orlen CEO Daniel Obajtek tweeted. "The merger of PKN Orlen and Grupa Lotos is a tremendous opportunity for Polish development," he added.

The takeover plan was announced in 2018 but Orlen had to first address competition concerns raised by the European Commission.

The terms set by the commission involved agreeing to sell off certain Lotos assets.

AFP

CONDOLENCES



*The Chairman & Board of Directors / Advisors
and the entire team of Bridge Group of
Companies offer their sincere condolences to
Managing Director of Bridge Consulting-Oman,*

AMARJEET MAJUMDAR

on the sad demise of his father

ASIT MAJUMDAR

May His Soul Rest In Peace

ANNOUNCEMENT OF TENDERS

The Rural Areas Electricity Company (S.A.O.C) (announce to float Tender No. **TANWEER- 01/2022**)

Supply, Installation and Commissioning of Fuel Meters for Rural Areas Electricity Company "Tanweer" Power Stations in Al Wusta Governorate

The Conditions:

- 1- Collection of Tender:** Interested and Specialized Companies which registered with Tanweer and Tender Board may obtain the CD of the tender documents from Procurement & Contracts Department, Rural Areas Electricity Company at Al Seeb, till the date of **20 January 2022** against a non-refundable amount of RO (70/-) for each set of documents. The fees for the tenders shall be deposited on Tanweer account 0423010783090041 - Bank Muscat and for more information please contact via email address i.e. tender.purchase@tanweer.nama.om , or call us on phone number: 24250824
- 2- Bank Guarantee:** The Tenderer should enclose original bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for an amount equivalent to (1%) of the tender value with a validity of (90) Days from the last date of submission and addressed to Rural Areas Electricity Company SAOC (Tanweer).
- 3- Offers Submission:**
 - A-** Original bid bond along Cover letters shall be placed by bidders inside the red waxed Tender's envelopes as communicated to bidders by Tanweer. Tender soft copy must be serialized according to the numbers of the tender items.
 - B-** Tender bids shall be provided separately on a CD Roms , along with original cover letters in each envelop. Bids and cover letters shall bear the bidder's official seal and must be signed in either blue or red ink, but not black. A true soft copy of the bids shall be provided on a CD in an inner envelope marked "Copy". Bids who do not comply with these requirements will be overlooked.
 - C-** Bidders shall write the following details on the cover of CD:
 - ☐ Tender name and number.
 - ☐ Addressed to the **Chairman of Tender Committee**, Tanweer.
 - ☐ Prequalification / Technical Proposal / Commercial Proposal / Bid Bond.
- 4- Submission Location:** The Completed bids in CD should be deposited in the Tender Box at Tanweer Main Office at Wilayat Al Seeb, before 12:00 PM on the date of **9 February 2022**.
- 5- Tender Price (R.O):** 5% VAT is inclusive.
- 6- Tanweer** without mentioning the reason is not bound to accept the lowest or any other tender and not bond to refund tender purchase fees if you are not qualified to participate the tender.

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Mazoon Dairy joins hands with Al Mouj Muscat Marathon 2022 as official sponsor

This year's Al Mouj Muscat Marathon, taking place over the weekend of February 11-12, is set to be a huge hit with a great turnout in all the race categories which includes entries from schools, corporates, first-timers as well as elite athletes. The number of registrations among young runners is commendable.

The participants are enthusiastically preparing to take on Oman's biggest race.

The race is a great opportunity to start 2022 in the right way by committing to an active and healthy lifestyle, and this year's event has brought together key figures in Oman's drive for greater opportunities and awareness of the benefits of physical activity.

Mazoon Dairy has come onboard as one of the main sponsors in this year's edition, where the company's employees will be present during the marathon activities to provide dairy products and fresh juices to runners, spectators and visitors to the



race village.

Khalid al Mahruqi, branding manager at Mazoon Dairy, said, "The Al Mouj Muscat Marathon is one of the most important sporting and social events in the Sultanate that intersect with the

goals and vision of the Mazoon Dairy Company, through which we seek to encourage consumers to adopt a healthy, more active and inviting lifestyle."

"To make sports and physical activity a priority for all seg-

ments of society. We are delighted to be part of this wonderful event and for Mazoon products to be the healthy and nutritious choice for all participants during the competition."

Each of the five races at this

year's race offer a different distance designed for varying levels of fitness and experience.

The longest races are the full marathon, which is 42.5km, and the half marathon of 21.1km, but there are also 10km and 5km

runs, as well as kids runs of 1km, 2km and 3km open to young runners aged 7-12 years old.

All participants will receive a special event t-shirt and medal at the finishing line, and get to enjoy the same exhilarating race-day experience.

The Al Mouj Muscat Marathon will continue to contribute to the social development of Oman this year by donating a percentage of the proceeds from the 5km run to support the vital programmes run by the Environment Society of Oman and Oman Diabetes Association. For more information, to register for the race and to donate directly to each organisation, please visit www.muscatmarathon.om.

First organised by Muscat Road Runners in 2012 with 135 competitors, Muscat Marathon has quickly grown in stature. In 2017, the event became known as the Al Mouj Muscat Marathon with Al Mouj Muscat, Oman's premier lifestyle desti-

nation, Oman Sail and Muscat Road Runners joining forces.

Fast-forward to 2019 and the marathon, marathon relay, half marathon and 10km routes were all certified by world-running organisation AIMS, aligning the event with International Association of Athletic Federation (IAAF) standards.

The Charity Fun Run 5km saw thousands of runners raise money for good causes and the Kids' Run sold out in record time!

The last edition hosted just under 11000 runners competing in six race categories across a two-day festival of running. 103 different nationalities were represented, furthering the marathon's reputation as the most iconic event on Oman's sporting calendar. The event had to be cancelled in 2021 due to COVID-19 but returns in 2022 under the management of Sabco Sports with the aim of reigniting Oman's passion for an active lifestyle and creating memorable experiences.

Ooredoo adds Majan Lounge as new Nojoom partner



Continuing to reward loyal customers, Ooredoo's popular Nojoom programme has added Majan Lounge at Muscat International Airports to its ever-growing partner list.

All new and existing Nojoom members can redeem their points through the award-winning app, and new members start earning points after just three months of joining. Enjoy luxury VIP access to the lounge while waiting for flights without spending a dime! Start your

journey in style with Ooredoo.

Ooredoo continues to connect with their customers' favourite outlets and service partners in Oman. This partnership is a great opportunity to reward loyal customers as the company aims to deliver better quality, more benefits and amazing value. Nojoom members now have even more of a reason to visit their much-loved outlets with their family and friends.

Nojoom points are earned by making calls, sending SMSs, pay-

ing Ooredoo's bills, or using any of the telecom company's services. Customers can also convert their Nojoom points to be used at popular outlets and service partners in Oman that include, Gloria Jean's Coffee, Shukran and Qatar Airways. This is one of many ways Ooredoo gives thanks to its customers.

For further information, please visit 'http://www.ooredoo.om' www.ooredoo.om or any of the 68 Ooredoo stores located across Oman.

Sony broadens 360 Spatial Sound experience

Sony Middle East & Africa announced a software upgrade for the premium HT-A7000 and HT-A5000 soundbars, which will add the customer-loved 360 Spatial Sound Mapping capabilities that first premiered in the HT-A9 home theatre system in 2021. Customers can access this innovative feature when connecting their soundbar to Sony's new SA-RS5 wireless rear speakers, launching April 2022, or the currently available SA-RS3S wireless rear speakers.

With Sony's revolutionary 360 Spatial Sound Mapping technology, customers can feel sound from every direction and distance. Using Sound Field Optimisation, the soundbar uses built-in microphones to ingeniously measure the relative height and position of the soundbar and rear speakers. 360 Spatial Sound Mapping technology then creates multiple phantom speakers by synthesising sound waves based on positional information. Thanks to this technology, Sony's wide spatial sound field fills every part of the living space, so everyone gets the same sound experience, wherever they are in the room.



Customers can enhance the experience further by pairing with a compatible BRAVIA XR television. Using the Acoustic Centre Sync feature, both a soundbar and BRAVIA XR TV become the centre speaker in the home cinema system as part of the 360 Spatial Sound Mapping setup^{1,2}, enabling sound to precisely match what's on the screen for clearer dialogue and a more immersive experience.

Add SA-RS5 optional wireless rear speakers for a richer and more immersive 360 Spatial

Sound experience

Sony's new SA-RS5 wireless rear speakers deliver optimal sound quality and wide directivity for 360 Spatial Sound in combination with a compatible soundbar. They feature up-firing speakers for richer and more immersive 360 Spatial Sound as well as built-in battery power for up to 10 hours of playtime.

SA-RS5 Wireless Rear Speakers' features:

Create immersive and clear sound: Up-firing speakers reflect

sound off the ceiling for more immersive overhead audio. Both wide directivity woofers and soft dome tweeters create a rich, expansive soundstage that offers exceptional clarity. Dual passive radiators enhance low-end tones, giving bass a boost.

Long-lasting battery life: With up to 10 hours of battery life when fully charged, the speakers offer flexible installation to fit any living room setup. They can be charged out of sight and easily powered up to automatically make a wireless connection with a compatible soundbar. It's quick and easy with no need for messy cables. If in a hurry, just 10 minutes of charge will give 90 minutes of use. SA-RS5 rear speakers also feature AC power connections for dual use.

One touch sound calibration: The SA-RS5 comes with OPTIMISE buttons and dual microphones in each speaker. Activate sound field optimisation by pressing the OPTIMISE button on the unit and the speakers, combined with a compatible soundbar, will intelligently measure the distance between the speakers and ceiling using dual microphones.

vivo X70 series: Professional photography packed in elegance

In today's always on lifestyle, it's difficult for one to carry professional photography equipment everywhere they go. vivo's brand new X70 series of professional photography flagship smartphones is here to put those worries to rest with the ultimate mobile photography experience. The X70 series - consisting of the X70 and X70 Pro - marks the next chapter in vivo's global imaging partnership with ZEISS and their joint pursuit of creating the ultimate mobile photography experience.

The vivo X70 series incorporates top-notch computational imaging features inside and out, resulting in an intuitive photography experience that enables users to capture or record remarkably natural-looking photographs or videos. On the camera specs front, the entire X70 lineup has 32MP front cameras, while rear quad-camera arrays have been installed on the X70 Pro (50MP + 12MP + 12MP + 8MP), and the X70 uses a tri-camera

system (40MP + 12MP + 12MP).

Here are six reasons why the X70 series is the ultimate photography partner:

►ZEISS T Coating: this technology enhances the transmission rate of visible light, improves image quality, and produces true colour. The technology effectively reduces reflectivity and unwanted effects, such as ghosting and stray light, to significantly improve the image quality in scenes with complex lighting. The difference is particularly obvious when shooting at night and in backlit settings.

►ZEISS Style Portrait: vivo and ZEISS have worked together to simulate and replicate more classic ZEISS lens styles in the X70 series. Four ZEISS Style Portrait lens effects are included in the X70 series, Biotar, Distagon, Planar, and Sonnar. These four distinctive styles bring richer shooting experiences and portrait mode options.

►Real-Time Extreme Night Vision: The feature supports man-



ually adjusting exposure intensity and photo brightness during the preview in the Night Mode and displays the time required for shooting. Thus, users can enjoy greater freedom in night shooting.

►Pure Night View: As ZEISS T Coating and software algorithms come together to work, stable ghosting and glare prevention can be provided by X70 Pro. In multi-light source night scenarios, stray lights and glares can be

reduced to give you the perfect picture.

►Ultra-Sensing Gimbal Main Camera: This sensor uses exclusive and customised CFA2+α (Colour Filter Array) techniques, so it is thinner and more trans-

parent - resulting in better performance in light sensing while enhancing shooting quality in low-light environments with faster and more accurate focus.

►Gimbal Stabilisation 3.0: The new and upgraded Gimbal Camera supports video stabilisation with 5 axes, including X/Y axis rotation, X/Y axis translation and Z axis rotation, allowing for steady pictures in large angle shake scenarios such as outdoor travel or extreme sports.

vivo is a technology company that creates great products based on a design-driven value, with smart devices and intelligent services as its core. The company aims to build a bridge between humans and the digital world. Through unique creativity, vivo provides users with an increasingly convenient mobile and digital life. Following the company's core values, which include Benfen, design-driven value, user-orientation, continuous learning and team spirit, vivo has implemented a sustainable

development strategy with the vision of developing into a healthier, more sustainable world-class corporation.

While bringing together and developing the best local talents to deliver excellence, vivo is supported by a network of 10 R&D centers in Shenzhen, Dongguan, Nanjing, Beijing, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Xi'an, Taipei, Tokyo and San Diego, focusing on the development of state-of-the-art consumer technologies, including 5G, artificial intelligence, industrial design, imaging system and other up-and-coming technologies. vivo has also set up seven production bases (including brand-authorised manufacturing centers), across China, South- and Southeast Asia, and more regions, with an annual production capacity of nearly 200mn smartphones. As of now, vivo has branched out its sales network across more than 60 countries and regions, and is loved by more than 400mn users worldwide.

Sohar International recognised at Finacle Innovation Awards

Driven by its digital transformation strategy, Sohar International has earned commendable recognition for its stance on innovation and its journey towards digitalisation, ensuring that it continues to play a vital role in economic development whilst supporting customers and the community at large.

As a testament to its dedication and commitment towards this journey, Sohar International recently earned two prestigious accolades at the Infosys Finacle Client Innovation Awards 2021. Ensuring an uninterrupted, convenient and safe banking experience throughout the pandemic, the bank emerged a winner in the 'COVID Response Innovation' category while bagging the runner-up award in the 'Process Innovation' category.

"Customer-centricity has always been the vital pillar that governs our innovative processes as we focus on providing our clients with an unparalleled banking experience. These accolades are a testament to our hard work, dedication and commitment, as well as a reflection of the successful growth strategy set in place for the organisation. At Sohar International, we continue to set new standards by focusing on devising pioneering solutions that maximise the use



of technology while maintaining the highest levels of customer service excellence," said Ahmed al Musalmi, chief executive officer of Sohar International. "While innovation gives us a competitive edge in the industry, we also recognise the importance of such implementations and how they positively impact customers, shareholders and the economic development of the country. We appreciate the organisers of the Infosys Finacle Client Innovation Awards for of-

fering a platform for financial institutions to shine in their areas of expertise and learn from other industry leaders."

Keeping pace with a dynamic market, Sohar International has also demonstrated flexibility in adapting to the changing demands of the industry. With a keen focus on devising pioneering solutions that enhance the banking experience and reduce the complexity of processes for customers, Sohar International's VAT Implementation Project re-

ceived much appreciation in the Process Innovation category.

The comprehensive project, which was delivered in a short time and made the most of Finacle capabilities, ensured a seamless transition to incorporate all VAT requirements as per the newly introduced VAT policies of the country.

The two awards further attest to Sohar International's relentless focus on innovation as it seeks to continuously create operating efficiencies across all its

processes, catalyse digital transformation by embracing emerging technologies and introduce services that offer greater value for customers, employees, investors and the community.

With excellence in all its banking operations and the inherent fervor to contribute towards the economic progress of the country, Sohar International has earned commendable recognition for its winning strategies and has successfully positioned itself as a premium bank in the Sultanate. Amongst its recent accolades, Sohar International won the 'Best Employer Brand' Award as well as the Award for 'Managing Health at Work' at the World HRD Congress - Oman Best Employer Brand Awards 2021 - a global body based out of India.

The Bank was also honoured with two coveted titles at the World Economic Magazine Awards based out of the United States of America, for being the 'Most Innovative Bank 2021' and for the 'Most Improved Bank in Profitability Management 2021'. In addition, the bank won the highly coveted award titled 'Innovative Campaign of the Year' at the Oman Banking and Finance Awards, powered by OER and co-located with New Age Banking Summit 2021.

ME Energy returns to Dubai as a live, in-person event

Middle East Energy Dubai, the most reputable and comprehensive energy event in the MENA region, has confirmed registration is now open for the live and in-person event, which returns to the Dubai World Trade Centre from March 7-9, under the theme of guiding you through the energy transition.

Held under the patronage of Sheikh Maktoum bin Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Deputy Ruler of Dubai, and hosted by the UAE Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure, the event is expected to attract over 18,000 energy professionals for the three-day conference and will feature five key product sections. These include smart solutions, renewable and clean energy, critical and backup power, transmission and distribution, and energy consumption and management to be discussed.

Azzan Mohammed, exhibition director, Middle East Energy, said, "This year, our focus is on providing the industry with the solutions to navigate the energy transition. Following the discussions at COP26, we want to provide a platform for energy leaders and professionals to meet and shape the future of the energy landscape by providing opportunities to reconnect, discover the latest products and showcase innovative solutions to deliver cleaner energy and supply sustainable power."

Informa, organisers of the event, have confirmed over 800 global exhibitors will participate in the 47th edition of the energy showcase, with marquee brands including Lucy Electric, Cummins, Emirates Transformers, Ducab, Riyadh Cables Group and Bahra Cables Company set to showcase a range of solutions and technologies to accelerate the path to the energy transition.

The in-person element of the event is supported by the Global Energy & Utilities Forum, which will provide a platform for industry experts to discuss thought leadership, collaboration, and solutions for meeting the energy shift within the sector through a series of high-level strategic panels, technical sessions, round-



Azzan Mohammed

table discussions and workshops.

Confirmed panellists include Eng Jamila Matar, director - Energy Department, League of Arab States; Stephan Gobert, senior vice president - Hydrogen AMEA, ENGIE; Michael Mair, VP Growth and Development, Europe, Middle East & Africa, Wood; Lina Osman, head - Sustainable Finance, Africa & MENAP, Standard Chartered; Sabrin Rehman, managing director - head of Sustainability, Middle East & Africa, HSBC; Maximilian Jarrett, Africa program manager, International Energy Agency; Sowunmi Olabole II, Office of the Senate, National Assembly - Nigeria; Michael Geissler, chief executive officer, Berlin Energy Agency; Graham Hallett, development director, Marjan Island.

As part of the Forum, the focus of discussion will be on developing a roadmap to decarbonisation, an insight into the energy systems of the future, the green hydrogen opportunities in the MENA region, funding of the energy transition, the rise of sustainable finance, powering the African continent with renewable energy, grids of the future, energy efficiency focus and decarbonising industries.

"We are pleased to be able to bring together these high calibre speakers for the 2022 edition of the Global Energy & Utilities Forum. Their wealth of knowledge and industry insights will provide an invaluable opportunity to hear first-hand from experts on themes such as decarbonisation, finance, investment, digitalisation, and new technology," said Mohammed.

Medical Mattress World showroom opens in Mall of Oman

Falcon Investment Group opened its 9th branch of Medical Mattress World in Mall of Oman, under the patronage of Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, CEO of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) and in the presence of H E Khalid Mohammed Abdulhaleem Radhi, Ambassador of Egypt to the Sultanate of Oman and other dignitaries

Yasser Taalab, CEO of Falcon Investment Group and chairman of the Egyptian-Omani Investment and Development Committee at the Egyptian Community Club, said: "We embarked on our journey of business and investments in the



beloved Sultanate of Oman more than 19 years ago because of the great advantages which the Sultanate enjoys, foremost of which is security, stability and distinguished relations with the coun-

tries of the world in light of the renewed era of the blessed Omani Renaissance."

Hasani said, "We encourage traders and investors to redouble efforts in the industrial and com-

mercial sector in order to strengthen the national economy and enhance the economic cycle during the Tenth Five-Year Plan."

Sameh Taalab, GM of Medical Mattresses World, said, "The

opening of the new showroom came in response to the needs of the Omani market. We provide the finest types of medical mattresses and the most luxurious sleeping supplies in the world. We made sure that the new showroom included our best range of products from mattresses to massage chairs. The bedroom is a source of calm and comfort for every person. Therefore, the mattresses along with the furniture must be chosen carefully keeping individual needs in mind. Especially when buying mattresses, because the more comfortable the mattress is, the more rested the person will be."

Youbuilt mobile application to be launched for construction, trading

Youbuilt, an innovative mobile application is the latest launch by Sagacity Pioneer Co, in tune with Oman Vision 2040. The application aims to ease sale, service, maintenance and purchase of building material in the construction industry. It also helps in procuring estimates or quotations for new construction projects.

Available on iOS and Android platforms, Youbuilt is an application that is necessary for individuals and contractors indulged in construction projects. Building material retailers, service and maintenance providers of the construction industry also gain increased sales by registering their business on Youbuilt.

Youbuilt is the brainchild of Roshin Rajan, an entrepreneur, visionary and philanthropist, who wanted to mould an application of global standards, that will revolutionise the construction industry through use of the latest technology. With more than 12 years of experience at the helm of construction business, Rajan wanted to put his knowledge and ideas to the best use for the growth of the industry and econ-



Roshin Rajan

omy in Oman. Rajan's knowledge in construction is deep rooted as it is a family business established by his father G Rajan, with over 36 years of operation in Oman. Rajan's vision and efforts are supported by Is'haq saif khalfan al Hasni to the success of this unique concept.

According to Rajan, "Our main objective of launching this innovative application is to take part in the Oman Vision 2040 and reach out to every corner of the Sultanate of Oman." He added, "Our vision is to become digital service providers for the local businesses, mid enterprises and corporates in Oman and to



Is'haq saif khalfan al Hasni

connect local Omani retailers to customers via a digital platform across the country. Our aim is also to generate more job and income opportunities for Omani nationals."

Rajan is also working on a couple of digital projects involving artificial intelligence and 3D construction technology, which will be unveiled soon. 'Mount Oman' is one of the projects in the pipeline that will help in construction of high end tourism projects as an application, while 'Youbuilt' budget homes is another project aimed at construction of residential houses at affordable prices.

Kia EV6 and Carnival win prestigious 2021 GOOD DESIGN Awards

Kia has been awarded two prestigious design awards for two of its latest models, with the Kia EV6 electric crossover and fourth-generation Kia Carnival MPV taking top honors in the 'Transportation' category in the annual GOOD DESIGN Awards.

The all-new EV6 is Kia's first dedicated battery electric vehicle (BEV), and is the first Kia to be based on the brand's new Electric Global Modular Platform (E-GMP), delivering a highly impressive 528km real-world driving range and ultra-fast recharging capabilities.

The EV6's bold conceptual styling incorporates Kia's highly acclaimed new design philosophy 'Opposites United', which takes inspiration from the contrasts found in nature and humanity. Key exterior highlights include sleek daytime running lights that form part of the car's 'Digital Tiger Face', a contemporary and aerodynamic side profile, and a bold crossover-inspired silhouette. The interior benefits from the E-GMP platform, which facilitates a high-tech, spacious and welcoming environment.



The all-new Kia Carnival MPV, penned at Kia's California design studio, wears a bold and boxy appearance that conveys the visual language found on the brand's highly successful line-up of rugged SUVs, including the Telluride, Sorento, and Seltos. Dramatic lines adorn the hood that help to enhance the vehicle's aggressive character, while the well-defined wheelarches provide a sense of volume to the Carnival's side profile. The three-row interior, available in seven- or eight-seat configurations, offers a premium and flexible layout resulting in best-in-class passenger and cargo room.

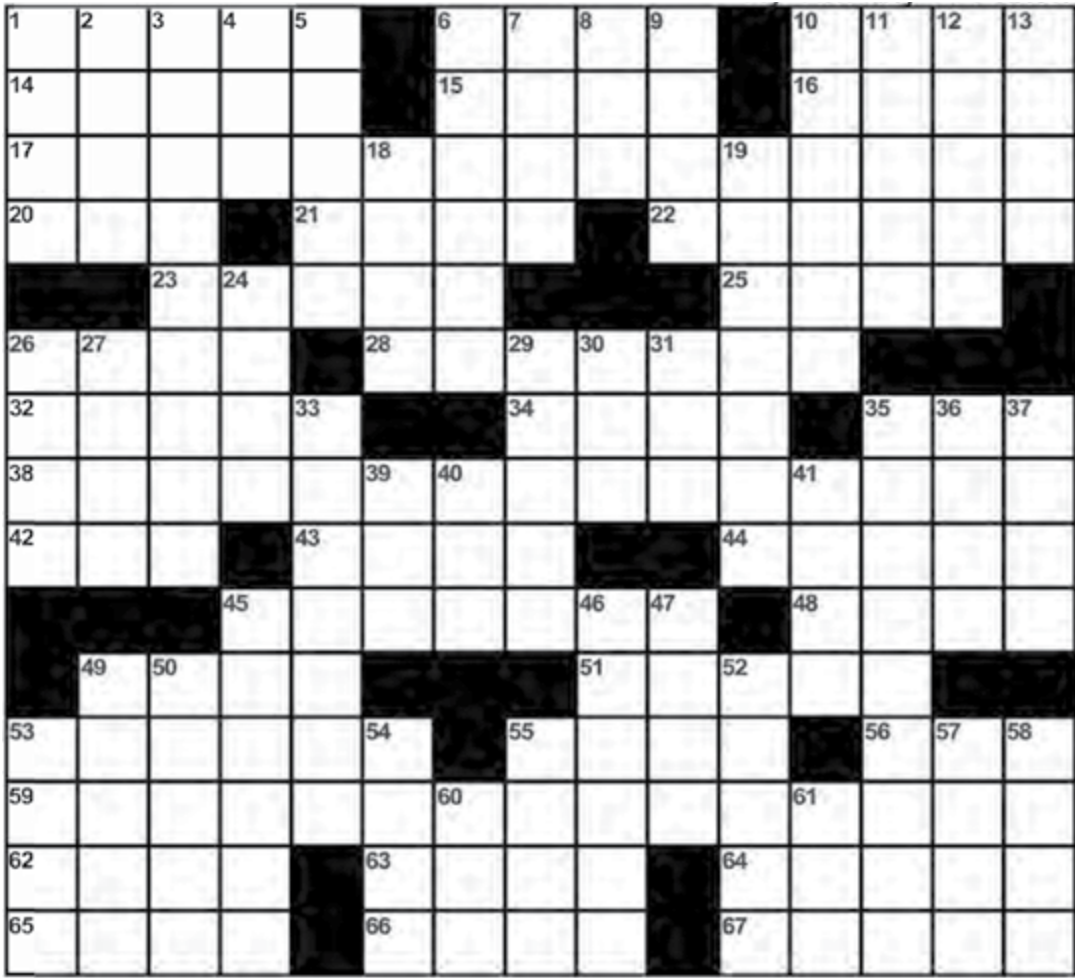
Karim Habib, head of Kia Design Center, said, "Securing these GOOD DESIGN awards is an endorsement of the approach we took with the styling of the Kia EV6 and Kia Carnival, and is a tribute to the collaborative efforts of our talented international design team. It truly has been a pivotal year for us; we launched our brand new design philosophy 'Opposites United', the ethos of which is already transforming our cars, and we are determined to ensure Kia keeps challenging the boundaries of automotive design."

The two accolades are the latest in a string of design awards

handed to Kia by the GOOD DESIGN jury in recent years, acknowledging the integrity of the brand's evolving design ethos. Just last year, the panel awarded the third-generation Kia K5 sedan and the fourth-generation Kia Sorento SUV with the same honor. Prior to this, previous iterations of the K5 and Sorento have been awarded GOOD DESIGN awards.

GOOD DESIGN is organised by Chicago Athenaeum: Museum of Architecture and Design and The European Centre for Architecture Art Design and Urban Studies.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

 - 1) River in Missouri
 - 6) Overly confident
 - 10) Crab delicacy
 - 14) Russian prison camp
 - 15) Lima's there
 - 16) IRA type
 - 17) "Waiting on ya"
 - 20) "To_ is human ... "
 - 21) Recital VIP
 - 22) Crest
 - 23) Word with "coach" or "home"
 - 25) Recipe amt.?
 - 26) Miner's entrance
 - 28) Marine food fish
 - 32) Tortellini topping
 - 34) Stacked amount of cash
 - 35) Mad cow disease, briefly
 - 38) Feature of contracts
 - 42) "Ammonia" has two
 - 43) "The Spirit of '76" instrument
 - 44) Feature of some purses
 - 45) Choose not to vote
 - 48) Uptight
- DOWN**

 - 1) Cruel person
 - 2) Aggressive court figure
 - 3) Wolf criers
 - 4) Go from pillar to post
 - 5) Land with pyramids
 - 6) Ball or globe
 - 7) Track and field event
 - 8) Cafeteria java container
 - 9) Dates for gals
 - 10) Trail for Hansel and Gretel
 - 11) Rich soils
 - 12) "Take_ down memory lane"
 - 13) Stimulate, as an appetite
 - 18) Seeks the affection of
 - 19) Beginnings
 - 24) Director Preminger
 - 26) Church recess
 - 27) Have an opinion
 - 29) Sleep disturber
 - 30) Was active at an auction
 - 31) "Greatest" of boxing
 - 33) Quirky
 - 35) Along the edges of
 - 36) Hosiery annoyance
 - 37) Catch sight of
 - 39) Post-USSR alliance
 - 40) Frequent, in rhyme
 - 41) Plural suffix with "Brooklyn"
 - 45) Homes for hawks
 - 46) Lipton product (var.)
 - 47) Loch_ monster
 - 49) Boy Scout group
 - 50) Hole for a ship's anchor rope
 - 52) Words before "costs"
 - 53) Muslim honorific
 - 54) Yonder folks
 - 55) Large wine casks
 - 57) Seeing through the deception of
 - 58) They're self-inflated
 - 60) Metal-in-the-raw
 - 61) Yes vote
- NOTE PAD**
-

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You aren't exactly famous for turning down dares, resisting the impulse to boldly go where no one has gone before, or tamping down the urge to do anything you're told not to. In fact, these situations are more like invitations to you! That doesn't mean you're never surprised, however, or at least caught a little off guard when you finally get the message from a long-suffering friend.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Take equal parts impulse and romance, add in a giant pinch of random (most likely thanks to a coincidence of some kind), and you get a day that you won't ever forget, and neither will the person who is lucky enough to be by your side. It's a recipe for deep infatuation, and since no one loves being in love like you do, you're only too happy to play. Watch to see what happens next!

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

Secrets are spilling out all over the place, including yours! This could be bad karma coming back to haunt you. It may feel like keeping juicy information to yourself is a crime, but you should try to button your lip a lot tighter. When you hear some scandalous information, you should forget you heard a word. This secret is an especially saucy one, so it will really test you. But if you keep yourself calm, you can pass with flying colours.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Secrets are all around you, seemingly at every turn now, but you're not really liking it all that much. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth is what you need. Of course, gossip has never really been your thing, since it's way too easy for it to spiral into mistruth. Someone comes to you with a huge secret they need to whisper in your ear now, but don't fear. Let them know that they should try the next person over.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

If you're getting excited about something new, and you almost certainly are, don't try to hide it. Everyone gets to act like a kid now and then!. Speaking of thrills, there could be romantic fireworks coming your way quite soon. If someone sounds like they're spoiling for a fight, though, make sure to warn them that your ire is running hot, so if they're dumb enough to start something, you're ready to finish it.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You're not overly emotional. In fact, you'd reliably choose to have oral surgery without anesthesia over a serious discussion of your feelings, especially if they're as close to the surface and as hard to ignore as yours happen to be just now. That doesn't mean you need to shut down. Just choose your people with care. Building-up your emotions is not a wise idea. So find a friend who is a good listener and ready to give time to you.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

If you had something scheduled for today, whether a firm plan or a half-expected appointment, you should probably just move on. Things may not turn out the way you expect them to, but the good news is that you're always up for a change of plan. That's especially true right now, since you have friends in high places who can help you to make the best of a bad situation. Believe it or not, everything happens for a good reason.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You don't exactly have a reputation for being chatty, but maybe you should. Few are as talkative, friendly or amiable as you, whether you're in the company of friends or total strangers. There's certainly no one better at making those strangers feel welcome either. Those traits come in handy over the next few days, which are sure to be busy. Clear off your social calendar! get ready to chit chat over a hot cup of coffee.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You're about to surprise your people in a big way and shock anyone else who's never seen this side of you. You can often seem detached and weirdly impersonal, and you're good at that image too. Right about now, though, you're hard-pressed to keep your eyes dry in the face of a dopey chick flick. Don't panic. This is just a phase! And this will come to an end sooner or later.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Things are getting better now, just like you thought (or hoped) they might. You feel like a weight has been lifted from your shoulders. And you're not bored with this downtime. Life is full of surprises. A seeming coincidence puts you back in touch with someone you thought you might never see again. Ready or not, here comes your striking wake-up call: You still care, and it seems that they do, too. What comes next?

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

A colleague you've been thinking about recently, someone who has been returning those furtive glances for some time now, is just about to signal in one way or another that they're ready for a staring contest. In fact, they might even be brave enough to walk up and say hello in hopes of a conversation. You can either go with the flow or simply slip out of the conversation. Whatever happens, you've got to admire their brass.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

It's the perfect time to be you. You're already flexible and able to see the bright side of any person or situation. You sail through all challenges that come up through the day and should be well on your way to a fantastic week by the end of the evening. Be nice to anyone who isn't quite as lucky as you. After all, not everyone has your adaptability. Spread kindness and love to make it a bright day for others too.

Answers: 1. b 2. d 3. c

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

L	A	D	A
E	P	O	F
E	O	R	R
S	O	C	B

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

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

WORD BUILDER

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Iran nuclear talks proceeding too slowly: French Foreign Minister

Paris, France - International negotiations on Iran's nuclear activities are proceeding so slowly that they are unlikely to lead to any agreement 'within a realistic timeframe', France's Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said on Tuesday.

The discussions taking place in Vienna 'are under way but from our point of view they are slow, too slow', Le Drian told the French parliament.

"There is a vital urgency on this issue because of Iran's own actions and the trajectory of its nuclear programme," he added.

On Monday Iran's foreign ministry spokesman had said that efforts by 'all parties' to revive his country's 2015 nuclear agreement with world powers had resulted in 'good progress' during the Vienna talks.

Negotiations to salvage the nuclear deal resumed in late November after they were suspended in June as Iran elected a new, ultraconservative government. The 2015 deal - agreed by



French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian speaks in the National Assembly, in Paris on Tuesday (AFP)

Iran, the US, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany - offered Tehran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme. But then-US president Donald Trump unilaterally

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JEAN-YVES LE DRIAN

withdrew the US in 2018 and reimposed biting sanctions, prompting Tehran to begin rolling back on its commitments. "There has been good progress on all four issues of removing sanctions, nuclear issues, verification and obtaining guar-

antees" during the latest round of talks, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh told reporters on Monday.

The US has participated only indirectly in the Vienna talks, which seek to bring Washington back inside the accord and to ensure Iran re-adheres to its own commitments.

Le Drian had sounded more positive about the talks on Friday, when he said they were progressing on a 'rather positive path' while still emphasising the urgency of bringing them to a speedy conclusion.

The following day his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said the two sides are nearing a 'good agreement' due to France 'behaving reasonably' after previously playing 'the role of a bad cop'.

Britain, France and Germany said last month that the window for concluding a deal was 'weeks, not months', due to the speed of Iran's nuclear enrichment. AFP

QUICKTAKES

Blast kills six in Mogadishu

Mogadishu, Somalia - Six people were killed on Wednesday in a devastating car bomb explosion in Somalia's capital Mogadishu, a security official and witnesses said. The attack was claimed by the Al Shabaab extremist group, which said in a brief statement that it was targeting 'foreign officers'.

It took place just days after Somali leaders had agreed on a new timetable for long-delayed elections in the troubled country.

"The initial information we have... indicates that at least six people were killed and several others wounded in the huge car bomb blast," local government security officer Mohamed Abdi said. "It has also caused devastation in the area," he said, warning that the toll could be higher as the number of people in the area was high.

Witnesses said a multi-vehicle private security convoy escorting foreigners was passing by the area when the explosion hit.

Iran arrests one in statue attack

Iran has arrested an alleged 'counter-revolutionary agent' on suspicion of carrying out an arson attack on a memorial to a revered general killed in a US drone strike, a judicial official said.

The statue of General Qassem Soleimani, who headed the Quds Force, the foreign operations arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, up to his death on January 3, 2020, was torched just hours after it was unveiled in the southwestern town of Shahrekord last week.

"The perpetrator of this shameful act has been arrested," said the judiciary chief of Chahar Mahal-Bakhtiari province, Ahmad-Reza Bahrami, late on Tuesday. "The provincial courts will punish the perpetrator of this outrage as quickly as possible in accordance with sharia."

The unveiling of the statue in Shahrekord was one of a number of commemorative events held last week to mark the second anniversary of Soleimani's assassination. AFP

Hong Kong to create more national security crimes

Hong Kong, China - Hong Kong will create a host of new national security crimes, the city's leader said on Wednesday, as she presided over the first session of a new 'patriots only' legislature scrubbed of political opposition.

The legislation will add to a sweeping national security law imposed directly on Hong Kong by Beijing that has transformed the international finance hub and empowered authorities to carry out a widespread crackdown on dissent.

The current national security law defines four crimes - secession, subversion, terrorism and colluding with foreign forces - and offenders can face up to life in prison. But on Wednesday, Chief Executive Carrie Lam confirmed that her government would create new 'local legislation' that meets Article 23 of Hong Kong's mini-constitution, which calls for the city to pass its own national security laws.

"Article 23 legislative work is part of Hong Kong's constitutional duty and cannot be further delayed," Lam told lawmakers, adding that the government aimed to publish a draft by June.



Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam (left) speaks to the Legislative Council members as the President of the Council, Andrew Leung conducts the session, in Hong Kong on Wednesday (AFP)

Lam did not outline what the new crimes would be.

But the specific offences Article 23 lists are treason, secession, sedition, subversion and theft of state secrets.

It also includes prohibiting any foreign political organisations from conducting activities in

Hong Kong or local political organisations establishing ties with similar overseas bodies.

No opposition

China imposed its own security law after huge and sometimes violent democracy protests swept Hong Kong in 2019, say-

ing it was needed to restore order and would only affect a 'tiny minority'.

It has begun transforming Hong Kong into a mirror of the authoritarian mainland, criminalising much dissent, setting new legal precedents and sparking

sanctions by Western governments who argue it has trashed the city's freedoms and autonomy. It also empowered China's mainland security apparatus to operate openly in the city, and allows the government to freeze the assets of any company or individual deemed to be a national security threat.

Most of Hong Kong's best-known democracy activists are in jail, have quit politics or have fled overseas.

The vast majority of national security charges revolve around people holding or vocalising political views now deemed illegal. In 2003, an attempt by Hong Kong's government to pass its own national security law sparked large protests and was eventually aborted - which is why Beijing imposed a law directly on the city in 2020.

It is unlikely the city government will face much opposition in passing the new law. Under new 'patriots only' political rules also imposed by Beijing, the city's legislature has been cleared of any opposition.

All lawmakers are now vetted for political loyalty before standing, and only 20 seats are directly

elected. Just one of the 90 vetted legislators who were selected in polls last month describes himself as 'non-establishment'.

Prevent and punish

A small committee of Beijing loyalists will choose Hong Kong's next leader in March, and Lam has not yet said whether she will stand for a second term.

Her first term ends in June. On Wednesday, Lam said it would be difficult for the new national security bill to be completed by the end of her first term, meaning the legislation will probably fall to her successor.

Addressing a chamber whose walls now bear China's red-and-gold national emblem - placed above the city's official seal - Lam praised Beijing's security law.

"Its function now is to act as an anchor to guarantee stability, to let people know there are consequences," she told lawmakers, adding the new legislation would be similarly 'well written'.

"The law requires us to prevent, curb and punish crimes. If prevention is done well, we can punish less."

AFP

Unprecedented crime wave grips Arabs in Israel 'by the throat'

Jerusalem - Sami Abu Shamsia's wrists were swathed in bandages covering wounds he says were inflicted by mobsters who kidnapped him in October, part of an unprecedented Arab crime wave in Israel.

Still bruised, he pointed out bullet holes in the gate outside his east Jerusalem home, a reminder of the drive-by shootings that preceded his abduction.

Recalling his five days as a hostage, Shamsia (47) told AFP he was held in the central city of Lod, one of the areas hit by the violence wracking Israel's 20 per cent Arab minority.

"I was blindfolded. My hands were tied behind my feet. My feet were tied with ropes, and I was lying on the ground. They beat me and threatened to fire bullets into my legs," he said.

Officials have blamed the spate of violence on Arab crime families which have accumulated power and weapons over the past two decades.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has specifically pointed the finger



This file photo shows Israelis and Arab-Israelis taking part in a march in Tel Aviv, in honour of those killed in organised crime as they call on police to curb the wave of intra-community violence in the country (AFP)

at organised crime groups he accused of committing murder and running 'protection rackets'.

"A state within a state has developed," Bennett said late last year, charging the gangs had acquired 'quantities of illegal weapons that are enough for a small army'.

Public Security Minister Omer Barlev has said 'crime families in the Arab sector' are 'holding the community by the throat'.

US\$9.4bn to 'close the gap'

Bennett's coalition government, the first in Israeli history to be

backed by an Arab party, has approved measures to combat the violence by improving socio-economic conditions among Arab citizens who have long complained of unequal treatment compared to Jewish Israelis.

Those programmes include an eye-popping US\$9.4bn in

funding over five years to 'close the gap' between the country's Arab and Jewish citizens, focusing on employment promotion, especially in hi-tech, and enhancing social services.

A separate US\$780mn crime fighting plan for Arab communities has also been approved.

But such interventions, which are still getting off the ground, did not stop 2021 from becoming the deadliest year on record for murders with Arab victims.

According to the Aman Center, a civil society group that works to curtail violence in Israel's Arab community, a record 128 Arab civilians were killed in 2021 as a result of violent crime.

The group recorded 113 such killings in 2020, 96 in 2019 and 67 in 2018. The vast majority of the victims have been male, according to multiple sources.

Growth of loan sharks

Shamsia, a trader working in the occupied West Bank, told AFP that Lod-based mobsters

wanted to collect roughly US\$270,000 in debt run up by his brother, a drifter with a criminal past disowned by the family six years ago. Shamsia said he refused to pay.

In the October 14 kidnapping, captured on security camera footage seen by AFP, a vehicle sped into the compound where Shamsia works and men grabbed him.

"I insisted that I would not pay money that I never borrowed," he recounted.

His stubbornness apparently led to his release five days later.

Walid Haddad, a criminologist who previously advised Israel's interior ministry, said there are five main Arab-controlled crime families in the country whose power has risen considerably since 2003.

That year a failed assassination attempt on prominent Jewish mobster Zeev Rosenstein killed three innocent bystanders in downtown Tel Aviv, prompting then-prime minister Ariel Sharon to order a crackdown on

Jewish-led organised crime, with help from the American FBI.

Once the Jewish mafia was weakened, Arab gangs who had been 'subcontractors' for Jews, 'began filling the power vacuum', Haddad told AFP in the majority Arab city of Nazareth.

"They decided to base their activities in Arab communities because they knew the police didn't care what happened there," he added, specifying that Israel's security forces have prioritised Palestinian political violence above mob-linked criminality.

Haddad and other experts told AFP that part of the violence had been driven by a growing loan shark trade among Arab mobsters, who offer fast cash to Arab citizens underserved by Israel's leading banks.

Jaafar Farah, director of the Center for Equal Rights in Haifa - who has lobbied Israel's parliament on behalf of Arab citizens, said "Israeli banks discriminate against Arab citizens."

AFP

NATO and Russia lay out stark differences

Brussels, Belgium - The NATO allies warned Russia on Wednesday that they would not compromise on the alliance's right to defend its eastern members to avoid further conflict in Ukraine, but invited Moscow to further talks on calming security concerns.

Speaking after talks with Russian envoys at NATO headquarters in Brussels, alliance Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned: "There are significant differences between NATO allies and Russia on these issues."

Stoltenberg said that it would be impossible for the 30 NATO members to agree to Moscow's core demands for a new security order in Europe, and in particular added that Russia would have no veto on Ukraine's right to eventually join the alliance.

President Vladimir Putin's government has issued a series of demands for the West to rule out accepting new members like Ukraine, Georgia or Finland on its eastern flanks and demanded limits on allied deployments in former Soviet allies that joined NATO after the Cold War.

Stoltenberg said it was 'positive' that the two sides had been able to sit down together, reviving the NATO-Russia Council platform, and that NATO members had invited Russia to agree to a series of talks to discuss arms control and 'many other is-



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (third from left) flanked by US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman (left) and Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko attends the NATO-Russia Council at the Alliance's headquarters, in Brussels on Wednesday (AFP)

sues to prevent a new armed conflict'.

"Russia was not in a position to agree on that proposal. They didn't reject it either, but the Russian representatives made it clear that they needed some time to come back to NATO with an answer," he said.

Stoltenberg warned, however, that Russia would have no veto

over any bid by Ukraine to join NATO and called for a 'de-escalation' in Russia's military build-up on its neighbour's border.

"Ukraine as a sovereign nation, Ukraine has the right to self-defence. Ukraine is not a threat to Russia," he said.

"It is Russia that is the aggressor. It is Russia that has used force and continues to use force

against Ukraine.

"And then they're building up, with around 100,000 troops, artillery, armour, drones, tens of thousands of combat ready troops and threatening rhetoric - that's the problem."

The West defends NATO's 'open-door policy' towards potential future members, while Moscow is demanding a cast-

iron guarantee that the alliance will not expand further towards its territory.

Russia denies that its massive troop build-up around already partially occupied Ukraine is a threat, but the deployment has forced Washington to engage with Moscow to head off fears of an all-out military confrontation.

Before Wednesday the NATO-Russia council had not met since 2019. NATO and Russia broke off practical cooperation in 2014 after Moscow occupied and annexed the Ukrainian region of Crimea.

'Moment of truth'

Russia's diplomatic mission to the alliance was withdrawn in October last year after eight of its staff were expelled on allegations of espionage.

But the former ambassador - now a deputy foreign minister - Alexander Grushko was back to confront Stoltenberg and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, having earlier this week described the meeting as a 'moment of truth'.

After the meeting, Sherman tweeted: "In today's NATO-Russia Council, I reaffirmed the fundamental principles of the international system and of European security: Every country has the sovereign right to choose its own path."

Earlier this week on Monday, Sherman met Kremlin envoys in Geneva for a direct US-Russia dialogue, and US officials promised solidarity as Wednesday's meeting expanded the talks to include ambassadors from NATO's 30 members.

Just ahead of the talks, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said: "The continuation of

NATO's open-door policy and the further advancement of NATO towards our borders is precisely what, from our point of view, threatens us.

"This is exactly what we are asking not to continue through legally-binding guarantees."

Open door policy

Peskov refused to be drawn on whether Russia could launch a military operation if denied. "We would not like to throw around threats and ultimatums like American officials," he added.

The allies have long insisted that NATO membership is a matter for sovereign states to decide for themselves and on Tuesday once again vowed to preserve their open-door policy.

They also threatened massive economic and financial sanctions against Moscow if its huge troop build-up on Ukraine's frontiers and in Russian-occupied Crimea turns into a new invasion.

Russia has put intense pressure on Ukraine since 2014, after a revolution overthrew a government that had sided with the Kremlin against moving closer to Europe.

Russia has seized and annexed the Ukrainian region of Crimea and Moscow backs an insurgency in eastern Ukraine in which more than 13,000 people have died.

AFP

Kim urges more 'military muscle' as US sanctions five N Koreans after missile test

Seoul, South Korea - Kim Jong Un personally oversaw the successful test of a hypersonic missile, state media said on Wednesday, as the United States imposed sanctions soon after on five North Koreans linked to the country's ballistic missile programme.

Defying US threats, Kim urged North Korea to press ahead with building more 'strategic military muscle' despite international sanctions over its nuclear weapons programme.

The US Treasury Department said the five North Koreans being sanctioned were 'responsible for procuring goods for the DPRK's (North Korea's) weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile-related programmes'.

'Today's actions, part of the United States' ongoing efforts to counter the DPRK's weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs, target its con-



Kim Jong Un (right) speaks with military officials as he observes launching of a hypersonic missile on Tuesday (AFP)

tinued use of overseas representatives to illegally procure goods for weapons', Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson said in a statement.

Pictures in North Korean state media showed Kim using binoculars to observe the second missile launch by the nuclear-armed nation in less than a week.

Hypersonic missiles are listed among the 'top priority' tasks for strategic weapons development in North Korea's five-year plan.

After the launch, Kim said North Korea must 'further accelerate the efforts to steadily build up the country's strategic military muscle both in quality and quantity and further modernise the army', according to KCNA.

The Tuesday test, which came as the UN Security Council met in New York to discuss Pyongyang's weapons programme, sparked swift condemnation, with the US State Department branding it a 'threat'.

It was the third reported North Korean test of a hypersonic gliding missile. The first, which took place four months ago, was followed by one last week.

North Korea's state news agency KCNA said the most recent test demonstrated 'the superior manoeuvrability of the hypersonic glide vehicle'. It also claimed it accurately hit a target some 1,000km away.

South Korea's military, which had cast doubt on Pyongyang's initial claims, said the missile launched on Tuesday had reached hypersonic speeds and showed clear signs of 'progress' from last week's test.

AFP

Wreck of Taiwan's most advanced fighter jet F-16V found after crash

Taipei, Taiwan - Taiwanese rescuers on Wednesday located the wreckage of a F-16V jet that crashed into the sea a day before, less than two months after the island launched the first squadron of its most advanced fighters.

The jet disappeared from radar screens around half an hour after taking off for a routine training mission from its base in southwestern Taiwan on Tuesday. The air force said the jet plunged into the sea with no sign of the 28-year-old pilot ejecting in time.

The national rescue centre said wreckage of fuselage had been found but there were no signs of the pilot following an all-night search involving multiple helicopters, coastguard vessels and over 60 officials.

The incident has dealt a blow to the new squadron of US-made F-16Vs that was commissioned in November as Taiwan up-



The airforce has temporarily grounded its entire F-16 fleet

graded its ageing fleet amid rising tensions with China.

The airforce has temporarily grounded its entire F16 fleet.

Beijing claims self-ruled Taiwan as part of its territory and has vowed to take it one day, by force if necessary. Under President Xi Jinping, China has ramped up economic, diplomatic and military pressure on Taiwan.

Taiwan's air force has suffered a string of fatal accidents in recent years as its kept under constant pressure by China,

which has ramped up incursions into its air defence zone since 2020.

Last year, Taiwan recorded 969 incursions by Chinese warplanes into its air defence zone, according to a database compiled by AFP, more than double the roughly 380 carried out in 2020.

Last March, Taiwan grounded all military aircraft after a pilot was killed and another went missing when their fighters collided mid-air.

AFP

European archaeologists return to Iraq after years of war

Nasiriyah, Iraq - After war and insurgency kept them away from Iraq for decades, European archaeologists are making an enthusiastic return in search of millennia-old cultural treasures.

"Come and see!" shouted an overjoyed French researcher recently at a desert dig in Larsa, southern Iraq, where the team had unearthed a 4,000-year-old cuneiform inscription.

"When you find inscriptions like that, in situ, it's moving," said Dominique Charpin, professor of Mesopotamian civilisation at the College de France in Paris.

The inscription in Sumerian was engraved on a brick fired in the 19th century BC.

"To the god Shamash, his king Sin-iddinam, king of Larsa, king of Sumer and Akkad," Charpin translated with ease.

Behind him, a dozen other European and Iraqi archaeologists kept at work in a cordoned-off area where they were digging.

They brushed off bricks and removed earth to clear what ap-

peared to be the pier of a bridge spanning an urban canal of Larsa, which was the capital of Mesopotamia just before Babylon, at the start of the second millennium BC.

"Larsa is one of the largest sites in Iraq, it covers more than 200 hectares," said Regis Vallet, researcher at France's National Centre for Scientific Research, heading the Franco-Iraqi mission.

The team of 20 people have made 'major discoveries', he said, including the residence of a ruler identified by about 60 cuneiform tablets that have been transferred to the national museum in Baghdad.

Archaeological 'paradise'

Vallet said Larsa is like an archaeological playground and a 'paradise' for exploring further ancient Mesopotamia, which hosted through the ages the empire of Akkad, the Babylonians, Alexander the Great, the Christians, the Persians and



Larsa is one of the largest sites in Iraq. Our team have made major discoveries, including the residence of a ruler

REGIS VALLET

Islamic rulers.

However, the modern history of Iraq - with its succession of conflicts, especially since the 2003 US-led invasion and its bloody aftermath - has kept foreign researchers at bay.

Only since Baghdad declared



This file photo shows members of a French-Iraqi archaeological expedition excavating at the site of the Sumerian city-state of Larsa, in Iraq's southern province of Dhi Qar on November 22, last year (AFP)

victory in territorial battles against the Islamic State group in 2017 has Iraq 'largely stabilised and it has become possible again' to visit, said Vallet.

"The French came back in 2019 and the British a little earlier," he said. "The Italians came

back as early as 2011."

In late 2021, said Vallet, ten foreign missions were at work in the Dhi Qar province, where Larsa is located.

Iraq's Council of Antiquities and Heritage director Laith Majid Hussein said he is delighted to

play host, and is happy that his country is back on the map for foreign expeditions.

"This benefits us scientifically," he told AFP in Baghdad, adding that he welcomes the 'opportunity to train our staff after such a long interruption'.

'Cradle of civilisations'

Near Najaf in central Iraq, Ibrahim Salman of the German Institute of Archaeology is focused on the site of the city of Al-Hira. Germany had carried out excavations here that ground to a halt with the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein.

Equipped with a geomagnetic measuring device, Salman's team has been at work in the one-time Christian city that had its heyday under the Lakhmids, a pre-Islamic tribal dynasty of the 5th and 6th centuries.

"Some clues lead us to believe that a church may have been located here," he explained.

He pointed to traces on the ground left by moisture which is retained by buried structures and rises to the surface. "The moistened earth on a trip several metres long leads us to conclude that under the feet of the archaeologist are probably the walls of an ancient church," he said.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

US on threshold of living with COVID: Fauci

Washington, US - Despite soaring cases and record-high COVID-19 hospitalisations, the United States is approaching the 'threshold' of transitioning to living with the coronavirus as a manageable disease, Anthony Fauci said on Tuesday.

Speaking to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the top US scientist said eliminating COVID-19 was unrealistic and that 'Omicron, with its extraordinary, unprecedented degree of efficiency of transmissibility, will ultimately find just about everybody'.

"There's no way we're going to eradicate this" virus, he said, given its contagiousness, its propensity to mutate into new variants and the large pool of unvaccinated people.

Those up to date with their vaccines remain well protected against severe outcomes, but vaccine efficacy against infection has fallen.

But 'as Omicron goes up and down', the country will hopefully enter a new phase "where there'll be enough protection in (the) community, enough drugs available so that when someone does get infected and is in a high risk group, it will be very easy to treat that person," said



Anthony Fauci shows a screen grab of a campaign website for Senator Rand Paul, while answering questions at a Senate committee hearing in Capitol Hill in Washington, DC on Tuesday (AFP)

Fauci.

"When we get there, there's that transition, and we may be on the threshold of that right now," he said, while also stressing that with the country currently recording almost a million infections a day, nearly 150,000 people in hospital and more than 1,200 daily deaths, "we're not at that point."

Official data showed there are currently 145,982 COVID-19 hospitalisations, even though a significant per cent are thought to be hospitalised 'with' the disease rather than because of it.

Earlier, the 81-year-old director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases slammed vaccine skeptic Re-

publican Senator Rand Paul for unleashing 'crazies' who were threatening his life and harassing his family, in unusually emotional congressional testimony.

President Joe Biden's top officials, including his chief medical advisor Fauci, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) director Rochelle Walensky and acting Food and

'More tests' in US schools to avert remote learning

Washington, US - The United States announced an increase in COVID-19 tests for schools on Wednesday in a bid to keep students in the classroom, as a surge in infections threatens to bring back remote learning.

Around four per cent of US schools have already shut with the Omicron variant tearing across the country, infecting pupils and educators and forcing teachers' unions to take a more cautious approach to curb transmission.

The unions' decision to prioritise teachers' health has put them at loggerheads with local authorities, as

families and experts remain torn about the wisdom of virtual education when effective vaccines are widely available to everyone aged five and up.

President Joe Biden has made keeping physical classrooms running during the current coronavirus surge a priority, and on Wednesday pledged an additional 10mn COVID-19 tests per month for US schools.

"These additional tests will help schools safely remain open and implement screening testing and test to stay programmes," the White House said. AFP

'Kindles the crazies'

"You personally attack me and with absolutely not a shred of evidence of anything you say," Fauci responded.

"All of a sudden that kindles the crazies out there and I have threats upon my life, harassment of my family and my children with obscene phone calls."

Fauci recalled that in late December, a man was arrested on his way from California to the capital Washington armed with an AR-15 assault weapon and multiple rounds of ammunition.

The man said he wanted to kill Fauci, because of what he said was blood on the scientists' hands.

Fauci then brandished a printout from Paul's website that showed the banner 'Fire Dr Fauci' next to an invitation to donate to the Republican's campaign.

Though Omicron causes severe cases at a lower rate than Delta, it is reaching more people because of its extreme infectiousness.

By December 27, the age-adjusted vaccine efficacy against hospitalisation was 92 per cent, according to data from New York state. AFP



A woman receives a booster dose in Jakarta on Wednesday (AFP)

Indonesia floats booster campaign to stem spread of Omicron variant

Jakarta, Indonesia - Indonesia opened its coronavirus booster campaign to the public on Wednesday as the country records rising infections driven by the Omicron variant.

The free shots will be given to the elderly and at-risk residents as a priority, but will be available to everyone who received their second dose six months prior, President Joko Widodo said on Tuesday after announcing the decision.

The boosters will be administered as half doses - which a local study confirmed was sufficient protection against the virus - due to supply shortages, said health minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin.

Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country with more than 270mn people, has struggled to procure enough vaccines for its residents since the onset of the pandemic.

Elderly Indonesians lined up at vaccinations centres in Jakarta on Wednesday for their boosters in hope of better protection against the highly contagious Omicron variant.

"I must get this shot because I have a lot of activities," said 84-year-old Hardini in Jakarta after receiving her third shot.

"I am still playing tennis, running. If I don't have immunity then I could infect people

or I could become sick."

Indonesia is administering half doses for all of its approved vaccines, of which there is no precedent elsewhere in the world, COVID-19 taskforce spokesperson Siti Nadia Tarmizi told AFP.

Indonesia uses Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and China's Sinovac for COVID-19 inoculations. Some countries, including the United States, are injecting half a dose of Moderna as a booster.

The decision to use half doses was based on a study conducted by the University of Indonesia and the Padjadjaran University in collaboration with the Health Ministry, Tarmizi said.

The country has been severely impacted by the pandemic since July last year, with hospitals running out of beds and oxygen to treat patients.

It had reported more than 4.2mn confirmed COVID-19 cases, and more than 144,000 deaths as of Wednesday.

Around 40 per cent of the Indonesian population is double-jabbed.

The low vaccination rate is leaving the country vulnerable to new outbreaks, especially of the more transmissible Omicron variant that is driving record case numbers in Europe. AFP

Canada's Quebec seeks to tax unvaxxed as Omicron hits

Montreal, Canada - The Canadian province of Quebec, struggling to control the Omicron variant, will impose a new health tax in the coming weeks on those who are not vaccinated against COVID-19.

"We are working on a health contribution for all the adults who are refusing to get vaccinated" because they represent a "financial burden for all Quebecois," said Quebec Premier Francois Legault.

The ten per cent of Quebecois who have not yet received any vaccine doses must not 'harm' the 90 per cent who have, he said.

"It is not on all Quebecois to pay for that," he said during a press conference, specifying that the government of the French-speaking province wanted the tax to represent a 'significant amount'.

"I feel this discontent with regard to the unvaccinated minority which, all things considered, clogs our hospitals," he said.

The Quebec premier explained that these 10 per cent of unvaccinated adults represent 50 per cent of people in intensive care, calling it a 'shocking'



A nurse holds a vial of vaccine for children in Montreal (AFP)

situation. He said that those who are unvaccinated for medical reasons will be exempt from the move.

In total, 2,742 people with COVID are hospitalised and some 255 people are in intensive care in Quebec, which has about 8mn inhabitants.

Hospitalisations also continue to increase in neighbouring province Ontario, the most populous in Canada, with 3,220 people hospitalised and 477 people in intensive care.

In an attempt to stem the new wave of coronavirus infections, Quebec announced on December 30 the return of certain restrictions, including a 10.00pm curfew and a ban on private

gatherings.

And the province had recently announced that non-essential stores are closed for people who are not vaccinated, starting with stores that sell alcohol and cannabis.

But Eric Duhaime, the head of Quebec's Conservative opposition party, decried the provincial government's anti-COVID strategy, tweeting that the new fee would only 'divide' Quebecois.

And the head of Quebec's Liberal party, Dominique Anglade - who is herself in favour of mandatory vaccination - called the tax a 'distraction'.

Though Quebec is the first place to institute a specific tax, the pressure on those who remain unvaccinated by choice is ramping up throughout the world.

France has instituted its so-called vaccine passport, and President Emmanuel Macron has said he wants to 'piss off' the unvaccinated.

Elsewhere in Europe, Austria has mandated coronavirus vaccines for every citizen, and Italy has done the same for over-50s. AFP



Lopez Obrador shows his oxygenation intake during a videoconference with the press at the National Palace, in Mexico City on Tuesday (AFP)

Doing well despite a second bout, says Mexican President

Mexico City, Mexico - Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said on Tuesday he was doing well despite catching COVID-19 for a second time, telling the country that Omicron was a less dangerous variant.

"I'm feeling pretty good," Lopez Obrador (68) said in a video message played during a news conference led by Interior Minister Adan Augusto Lopez in his absence.

"Let's not be scared. Fortunately this is a variant that does not have the level of danger of the Delta variant," Lopez Obrador added, speaking with a croaky voice. "What do I have? Burning in

the throat, hoarseness, a little body ache at first," he said.

On Monday the president had appeared in front of journalists speaking with a hoarse voice and without a face mask, prompting accusations of irresponsible behaviour from critics. He said at the time that he planned to get tested for the coronavirus but believed he had the flu.

Hours later, however, he announced that he had COVID-19. Lopez Obrador overcame a first bout of the coronavirus in early 2021.

He has received the AstraZeneca vaccine including a booster on December 7. AFP

Gloom in Vietnam's incense village ahead of Tet new-year

Hanoi, Vietnam - Vietnam's 'incense village' is dazzling pink as workers prepare the fragrant sticks for the Lunar New Year holiday, but strict rules to stop the spread of COVID-19 are dulling its lustre.

January is usually the busiest time of year for workers in Quang Phu Cau village on the outskirts of Hanoi, where the tradition of making incense goes back more than a century.

As Vietnam's Tet new-year holiday approaches - this year it begins on February 1 - sales tick up with throngs of people crowding into temples to light incense during worship, or burn the sticks on the ancestral altar



A worker collects dried incense sticks in a courtyard in Quang Phu Cau village on the outskirts of Hanoi on Wednesday (AFP)

at home.

But while villagers are busy dyeing, drying and whittling bamboo bark to make the sticks,

they complain that business is slow.

"I think our sales must have dropped by 30 per cent com-

pared with the same period last year," says Nguyen Thi Luyen, 59.

Communist Vietnam reported economic growth for 2021 of just 2.58 per cent - its lowest in three decades - as the country endured draconian restrictions to fight the pandemic.

Production, supply chains and businesses were seriously hit as almost the entire country went into lockdown for at least three months.

Things have started to improve, but the consequences remain. "Normally, there would be trucks carrying our products from central provinces and border provinces. This year, due to

pandemic preventive policy, trucks cannot carry goods there," Luyen told AFP.

Quang Phu Cau is among several places dotted across Vietnam making the sticks, the scent of each batch carefully tailored to suit the tastes of the regions where they will be sold.

Most households in the village are involved in the ancient trade, from cutting bamboo planks and dipping thin strips into pink dye to coating the dried sticks in an aromatic paste.

"We really hope things will come back to normal soon," Luyen said.

AFP

'No path ahead but the sea': Lebanese join migrant flow to EU for better life

Tripoli, Lebanon - If he wasn't making good money smuggling irregular migrants to the European Union by sea, Ibrahim himself might have joined the growing exodus from crisis-hit Lebanon.

"If I didn't work in this profession, I would have left, just like so many other people," said the 42-year-old trafficker, who asked to use a pseudonym when he spoke to AFP in the northern city of Tripoli.

"Maybe I would have turned to someone to smuggle me out," he said, his face hidden by an anti-COVID surgical mask and a hoodie.

Lebanon, in the throes of a brutal economic crisis, is no longer just a launchpad for Syrian refugees and other foreign migrants.

Its own desperate citizens now also risk drowning in the Mediterranean in their quest for a better life.

Ibrahim argues that, while having smuggled around 100 Lebanese nationals to Europe since 2019 makes him no angel, there is virtue in helping his compatriots. "I get them out of here, out of this beggar's life," he said.

"At least if they are put in a camp, they can eat and drink with dignity."

Ibrahim said he took pride in taking only Lebanese nationals on his boats, and even then, only those who can produce civil registry documents.

"I get requests from Palestinians and Syrians but I am responsible only for my own countrymen," said Ibrahim, a former school bus driver whose tumbling income led him to people smuggling.

"There are many Lebanese who want to leave... They are ready to sell their houses, sell their cars, sell everything, just to make it out."

Sinking ship

Lebanon, a country of around 6mn people, is like a sinking ship, grappling with an unprecedented financial crisis that the World Bank says is on a scale usually associated with wars.



This file photo shows Joanna on her father Abdelrahman Kilo's lap as he narrates their failed adventure to migrate, in Tripoli on December 9, last year (AFP)



This file photo shows Lebanese migrant smuggler Ibrahim (pseudonym) during a conversation with an AFP journalist in Tripoli (AFP)

The currency has crashed, people's purchasing power has plummeted and the monthly minimum wage is now worth US\$22.

The UN's refugee agency UNHCR said at least 1,570 individuals, including 186 Lebanese nationals, had embarked or tried

to embark on illicit sea journeys from Lebanon between January and November 2021.

Most were hoping to reach European Union member Cyprus, an island 175km away.

This is up from 270 passengers, including 40 Lebanese in 2019, UNHCR spokesperson Lisa

Abou Khaled told AFP.

"In previous years, the vast majority of passengers were Syrians, while in 2020 and 2021, a notable number of Lebanese joined these movements," she said.

Lives have been lost, including those of two little children, during attempted crossings over the past two years, though there is little data and no exact toll.

The Lebanese army said it is diligently monitoring the 225 kilometre coastline with radar systems and patrol boats.

A joint maritime operations room facilitates coordination between naval forces and other security agencies as well as authorities in Cyprus.

"In 2020, the navy succeeded in seizing about 20 boats and detaining 596 people," the army said.

The army said that 'Lebanese nationals who know their way around the country's coastline' are the most common smuggling

culprits.

They include Ibrahim who said he organised an illicit sea crossing to Europe in 2019 for a Lebanese family of five now residing in Germany.

Since then, he said he has organised nine others, including his latest in September which saw 25 Lebanese nationals arrive in Italy.

With prices ranging from US\$2,500 per person for a trip to Cyprus to up to US\$7,000 to get to Italy, Ibrahim said he can make up to US\$5,000 profit from a single boat journey.

"We used to have to advertise our trips," he said. "Now people come running to us."

'No future'

Sitting on a bench on Tripoli's coast, Bilal Moussa (34) was watching the giant waves that almost swallowed him in November. Taking a long drag from a cigarette, the father of three said he would try again.



Lebanese would-be migrant Sarah wipes her tears as she listens to her husband talking about their failed adventure to migrate to Europe (AFP)



Mohammed Msawel, another would-be migrant from Lebanon, shows the raft he was loaded in after he was caught by the Greek coastguards (AFP)

"There is no future here, not for us and not for our children," said Moussa, who quit his supermarket job because his monthly salary of US\$55 barely paid for his commute.

In September, Moussa decided to attempt the sea voyage to Italy.

He sold his car and borrowed US\$1,500 from a friend to cover the US\$4,000 for the trip.

On November 19, Moussa packed a small duffel bag and left his home in the Dinniyeh region without even telling his wife.

When he reached the Tripoli meeting point, he found around 90 passengers clambering onto a truck that would drive them to the Qalamoun region from where they would depart.

They included 15 Palestinians and 10 Syrians, while the rest were Lebanese.

"We had 35 children on board, and around 20 women," he said.

Two hours after the 18m craft

set sail, a navy boat took chase and ordered the captain back.

Their overcrowded craft started taking on water from the wake of the patrol boat, but the captain sped off and lost his tail after an hour-long white-knuckle chase.

The next terrifying moment came when the engine broke down and the boat started to sink, in the dark.

Panicked passengers started throwing suitcases and fuel tanks overboard.

Moussa and others contacted relatives back home to send help, which arrived several hours later.

A Lebanese army ship came and towed them back ashore, where passengers were interrogated and then released.

"I felt defeated because I came back, because I didn't make it," Moussa said.

"But I am going to leave again... We have no path ahead but the sea."

AFP

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An attendee uses a Liteboxer interactive boxing home workout during the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Nevada, on January 7 (AFP)



Interactive comment sections and virtual reality headsets: Internet-connected fitness gear and services have boomed during the pandemic as at-home athletes seek a proxy for gym life.

While home workouts long predate the coronavirus, they have taken on a social aspect that looks set to become the standard in a world reshaped by the pandemic.

"A big part of going to the gym together is sort of suffering together... you build a camaraderie around that," Jeremy Needham, who does customer education for US boxing fitness company Liteboxer, told AFP at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.

"And now that we don't share that space, at least in real time, we have to do it virtually," he added.

Like other companies that sell internet-connected fitness gear, Liteboxer offers customers access to workouts, competitions and other features for a monthly charge - on top of the roughly US\$1,200 wall-mounted machine.

The market for fitness tech has been growing for years, but the industry has gotten a boost in the last couple of years, similarly to how the pandemic accelerated e-commerce and remote working trends.

"Connected equipment exploded onto the scene in a big way as consumers had to shift the way to work out during the pandemic," CES organiser Consumer

Technology Association (CTA) noted in an industry forecast.

Internet-connected exercise equipment was a nearly US\$3.8bn market in 2021, and double-digit percentage growth is expected this year, CTA's forecast said.

"(Customers) want connectivity," said Richard Kowalski, an analyst with CTA. "They want to engage with other people online."

Need for pandemic release

Connected rowing machine maker Hydrow allows customers to comment and like others' workouts, and users have developed their own social media groups.

"You start talking to each other and then all of a sudden, you have a group of maybe six guys, you know, from all over the world," Aquil Abdullah, who leads workouts on the system, told AFP.

"A guy is in London, a guy is out in California, a guy is down in Florida, and you have this community."

The machines, which sell for US\$2,295, have the usual rowing bar and seat, but also a screen that allows clients to exercise along with instructors on the water, in locales from Miami to London.

"We do these workouts, and so that's part of building community and building those connections," said Abdullah, who rowed for the US at the 2004 Olympics in Athens.

But the connected fitness industry has



A man rides an exercise bike while an instructor appears on screen (AFP)

You start talking to each other and then all of a sudden, you have a group of maybe six guys, you know, from all over the world. A guy is in London, a guy is out in California, a guy is down in Florida, and you have this community

AQUIL ABDULLAH

shown some sensitivity to the changing conditions of the pandemic and the way it affects equipment users' lives.

Fitness firm Peloton's shares have been under pressure since early November, when the company cut its forecast as more consumers returned to reopening gyms.

Credit Suisse downgraded the firm in December, saying the market shifts have forced Peloton to increase advertising and discounting.

However, as cases of COVID's Omicron variant break records around the world, many are again hunkering down at home.

That shift could work in favour of home fitness tech companies.

CTA took a bullish perspective, saying 'the growth trajectory suggests that health-conscious consumers are finding practicality and convenience in exercising at home, even as gyms and workout classes reopen'.

And exercise of any kind has offered some people a relief from the pandemic's impacts - as work, school and travel disruptions and simmering health worries offer plenty to stress about.

"The pandemic locked us inside... we couldn't do the things that we loved," said Needham. "But the human body still needs cardiovascular activity, it's quite simple. You just need a really engaging way... to release that energy that builds up in you."

AFP

FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Iheanacho overshadows Salah, Mahrez at Africa Cup of Nations

Yaoundé, Cameroon - Kelechi Iheanacho overshadowed fellow Premier League stars Mohamed Salah and Riyad Mahrez on Tuesday as Nigeria made a winning start to their Africa Cup of Nations campaign and title-holders Algeria were held.

The Leicester City forward scored the only goal on 30 minutes as Nigeria overcame lacklustre Egypt 1-0 in a clash of Group D big guns in the north-western city of Garoua.

His match winner and overall performance earned Iheanacho the man-of-the-match award on a day when prolific Liverpool scorer Salah and Manchester City winger Mahrez failed to sparkle.

Captain Salah cut an isolated, frustrated, figure at the Stade Roudme Adjia and when he did get a scoring chance in the second half, his prod was saved by the boot of goalkeeper Maduka Okoye.

It was an otherwise uneventful evening for the Nigeria shot-stopper, who must have anticipated being called into action more often against the record seven-time African champions.

"We had three things in mind - winning, retaining possession and cutting off the supply to Salah," said Nigeria caretaker



Nigeria's forward Kelechi Iheanacho (right) kicks the ball past Egypt's defender Ahmed Hegazi during the Group D Africa Cup of Nations match at Stade Roudme Adjia in Garoua on Tuesday

coach Augustine Eguavoen.

"Every game will be treated like a final because each team in Cameroon must be respected regardless of the name of the country.

"There are no minor football nations anymore in Africa so if you do not plan and make the effort, you can be shocked."

This was the eighth meeting of the Super Eagles and the

Pharaohs in the flagship African tournament and three-time champions Nigeria have won four and drawn two.

Nigeria succeeded after a troubled build-up in which Ger-

man coach Gernot Rohr was fired following an unimpressive World Cup qualifying run and former national star Eguavoen took temporary charge.

Eguavoen's squad was with-

out forwards Victor Osimhen, Emmanuel Dennis and Odion Ighalo for a variety of reasons, but his team went on the offensive from the kick-off and did him proud.

Speedy winger Moses Simon played a major role when the Super Eagles took the lead at the 30,000-capacity stadium.

Guinea-Bissau still winless

His cross was only partially cleared by Ahmed Hegazy and Nigerian Joseph Aribio nodded the ball into the path of Iheanacho, who hammered a half-volley past goalkeeper Mohamed Elshenawy.

After the later Group D match Guinea-Bissau are still without a win in three Cup of Nations appearances as Judilson 'Pele' Gomes missed a penalty and the woodwork saved Sudan twice in a 0-0 draw.

Algeria were hot favourites to win the opening Group E match against Sierra Leone, a lowly ranked team making a first Cup of Nations appearance since 1996.

But captain Mahrez could not inspire his team in the Atlantic port city of Douala and several excellent saves by Sierra Leone goalkeeper Mohamed Kamara saw him voted man of the match.

His finest moment came during the second half when Yacine Brahimi broke through, but the goalkeeper held his shot at the second attempt.

AFP



Southampton's Jan Bednarek (left, red jersey) scores his team's first goal during the match against Brentford

Southampton mark new era by thrashing Brentford

Southampton, UK - Southampton got Serbian businessman Dragan Solak's reign as owner off to a flying start with a 4-1 thrashing of Brentford on Tuesday to pull further clear of the relegation zone.

Another season in the top-flight looks safe for the Saints as they moved above Brentford into 11th, 13 points clear of the bottom three.

Southampton's new ownership group Sport Republic was founded by Rasmus Ankersen,

who recently stepped down as Brentford co-director of football.

Ankersen helped lead the Bees back to the top flight for the first time in 74 years.

But it in Southampton's first home game since the reported £100mn (US\$135mn) takeover went through, it was a night to forget for the Brentford.

"They (the owners) saw a good game today and a deserved three points," said Southampton boss Ralph Hasenhuttl after his side scored four goals at home

for the first time in a Premier League game since 2017.

"It's not very often that injury time plays out and we feel comfortable because sometimes it's tight here. Today we had a fantastic performance."

Jan Bednarek's header opened the scoring after just five minutes as he got on the end of James Ward-Prowse's corner. Thomas Frank's men fought back to level on 23 minutes courtesy of a fine volley from Vitaly Janelt.

AFP

PSG postpone Qatar camp over France's COVID scene

Paris, France - Paris Saint-Germain's three-day training camp in Qatar and Saudi Arabia has been cancelled because of the COVID-19 situation in France, the club announced on Wednesday.

"Given the health situation in France, Paris Saint-Germain has decided to preserve the health of its staff and players by postponing the Qatar Winter Tour 2022 and the friendly match in Riyadh," PSG said.

The tour had been scheduled for January 16-19, culminating in the match against a local team in the Saudi capital. PSG has been hard hit by COVID-19, with Argentina star Lionel Messi, goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma, defender Juan Bernat and midfielders Danilo Pereira, Julian Draxler and Angel Di Maria all having tested positive for coronavirus.

France has suffered more than 125,000 deaths since the start of the pandemic, and continues to register thousands of daily new coronavirus cases as the highly contagious Omicron variant drives up infections.

AFP

Peterhansel strikes

'Mr Dakar' wins Stage 10 as title beckons for Attiyah

DAKAR RALLY

Bisha, Saudi Arabia - The Dakar Rally's record 14-time champion Stephane Peterhansel powered to stage 10 success on Wednesday as only a mechanical meltdown appeared to now stand between Nasser al Attiyah and the 2022 title.

The Qatari three-time winner heads into Thursday's penultimate stage 32min 40sec clear of France's nine-time world rally

champion Sebastien Loeb.

In the bike category France's Adrien Van Beveren moved to the top of the rankings after a day marked by the premature end of Kevin Benavides' title defence.

Peterhansel, known as 'Mr Dakar', won last year, three decades after his first victory on two wheels in 1991.

The only competitor to win the famed rally in Africa, South America and Asia, Peterhansel

was thrilled to land a stage in his Audi hybrid.

"I'm not necessarily a stage hunter, but each Audi driver has now won a stage, and that's fantastic," the Frenchman said.

"When Carlos (Sainz) became the first driver to win a Dakar stage in an electric car, it was a milestone, now we confirmed that performance."

He added: "This is good for morale, not least because it comes after a complicated start to the rally. We need to win in 2023. Failure is not an option."

AFP



Audi's electric French driver Stephane Peterhansel and his co-driver Edouard Boulanger compete during the Stage 10 of the Dakar Rally 2022 between Wadi Ad Dawasir and Bisha in Saudi Arabia, on Wednesday (AFP)



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India's Jasprit Bumrah (centre) celebrates with Virat Kohli after dismissing South Africa's Aiden Markram (right) during the second day of the third Test, in Cape Town on Wednesday (AFP)

Bumrah bowls India to lead before openers fall

Cape Town, South Africa - Jasprit Bumrah bowled India to a slender first innings lead before South Africa hit back at the start of the second innings on the second day of the series-deciding third Test at Newlands on Wednesday.

India were 57 for two at the close, an overall lead of 70, with Cheteshwar Pujara on nine and captain Virat Kohli on 14.

Bumrah took five for 42, his seventh five-wicket haul in Tests, as South Africa were bowled out for 210.

It gave India a first innings lead of 13 but Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen dismissed both Indian openers to keep the match - and the series which is tied at 1-1 - evenly poised.

Keegan Petersen top-scored with 72 for South Africa but the fragility of the home team's batting was exposed, with no other

batsman scoring more than Temba Bavuma's 28.

Even so, South Africa seemed well-placed until Mohammed Shami made a double strike shortly before tea.

With batting conditions seemingly easier in bright sunshine than on the overcast first day, South Africa reached 159 for four, with Petersen and Bavuma both batting relatively comfortably.

But the consistently accurate Shami produced a ball which climbed on Bavuma, forcing an edge which was taken by Kohli at second slip.

Two balls later Kyle Verreynne prodded at a good-length delivery from Shami and was caught behind, leaving South Africa with no more recognised batsmen.

Bumrah followed by bowling Jansen with the last ball before

tea and then had Petersen caught at first slip in the second over after the interval.

Petersen had to face the third ball of the morning after Aiden Markram padded up and was bowled by an in-swinging Bumrah without a run added to the overnight 17 for one.

When nightwatchman Keshav Maharaj was bowled by Umesh Yadav for 25, South Africa were precariously placed at 45 for three.

The slightly-built Petersen batted with skill and application in partnerships of 67 with Rassie van der Dussen (21) and 47 with Bavuma before Shami struck.

His 72, which came off 166 balls and included nine fours, was his second half-century following the 62 he made in the first innings in the previous Test at the Wanderers.

Bumrah, though, was India's

most effective bowler.

He dismissed South African captain Dean Elgar on the first evening and posed problems for all the batsmen on a pitch which still offered good bounce and some seam movement for the bowlers.

Rabada had a hostile opening spell when India started their second innings. Mayank Agarwal was given out caught behind but won a reprieve when a review showed the ball had brushed a pad and not the inside edge of his bat.

But Agarwal made only seven before edging Rabada to Elgar at first slip.

Jansen struck in the next over when KL Rahul was caught at second slip.

Pujara and Kohli prevented any further breakthroughs before the close of play.

AFP

SCOREBOARD		
India 1st Innings 223		
SOUTH AFRICA 1 st INNINGS		
Dean Elgar (c)	c Pujara b Bumrah	3
A Markram	b Bumrah	8
K Maharaj	b Yadav	25
K Petersen	c Pujara b Bumrah	72
R van der Dussen	c Kohli b Yadav	21
Temba Bavuma	c Kohli b M. Shami	28
Kyle Verreynne	c Pant b M. Shami	0
Marco Jansen	b Bumrah	7
Kagiso Rabada	c Bumrah b Thakur	15
Duanne Olivier	not out	10
Lungi Ngidi	c Ashwin b Bumrah	3
Extras: (b 4, lb 4, nb 4, w 1, pen 5)		18
TOTAL:	(76.3 Ov, RR: 2.74)	210
Fall of wickets: 1-10, 2-17, 3-45, 4-112, 5-159, 6-159, 7-176, 8-179, 9-200, 10-210		
Bowling: J Bumrah 23.3-8-42-5, Umesh Yadav 16-3-64-2, M Shami 16-4-39-2, S Thakur 12-2-37-1, R Ashwin 9-3-15-0		
INDIA 2 nd INNINGS		
KL Rahul	c Markram b Jansen	10
M Agarwal	c Elgar b Rabada	7
C Pujara	not out	9
Virat Kohli	not out	14
Extras: (b 8, lb 4, nb 5)		17
TOTAL:	(17 Ov, RR: 3.35)	57/2
Fall of wickets: 1-20, 2-24		
Bowling: K Rabada 6-1-25-1, D Olivier 2-0-13-0, M Jansen 5-3-7-1, L Ngidi 3-3-0-0, K Maharaj 1-1-0-0		



England batsman Ben Stokes (AFP)

Injury-hit England fighting to turn corner in Ashes climax

Hobart, Australia - A patched-up England head to an Ashes finale against Australia under lights in Hobart on Friday buoyed by a fighting draw in Sydney, but consumed by injury worries and selection dilemmas.

The tourists finally stopped the rot on a gruelling tour last week with their nail-biting last-wicket hold-out at the Sydney Cricket Ground to prevent a 5-0 whitewash.

But it came at a price with wicketkeeper Jos Buttler sent home with a fractured finger and experienced pair Jonny Bairstow and Ben Stokes racing the clock to be fit.

England captain Joe Root said not losing was 'hugely important' and he hoped it had turned the tide after three heavy and humiliating defeats in Brisbane, Adelaide and Melbourne.

"It would have been very easy for us to roll over and feel sorry for ourselves," he said, after breaking Alastair Cook's record for most matches in charge when he captained England for the 60th time in Sydney. "But it was up to the guys to put some pride back into the badge and show how

much they care about playing for England."

However, it can't disguise their still appalling record in Australia with 12 defeats in 14 Tests, with England reduced to celebrating a draw.

Former skipper Michael Atherton said in a column for *The Times* this week that avoiding a whitewash was 'a small mercy'. "Sober assessment of the fourth Test would stress that Australia declared in both innings and that there were two sessions lost to rain," he added.

"England were second best by a yawning distance."

Hobart's Bellerive Oval will play host to its first Ashes Test after winning the race to replace Perth, which was axed last month over Western Australia state's tough COVID quarantine rules.

And it will be day-night pink-ball affair, the second of the series after Adelaide, where Australia crushed England by 275 runs.

At least the visitors can draw inspiration from a better batting performance in Sydney with Bairstow making England's first century of the series.

AFP

Vaishali to lead Oman women team against touring Wanstead of UK

Muscat - Women's cricket is on the rise and Wanstead Cricket Club, one of the top women's teams in UK, will be touring Oman for a nine-day tour, starting on January 15.

Vaishali Jesrani will be leading the Oman side whereas Fiza Javed will be her deputy for the series.

Oman Cricket has picked an exciting bunch of experienced and budding cricketers who will be in action against Wanstead CC for one 30-over game and three T20 matches at the picturesque Al Amerat Cricket Stadium.

The tour opens with a 30-over day-night clash starting at 2.30 pm on January 16 followed by



XXXXXX

T20 games on January 18, 20 and 21 starting at 10.30 am.

With a strong girls team, Wanstead CC is likely to pose a strong challenge to Oman

Women's team and Oman captain is fully alive to the task ahead.

"While the girls are all geared up to compete against a quality

side, the series offers an excellent opportunity for the youngsters in Oman team to come forward and showcase their talent," said Vaishali, who is also

Women's Coordinator at Oman Cricket.

SQUAD:

Vaishali Jesrani (captain), Fiza Javed (vice-captain), Amanda D'costa, Nikhita Jagadish, Sameera Khan, Hina Javed, Afida Aftab, Suhanthika Sahiva, Prinka Mendonca, Snehal Nair, Nayan Anil, Shreya Prabhu, Bhakti Shetty, Sakshi Shetty.

Reserves: Alifia Sayed, Clarita Saldana, Nitya Joshi, Sani-e Zehra.

Team officials: Haider Ali (manager/head coach), Desmond Berhardt, Amir Kaleem (assistant coaches), Vijay Kaliswaran (physio).





Australia's Ashleigh Barty serves during a practice session ahead of the Australian Open at the Melbourne Park on Wednesday (AFP)

Barty hot favourite to win Australian Open

Melbourne, Australia - Ashleigh Barty will be hot favourite to win her home Australian Open for the first time, but even with Serena Williams absent the world number one faces threats from all angles.

For the first time in a quarter of a century the first Grand Slam of the year will not feature either of the Williams sisters - Serena would have been pursuing a record-equalling 24th major crown but she is not fit.

With defending champion Naomi Osaka still working her way back to top form and fitness after a long break, the 25-year-old Barty has emerged as the clear favourite at Melbourne Park.

Like her rival Osaka, Barty was dumped out of the third round of the US Open in September and did not play the rest of the year, returning home to Australia because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Unlike the Japanese star, who pulled out of a warm-up tournament last week saying her 'body got a shock' after

playing her first matches for four months, Barty appears to be back in the groove already.

Barty won the French Open in 2019 and Wimbledon last year but her best performance in Melbourne was reaching the semi-finals in 2020, where she lost to eventual champion Sofia Kenin.

However, she fired a warning to the rest of the Australian Open field on Sunday, claiming the singles and doubles titles at the Adelaide International.

Barty pulled out of this week's Sydney Classic, explaining that she needed to recover from her exploits, but said that her 14th career singles crown was a huge confidence boost.

"When my back was against the wall I was able to produce some pretty good stuff," she told the WTA.

"Pre-seasons are good but you never quite know where that level is until you test yourself against the very best.

"And it's been really nice to have some good hit-outs this week and I feel like I'm ready." AFP

Djokovic admits 'errors' as he fights to avoid deportation

Melbourne, Australia - Novak Djokovic on Wednesday admitted 'errors' in his travel papers and for not isolating after a claimed coronavirus infection, as he battled to stay in Australia and fight for a record 21st Grand Slam.

The world number one said his team had offered fresh information to the Australian government, which is pondering whether to cancel his visa, again, and throw him out of the country.

"We are living in challenging times in a global pandemic and sometimes these mistakes can occur," the unvaccinated 34-year-old said in a statement released as he practised on the courts of the Australian Open, which starts on Monday.

The Serbian star flew into Melbourne a week ago claiming a vaccine exemption because of a positive PCR test result on December 16.

Border agents rejected his exemption saying a recent infection did not qualify, tore up his visa and placed him in a detention centre.

But the vaccine-sceptic Djokovic's high-powered legal team dramatically overturned the visa decision in court on Monday on a procedural matter related to his airport interview.

Now, Immigration Minister Alex Hawke says he is considering cancelling the visa another time, as fresh doubts emerge.

In an update to Australian media, his spokesman acknowledged receiving 'lengthy further submissions' from the player's lawyers.

"Naturally, this will affect the timeframe for a decision," he said.



Novak Djokovic hits a return during a practice session ahead of the Australian Open, on Wednesday (AFP)

'Error of judgement'

Djokovic, a nine-time Australian Open champion, described reports about his post-infection outings in Serbia as 'misinformation'.

On the day of his claimed positive test in Serbia, he appeared at a ceremony to honour him with stamps bearing his image. The following day he attended a youth tennis event. He appeared at both apparently without a mask.

Djokovic, who made no mention of the stamp ceremony, said he only received the PCR test result after attending the children's tennis event.

But he admitted that he also

We are living in challenging times in a pandemic and sometimes these mistakes can occur

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

went ahead with an interview and photoshoot with French sports newspaper *L'Equipe* on December 18.

"I felt obliged to go ahead and conduct the *L'Equipe* interview as I didn't want to let the journalist down but did ensure I socially distanced and wore a mask except when my photograph was being taken," he said.

"On reflection, this was an error of judgement and I accept that I should have rescheduled this commitment."

The player said he also had two rapid antigen tests, which both returned negative results.

AFP

Muguruza 'manages anxiety' to make winning start

Sydney, Australia - Australian Open third seed Garbine Muguruza made a confident start to her season with a straight-sets win over battling Ekaterina Alexandrova on Wednesday at the Sydney Classic.

The Spanish world number three, who had a first-round bye in Sydney, withstood a fightback from the 40th-ranked Russian in the second set to win 6-1, 7-6 (7/4).

Muguruza will now play another Russian, Daria Kasatkina, in the quarter-finals after she upset Belgian Elise Mertens 6-3, 6-4.

Muguruza, a former world number one and two-time Grand Slam champion, will be one of the main contenders for next week's Australian Open.

Her best result at Melbourne Park was in 2020, when she finished runner-up to surprise winner Sofia Kenin.

Playing her first match since winning the WTA Finals in November, the 28-year-old Muguruza said she was encouraged by the way she had stayed strong when facing five set points in the second set.



Garbine Muguruza of Spain hits a return against Ekaterina Alexandrova of Russia during their match at the Sydney Classic, on Wednesday (AFP)

"I was most pleased that I stood very calmly in the second set when I was, you know, 5-4 down and serving and having all those set points, where you can get a little bit upset," she said.

"So to manage the anxiety, playing the first match of the year and you want to win and you want to start on the right foot.

"The last match was two months ago so it's been a while." Tunisia's Ons Jabeur warmed

up for the first Grand Slam of the year by defeating two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitová 6-4, 6-4.

The 27-year-old Jabeur had a breakthrough 2021, winning her maiden WTA singles title and surging into the top 10 for the first time.

Seeded seventh this week in Sydney, Jabeur came from behind in both sets to defeat Kvitová for the first time in four attempts to set up a quarter-final

against Estonia's Anett Kontaveit.

The fourth-seeded Kontaveit had a comfortable 6-3, 6-1 win over Romanian qualifier Elena-Gabriela Ruse.

In the men's draw four of the top-five seeded players progressed without too many problems.

Top-ranked Russian Aslan Karatsev beat Serbia's Miomir Kecmanovic 7-5, 6-4, while third-seeded Briton Dan Evans crushed Spaniard Pedro Martinez 6-2, 6-3.

However, second seed Nikoloz Basilashvili of Georgia went down to former world number one Andy Murray in a marathon match that lasted three and a quarter hours.

In an intriguing clash between two completely different styles of play, Murray's consistency was just enough to get him over the line 6-7 (4/7), 7-6 (7/3), 6-3.

The exciting Basilashvili hit an incredible 59 winners to Murray's 24, but the Georgian also made 52 unforced errors, which eventually cost him the match.

AFP

Monfils suffers injury scare ahead of AO

Adelaide, Australia - France's Gael Monfils suffered an injury scare ahead of next week's Australian Open when he was forced to withdraw from his Adelaide International Two second-round clash against Brazilian Thiago Monteiro on Wednesday.

Monfils, who won the Adelaide International One last week, took the first set in a tiebreak but appeared to injure his neck at the start of the second set and called for the physio. Monteiro won the second set then broke Monfils' serve in the first game of the third before the top-seeded Monfils decided to withdraw.

The Brazilian won the match 6-7 (2/7), 6-3 1-0 ret to move into the quarter-finals, where he will play French qualifier Corentin Moutet. Moutet ousted eighth-seeded Hungarian Martin Fucsovics 6-2, 6-2.

In another upset, Australian wildcard Thanasi Kokkinakis saw off second seed John Isner in three tiebreak sets 6-7 (5/7), 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/4).

AFP

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