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GO TO PAGE 12 SPORTS



Vaccination drive kicks off today

Number of new cases drops further, no death reported on Thursday

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman is set to begin the immunisation campaign against COVID-19 on Sunday with H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, taking the first shot. The Ministry of Health (MoH) has identified specialised polyclinics in Bausher, Quriyat and Seeb for the inaugural vaccine rollout.

The first batch of 15,600 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine arrived in Oman on Thursday night. The second



The first batch of the Pfizer-BioNTech arrived in Muscat on Thursday (Supplied photo)

consignment of 28,000 doses is scheduled to arrive early next month.

According to the MoH, priority will be given to high-risk groups. "In the first stage, the target groups include the most vulnerable to contracting the virus - frontline workers, people with chronic diseases and elderly," H E Dr Sa'eedi said, adding that he personally believes in the safety of the vaccine and that he will be the first to take the shot here in Oman.

According to the strategy adopted by the ministry, it plans to cover 60 per cent of the population with vaccines. This will be done in several phases, the first of which will cover 20 per cent of the targetted percentage due to the initial supply constraints.

The ministry has said that it is not legally binding on people to

take the vaccine. While it is left on an individual to take the vaccine, it is national duty to get immunised.

For the first time since May, Oman reported less than 60 COVID-19 cases on Thursday with no new deaths.

"Fifty-four new cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) were reported, taking the total to 128,290, while the number of those who have recovered increased by 263 to 120,441. The number of deaths has reached 1,491," an MoH statement said on Thursday.

In another indication of control on infections, the number of hospitalised patients has come down significantly.

'As of Thursday, a total of 77 COVID-19 patients are in hospitals, including 40 in ICUs. The rate of recovery is 93.9,' the MoH statement said.

Single-use plastic bags ban: Five days to go

Fine of no less than RO100 and no more than RO2,000 to be imposed for violations

Our Correspondent
Muscat

With only five days to go before a ban on single-use plastic bags in shopping centres comes into effect in Oman, the Environment Authority (EA) is leaving no stone unturned to raise awareness on the implementation of the new measure and preparing everyone for the ban. The authority is also planning to replace one-time use plastic water bottles with glass ones in the future.

Over 30,000 environmentally friendly bags will be distributed free in the country starting January 1, 2021, according to Dr Mohammad Majid al Kasbi, director, Department of Chemical Materials, at the EA.

"The EA, in cooperation with

competent authorities, will gradually begin to ban single-use plastic bags in the country. In the first phase, the ban will be effective in shopping centres. In the second phase, we will prohibit the use of plastic bags in bakeries and butcher's shops," Kasbi said.

He highlighted the issue of increasing use of plastics, especially bags, and the grave concern about their impact on wildlife and marine life, as well as the presence of these wastes on the seabed where it can remain forever. "It requires a serious response to solve this problem," Kasbi said.

Talking about the EA's efforts to reduce the use of plastic bags, he said, "The authority has cooperated with several relevant authorities such as the



(Photo for illustrative purpose)

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, the Consumer Protection Authority, and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion to spread awareness on

the importance of using environmentally friendly bags.

"We distributed thousands of environmentally friendly bags this year. The EA's initiative to distribute more than 30,000 free eco-friendly bags starting January 1 will target school students, universities and citizen's homes in several governorates across the sultanate. It will take place in cooperation with the governor's offices in the wilayats. Many commercial centres have agreed to offer their customers eco-friendly bags for free when they shop from them."

Talking about the alternatives available, Kasbi said, "Multi-use bags are an option. The multi-use eco-friendly bags are made of cloth, paper or other organic materials. These bags can be

used over hundreds of times, while the plastic shopping bags are used only once and take more than a thousand years to degrade.

"Plastic bags end up in landfills and the sea. They strangle animals and are present in the environment. We urge all members of society to cooperate with the concerned authorities to reduce the use of plastic bags. Use environmentally friendly bags to protect the environment from pollution and to protect natural life in Oman."

Meanwhile, the authority has informed that violators of the decision will be liable to pay a fine of no less than RO100 and no more than RO2,000. The fine will double in case of a repeat violation, it stated.

British Cold War double agent dies

Moscow, Russia - George Blake, a famous 'mole' in British intelligence who spied for the Soviet KGB during the 1950s before fleeing across the Iron Curtain, has died aged 98, Russian news agencies reported on Saturday.

"The legendary intelligence officer George Blake has passed away today," the spokesman for Russia's SVR foreign intelligence service Sergei Ivanov told the TASS state news agency.

"He sincerely loved our country and admired our people's achievements during World War II," Ivanov added.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, himself an ex-KGB agent, on Saturday expressed his "deep condolences" to Blake's family and friends.

AFP

WINTERING WITH FAMILY ON QURM BEACH



The mercury dipped in Muscat on Saturday providing families an opportunity to spend time outdoors. Amar Shah, who came to Qurm beach with his family, said, "After long periods of lockdown and other restrictions, it feels great to step out, specially in this pleasant weather. The children are particularly happy, and we are looking forward to exploring more of Oman's natural beauty." The Met office has predicted a further decrease in temperatures in most parts of the country till Monday (Syed Fasiuddin)

18 aquaculture projects worth RO1bn approved in 2020

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to increase the national income, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources is working to establish various aquaculture projects across the sultanate with an investment of around RO1bn.

According to the Contractual Production in Agricultural & Fisheries Sectors Symposium, which was organised by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry recently, 18 aquaculture projects were approved in 2020.

"Of the 18 projects, seven have got approved commercial licences and 11 are under preliminary commercial licence phase with a total investment cost of RO987mn and an expected production of 435,397 tonnes," an official source in OCCI said.

He added, "Shrimp cultivation is the most common among the projects, with four approved commercial projects and four



under preliminary commercial licence phase. There are two approved commercial and four preliminary commercial projects for the closed systems projects - abalone, sea cucumber, bermandi and salmon. The ministry has also granted a preliminary commercial licence for marine algae farming, with an investment estimated at RO133mn for the production of 17,500 tonnes per year."

The ministry said that the sultanate's production from aquaculture in 2019 accounted for 1,054 tonnes of fish and fish products, an increase of 133 per cent compared to 2018, worth a total value of RO2mn.

WALKING THROUGH HISTORY



As an Omani, it is my duty to promote the country in whatever way I can. I am proud of our ancestors and learning about them, and the structures they made, prompted me to start this project

HILMI AL KINDI



Hilmi al Kindi and Nawaf al Sulaimani walk to Oman’s historical sites in a project titled ‘Tracing Our Ancestors’

Shaddad al Musalmy
Muscat

Being a country with a rich history, Oman has countless ruins, forts, castles and natural wonders that are still being explored and found today by the new generation. For a firsthand experience of these and to learn more about the hidden treasures of Oman, one doesn’t always have to drive but can walk to these locations, according to Hilmi al Kindi and his friend Nawaf al Sulaimani.

In an effort to relive Oman’s history, rediscover its natural wonders and find new ones, Kindi - who has quite possibly spent his life walking in and around the sultanate to spread various social messages - has now embarked on a project he calls ‘Tracing Our Ancestors’.

Kindi, who loves history and seemingly endless walking expeditions in equal measures, if not more, said Oman still has many undiscovered historical sites. He roped in his friend Sulaimani to walk to different locations across the country and has so far visited Old Al Khoudh, Samail and Izki.

“The aim of our project is to spread the message about preserving and learning from our Omani heritage among the youth and, consequently, the generation that follows. Some of our historical structures reveal the best of creativity. Omanis are hard working and even without today’s engineering and technologies, they created miracles,” Kindi told *Muscat Daily*.

Kindi, 40, plans to cover most of the country, if not all of it, with Tracing Our Ancestors and write a book about the hidden history of Oman.

Additionally, he is eager to make documentaries about Oman’s heritage structures.

“I hope the authorities can maintain them, and carry out restoration works where necessary, because some of these structures are very old. They need proper care,” he said, adding that these sites can promote tourism in Oman.

While still not halfway through his Tracing Our Ancestors project, Kindi is firming up plans for his next.

“After I’ve walked to all the heritage sites of Oman, and I have documentaries on these, I plan to walk around the world to showcase them. As an Omani, it is my duty to promote the country in whatever way I can. I am proud of our ancestors and learning about them, and the structures they made, prompted me to start this project,” he said.

However, Kindi has faced disappointment in securing sponsorship for his project.

“For over a year before embarking on this, I tried getting a sponsor. But it was in vain. This has been my long-time dream. So I decided to just team up with Sulaimani and set off on this project just like I did in my earlier ventures.”

Kindi faces another challenge - of filming documentaries - in his Tracing Our Ancestors project.

“We need proper videographers. So far, we have managed on our own with our small cameras. That is why we will be doing this project in stages. Time is also an issue because we have our full time jobs,” he said.

Kindi’s plans for the future include setting up an association or institute to teach the youth about Oman’s history and heritage.



(Supplied photos)

@shadadm

Partial collapse of Beit al Ajaib in Zanzibar a great loss: Unesco

Sultanate working on RO6mn renovation of the site dating back to 1883

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The partial collapse of the Unesco World Heritage site House of Wonders or Beit al Ajaib in Stone Town, Zanzibar on Friday, has evoked a sense of loss and regret from the Omani authorities as well the Unesco.

Owing to its long history of relations and shared culture and heritage with Zanzibar, Oman has committed to renovate Beit al Ajaib in response to the Royal Orders of the Late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos at a cost of RO5,931,770. A section of the House of Wonders, a landmark building dating back to 1883, which was undergoing renovations, collapsed on Friday.

The sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, in a statement expressed regret over the loss.

'The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, with regret, has followed up the partial collapse of the House of Wonders in Zanzibar and hopes that, as the funding body for the comprehensive restoration, maintenance and re-



habilitation project, a team will be formed from all concerned parties to find out the causes and determine the urgent and necessary measures to preserve and protect the building,' the official statement said.

The ministry added that it had previously carried out the necessary strengthening process of the building before the comprehensive restoration began.

The ministry also issued a statement regarding false infor-

mation being circulated on social media that the collapse took place after the restoration.

'The truth is that the restoration work was not completed, but stopped since the beginning of the year due to the pandemic. The damage would have been greater had it not been for the reinforcement process that was already carried out.'

Following the news of the collapse, Mechtild Rössler, director of the Unesco World Heritage

Centre, joined the people of Zanzibar, and the United Republic of Tanzania in general to mourn this sudden and significant loss, a statement from Unesco said.

'The House of Wonders is one of the outstanding monuments in the Stone Town of Zanzibar (United Republic of Tanzania),' Unesco stated.

"We are in contact with the Stone Town Conservation and Development Authority

which is currently carrying out a rescue operation and will soon be starting a preliminary assessment of the damage caused by the collapse," said Mechtild.

"We have confidence that the authorities will carry out the necessary emergency actions and assessments to understand the causes of this damage and propose solutions to safeguard this monument which is an essential component contributing to the 'Outstanding Universal Value' of

the site. Unesco stands ready to support the ongoing efforts and we are with the United Republic of Tanzania in facing this disaster."

Earlier this month, a team from Oman, led by Eng Ibrahim bin Saeed al Kharusi, Undersecretary at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, visited the site for inspection. The Stone Town of Zanzibar is an outstanding example of the Swahili coastal trading towns of East Africa.



Meet reviews work of GCC railway project

Muscat - Oman and GCC member states discussed the implementation and operation of a railway project in the region with an aim to link all the member states.

The discussion took place during the 22nd meeting of the GCC Transport Ministers' Committee. At last week's meeting held via video-conferencing, the sultanate was represented by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology. The sultanate's side was headed by H E Eng Said Hamoud al Ma'awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, in the presence of H E Eng Salim Mohammed al Nuaimi, Undersecretary for Transport.

The meeting reviewed a draft of establishing a GCC railway authority, a study on the forecast of volume of travellers and goods traffic and the agreement to link the GCC countries.

ONA



55,000 livestock vaccinated in Muscat

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has completed the first phase of livestock vaccination in Muscat governorate as part of its National Project for Livestock Immunisation, with over 55,000 animals having being immunised.

The ministry's veterinary team visited 573 breeders and vaccinated 33,238 animals (goats, sheep, cows and camels) in the wilayat of Seeb, and 24,319 animals in the wilayat of Amerat against diseases including intestinal poisoning, foot-and-mouth disease and rabies.

An official in the ministry said,

"The campaign aims to immunise livestock, reduce infection and prevent common disease transmission between animals and human beings. The programme also aims to provide vaccination to the largest number to protect herds from epidemics, including plague, smallpox and foot-and-mouth disease that cause great economic losses."

The first phase of vaccination programme began on September 15 and finished in mid December.

"The second phase of the programme will start this week and will continue until the end of April. It will cover all the targeted villages in the wilayats," the official added.

REGIONAL WEATHER			PRAYER TIMINGS	
	Max	Min		
Abu Dhabi	26	13	Fajr	5.27am
Doha	25	16	Sunrise	6.47am
Kuwait City	14	10	Duhr	12.13pm
Manama	22	16	Asr	3.14pm
Riyadh	19	7	Maghrib	5.34pm
			Isha	6.49pm



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Omani photographer wins gold in international contest



Our Correspondent

Muscat

Photographer Turki Ibrahim al Junibi struck gold in the 4th International Circular of Photography - Autumn Circuit 2020 - held in Serbia Montenegro recently.

Hailing from the wilayat of Masirah in South Sharqiyah, the 34 year old's photograph simply titled 'A girl and a book' won the gold medal in the Open Monochrome category of the online competition.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Junibi said 259 photographers from 30 countries participated in the competition. "My winning photo shows a girl's eagerness to learn. I took the black and white photo of the village girl in Kashmir, India, in 2018."

Junibi started photography in 2016 and joined the Photographic Society of Oman in 2018. He is keen to promote domestic tourism and showcase Oman's beauty and diversity to the world through his photographs.

"This is my contribution to my beloved country," he said.

"I love taking photos of people's faces and their customs, besides nature," Junibi informed. "I hope to hold a solo exhibition of my photos soon."

He takes the difficulties he faces while shooting in his stride. "Reaching some locations while doing nature and wildlife photography need trekking for long over difficult terrain or climbing mountains."

In efforts to encourage interest and raise awareness on photography, he holds workshops for school students in Masirah.



CURB COVID-19

BREAK THE CHAIN...

YOU CAN DO IT

Municipality starts towing abandoned vehicles away

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat Municipality has started towing away abandoned vehicles parked in public places in Muscat governorate. Officials have been making field visits to monitor the situation.

'Muscat Municipality in Bausher towed away vehicles abandoned in public places as these vehicles take up valuable parking spaces in residential and industrial areas,' municipality said in a statement on Thursday.

The municipality affirms that this practice is illegal and calls on vehicle owners to avoid leaving cars neglected. 'Muscat governorate is an important tourist

Muscat Municipality said 829 vehicles have been found abandoned in the governorate in 2020, with Amerat registering the highest number of 686

destination in Oman. However, abandoning cars in public squares and streets is an uncivil practice spoiling the aesthetics and security of the city,' the civic body stated.

Leaving vehicles unattended for an extended period of time violates the administrative decision No 171/2018 issued on the regulation of neglected vehicles in public places in Muscat governorate.

'Article 4 states that the municipality can tow away abandoned vehicles from public places away at the expense of the owner 14 days after a warning notice is left on it, without being



responsible for any damage caused during the towing process to the yard,' the municipality said.

According to Muscat Municipality, 829 vehicles have been found abandoned in the governorate in 2020.

'Amerat registered the highest number of abandoned vehicles (686), followed by Bausher (88), Quriyat (54) and Muttrah (1). Most of these vehicles were found in industrial areas,' the municipality stated.

'The practice can also cause traffic congestion. Cars left abandoned for a long time also accumulate dust and become likely host for insects and rodents.'



MoH holds CBRN hazards handling training course

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) last week organised the second phase of a four-phase training course on the management of chemical, biological, radioactive and nuclear (CBRN) hazards.

The training, which lasted for two days, concluded at Sohar University and focused on scenarios and practical exercises. The first training phase was held in November and lasted for one week. It included 18 clinical and non-clinical staff selected from MoH structures from a number of governorates.

The ICRC is organising the training course for the first time in the region, hosted by the sultanate, to enable the MoH clinical and non-clinical first responders to respond to CBRN hazards.

The clinical training and training of trainers will be completed in 2021.

During the four training phases, participants will come to know how to protect themselves and others from hazardous materials. In addition, they will be qualified to train the responders.

The training modules include the basic principles of

risk management in relation to CBRN emergencies for decontamination, and establishing and operating a field decontamination zone.

The training course aims at CBRN risk mitigation for individuals or groups exposed to CBRN agents by avoiding or reducing the exposure of the medical team to these materials, the removal of contaminants from skin, hair and exposed clothes, and getting proper medical care and antidotes to help control the symptoms of poisoning.

This is in addition to learning about the recommended means and methods of protection and isolation according to the material the person was exposed to.

Dr Rashid bin Hamad al Badi, MoH director of Emergency Management Centre, said, "This training is of utmost importance, and aims at increasing the efficiency of the medical sector in responding to incidents that involve hazardous agents, whether in the field or inside health institutions."

He further underlined that the issue is given special attention considering the fast development the sultanate is witnessing in the industrial and logistical fields, and the risks these developmental activities entail.

NONE OF MY BUSINESS

Just not superheroes and villains, everyone has – or would like to have – an alter ego to give vent to their wild dreams. If nothing, it helps take the mind off endless deadlines, commitments, cut-throat competition or just everyday banality.



UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

'NONE OF MY BUSINESS' unveils people who make news as they're prodded to reveal little known facets of themselves – everything not related to their work and profession. Here is P Chandrasekhar, group general manager of Jawad Sultan Group up close and personal.

Friends or food...in a lazy evening?

I prefer both because none is complete without the other.

What is the full form of ATM?

Though it is Automated Teller Machine, I would prefer to call it All Time Money.

Mohamed Salah or Roger Federer? Why?

I would go for Roger Federer because

he is a legend and one can't think of another Federer in a long time to come. Also, I can relate to him as I was actively involved in tennis.

What were you doing 10 years ago?

I was very much in Oman, a country which I love. I was probably in office as there was no afternoon break.

Who said 'veni,

vidi, vici'?

Sorry, I do not remember. [Attributed to Julius Caesar, meaning I came, I saw, I conquered]

A dialogue from a film in your mother tongue?

It's from the film *Sholay*. 'Kitne aadmi, Do? Aur tum? Teen? Ah!' It translates to - how many people were there? Only two and you three, yet you decided to come back. Shame on you.



Scan the QR Code to view this 'NONE OF MY BUSINESS' video in full on Muscat Daily social media handles

Omani woman gets top job in Islamic cooperation body

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has appointed Omani woman Dr Amina Obaid al Hajri as its director general of Cultural, Social and Family Affairs.

Dr Amina said she seeks by assuming the post to enhance the cultural, social and family af-

fairs in the OIC and promote cultural cooperation among the member states.

She also pointed out that the Directorate General accords attention to empowering women, disabled children and orphans, besides taking care of youth. OMA

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Advertisement No.(61 /2020)

Companies specialized in the field and registered with Tender Board, may obtain tender documents for the website through the following link:
(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) against non-refundable fees as mentioned below starting from the date of this announcement and until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No	No E- Tender	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/ 20/126	2020/MM/QS-55	Demolishing of Buildings at different locations at Qurriyat (Part 2)	Rial 25	05/01/2021	07/01/2021	First

Tender Conditions :-

- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
- Original Tender Bonds are to be placed in the Tender Box at Muscat Municipality HQ, Third Floor.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) .
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@ita.gov.om) or call (+96824166670).

Bank Muscat announces completion of three Green Sports fields in Dakhliyah



Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the sultanate, recently inaugurated three football fields as part of its Green Sports programme to teams in Dakhliyah governorate.

In line with the bank’s commitment to community development and promoting Oman as a sporting nation, the official opening of the Al Najd Team’s Green Sports Field in the wilayat of Samail was held in the presence of Humood Salim al Hashami, team manager, and Hamdan Humood al Bimani, regional manager - Dakhliyah South, Bank Muscat.

Bank Muscat is continuing to hand over more Green Sports fields to teams across the country as part of its efforts to support Omani youth and local communities. The Al Rasheed Team’s stadium in the wilayat of Samail was inaugurated in the presence of Sami Saud al Jabri, team manager, and bank officials.

Another field was handed over recently to the Al Husn Sports Team at an event attended by Humood Bakhit al Attabi, team manager, and Abdullah Said al Roshdi, regional manager - Dakhliyah North, Bank Muscat. The bank’s representatives handed over project completion certificates to the respective teams at the events, which were organised in full compliance with social distancing norms.

Hamdan Humood al Bimani, regional manager - Dakhliyah South, Bank Muscat, congratulated the teams for their excellent partnership in successfully completing the respective fields.

The Green Sports programme has been a flagship of the bank’s CSR programmes as playing an excellent role in enhancing the capabilities of team members. There is no doubt that it has been greatly contributing to further build Omani sporting talent.

He added that the programme provided an excellent means to channelise the energy and talents of the youth in a productive way, besides helping local communities develop stronger bonds and a greater spirit of cooperation. It must be noted that the facilities provided under the programme are used not only by the teams, but also by the local communities that they are based in.

There is no doubt that it is contributing to the emergence of more Omani talent in football and also has a positive impact on the environment.

Importantly, it is building a pipeline of talented players who can represent the country at all levels in the future.

Number of Green Sports fields that Bank Muscat has officially inaugurated is 96 playgrounds so far distributed in the various governorates, and the number of sports teams benefiting from the program until this year reached 123 teams across different governorates since the launch of the programme in 2012.

Recently, the bank announced that applications for the 2021 edition of Green Sports programme will be accepted till January 6. All teams applying for Green Sports support should note that applications will be accepted only online. To apply, <https://www.bankmuscat.com/greensports/>

Ahlibank to hold its year-end RO250,000 ‘Salary for Life’ draw

Continuing the successful journey of the Wafra prize scheme 2020 by encouraging the culture of savings among its customers, Ahlibank will hold its year-end grand prize draw giving an opportunity for account holders to win the RO250,000 cash prize.

To celebrate the success of the programme, the bank is all set to unveil the new 2021 Wafra prize scheme and its future plans, which will provide greater opportunities for winning and more benefits for customers to enrich their lives.

Commenting on the ‘Salary for Life’ 2020 prize, Muneer al Balushi, AGM-head of Retail Distribution, said, “True to its name- ‘Wafra’, means ‘abundance’ in Arabic and more generosity and development. It is also the embodiment of Ahlibank’s promise to its customers to enhance their banking experience to achieve financial stability and a better future for them and their families.”

He added, “In addition to monthly and weekly, special prizes, Eid and special occasion prizes, the weekly ‘Istqrar’ prizes for retirees, and draws are targeted at various segments of the society, Ahlibank has doubled the ‘Salary for Life’ prize in 2020 by providing four opportunities to win RO250,000.

“The new Wafra prize 2021 scheme details of which will be



ing an average quarterly balance of RO1,000 and a minimum of RO1,000 at the date of draw.

Furthermore, the bank has invited all its customers and individuals in general to save more in Wafra account with ahlibank, to double their chances of winning this year’s last quarterly prize.

Being the fastest growing bank in Oman and a trusted financial partner for many clients, Ahlibank seeks to enhance its contribution to Oman’s economic and social development by providing financially inclusive banking services, commitment and, most importantly, encouraging individuals and society to continue their savings.

For more information about Wafra and to keep up-to-date with our latest news and events, please visit Ahlibank’s website: <https://ahlibank.om/ar-om>, or visit the bank’s official social media pages in Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

HONOR partners with Red Bull

Global technology brand, HONOR recently partnered with Red Bull Basement 2020. An open call for student innovators in all areas of study to innovate, collaborate and improve student life, the program, encouraged student entrepreneurs to take a look at all aspects of life on campus and in their communities and imagine creative ways to do things better.

As the Mobile Service and PC Partner of Red Bull Basement, HONOR provided mentoring expertise, alongside its latest products for content development and testing, and a comprehensive development kit that gives participants the ability to program apps across a full range of devices. The HONOR team also educated students on how to effectively market and monetize their apps.

This collaboration is in line with HONOR’s mission to empower young innovators to create a better future through groundbreaking technology. HONOR continues to heavily invest in R&D to offer more products of great value to young customers worldwide. With a strong emphasis on quality and innovation at the center of HONOR’s business strategy, the brand is sparing no efforts to stay at the forefront of technology breakthroughs.

Knowing the younger generation expects fast performance across their digital devices, it is no wonder brands like Red Bull and HONOR are helping young people unleash their creativity to enhance the next generation of mobile products. The newest smartphone, the HONOR 10X Lite, lives up to this ethos with a flurry of smart features. HONOR 10X Lite excels in several ways: photography, a whopping 5000mAh battery, 6.67” Punch-Hole Display, and the eBook Mode.

Packed with a 22.5W Super-Charge, the HONOR 10X Lite enables digital natives to fully charge their devices in just 95 minutes.



666,268km in a Mitsubishi Mirage... and ready for more

Jerry and Janice Huot drove their 2014 Mitsubishi Mirage 414,000 miles (666,268km) – through six gruelling winters in rural Minnesota – and the only reason they didn’t go farther was a too-good-to-refuse offer from White Bear Mitsubishi dealer principal Richard Herod III to trade in the Plasma Purple sub-compact for a new 2020 Mirage earlier this year.

The Huots dubbed their Mirage the “Purple Won,” and out-fitted it with a vanity plate that played off the car’s colour and the nickname of Minnesota’s favourite son and rock legend Prince. The paint colour also closely matched that of the Huot’s favourite NFL team, the Minnesota Vikings, which at one point, prompted Jerry to dress up the Mirage with Viking horn decals for Janice’s birthday.

On the way to 414,000 miles, the Purple Won was a commercial delivery vehicle, hauled rocks and mulch for a landscaping project and required nothing but



standard maintenance. When asked about their Mirage experience, and their story is nothing short of epic. After getting the little purple car right of the showroom floor brand new, Janice drove it mostly for the first 7,000 miles or so, but when winter came, she wanted all-wheel-drive, so she got a 2015 Mitsubishi Outlander Sport. But then Jerry started using the Mirage for his business.

As a courier he delivered samples from various doctors’ offices to labs across the state. All the while, the Mirage never missed a beat. It got him up and out of their gravel driveway, even in the middle of winter, when others got stuck in the snow.

According to Jerry, they never had to even worry about maintenance, “It was stored outside year-round. I used it to haul rocks and mulch for our yard. All we did was routine maintenance. We had to replace the wheel

bearings sometime after 150,000 miles (241,400km), and the starter motor was replaced at somewhere between 200,000 (321,870km) and 300,000 miles (482,800km), but that was all covered under warranty. Otherwise, regular oil changes seemed to do the trick.”

Speaking on the reason behind eventually selling the car he said, “I didn’t plan to. I had brought it into the dealership for regular service and was saying hello to all the people we’ve gotten to know there when Richard (the local dealer principal) came by. When he heard about how many miles we had on the car, he said he wanted to use it for advertising, so he worked with us to get great deal on a new 2020 Mirage.”

When asked what he thought about the new Mirage, he responded, “Oh, I love it! It’s really similar to the old one, but it’s got HID headlights and fog lights, which are good for us living out on a dead-end road on the north side of the lake in Lindstrom (Minnesota). It’s really peppy and comfortable, and it’s got heated seats and a really nice stereo. But you have to understand, the Purple Won was the first new car I’d ever owned, and it was absolutely the best, totally dependable and economical. We still miss it. As long as Mitsubishi keeps making the Mirage, I’ll own one.”

In the sultanate, the Mitsubishi Mirage is sold by General Automotive Company (GAC), the official distributor of Mitsubishi vehicles in Oman.

The Mirage is powered by a 1.2L 3-cylinder DOHC engine featuring the latest version of Mitsubishi Innovative Valve timing Electronic Control (MIVEC) variable valve-timing system that maximises fuel efficiency and power output while greatly minimising exhaust emissions. For more information on the Mitsubishi Mirage, visit GAC’s Mitsubishi showrooms in Azaiba, Barka, Sohar, Nizwa and Salalah.



Changan CS35 Plus: A sporty new-generation crossover

The premium automotive brand Changan recently launched by Bahwan International Group in Oman has received overwhelming response among the customers. Changan Automobile boasts a comprehensive portfolio of range of products including sedan, crossovers and SUVs like EADO- Family Sedan, CS35 Plus Crossover, CS75 4WD Crossover, CS85 Coupe and CS95 7 Seater 4WD.

Changan's CS35 Plus, a sporty new-gen crossover equipped with state-of-the-art technologies is popular for its unparalleled driving experience. Energetic like the youth, it is packed with a 1.4lt Turbo charged engine which produces 156 hp and 260 nm of torque and fitted with a seven-speed Dual Clutch Transmission (DCT) to always keep you ahead of the segment competition.

CS35 Plus possesses fashionable appearance, strong power and good entertaining features. Developed by the global research and development team of Changan Automobile, it integrates all comprehensive functions: high-quality performance, comfortable driving experience, large internal space and



abundant configurations of entertainments.

Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment LLC (AGAE), which is part of Bahwan International Group, recently announced a partnership with leading international automotive group Changan Automobile Co. Ltd to bring its range of passenger vehicles to Oman including Changan CS35 Plus.

A spokesperson for AGAE said, "Vibrant in style and sporty in design, the all-new CS35 Plus gives a robust presence on the outside while the beautifully crafted interiors gives a first-

class feel inside. It's vibrant and energy filled design appeals to the youth and tech savvy.

It is a youthful SUV for younger generation who are spirited, passionate, social and want to become the influencers of their time."

It has amazing features including Adaptive Cruise Control, 360° camera, electrically folding and adjustable ORVMs, 18" Alloy wheels, LED headlamps, Panoramic Sunroof, 3D designed LED Taillamps, Leather Seats, 10 inch touch info screen, automatic AC control, 6-way power adjustable driver seat.

and Anti-lock Braking System (ABS) with Electronic Brakeforce Distribution (EBD).

Vehicle specifications
CS35 Plus's vehicle specifications include length x width x height of 4335mm x 1825mm x 1660mm, 1.4lt Turbo GDI Turbocharged Gasoline Direct Injection engine, wheelbase of 2600mm, power of 156 HP, torque of 260 Nm and fuel tank capacity of 53 litres.

Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment which is part of Bahwan International Group has set up a spacious and state-of-the-art showroom in Qurm and Service Centre in Ghala, Muscat.

AGAE has already tied up for periodic maintenance services in many cities including Salalah, Sohar, Sur, Nizwa, Ibra and Barka etc. Changan Oman offers 5 years or 150,000kms manufacturer warranty on all passenger vehicles in Oman.

For more information, call Changan Oman Toll free number 80050800, WhatsApp on 94641010 or visit our showroom in Qurm.

Also you can visit and register at www.Changanoman.com to book test drives and call back.

OAB wins award for efforts in social responsibility

In recognition of its valuable service towards society, Oman Arab Bank (OAB) was recently bestowed with the Excellence Award in Social Responsibility during the 4th Oman Forum for Partnership and Social Responsibility.

The forum was held at Grand Millennium Muscat, under the patronage of H E Laila Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development.

Feras al Farsi, responsible for sustainability at OAB, said, "We are extremely proud to receive this award as social responsibility is one of the most important focus areas of our strategy.

"Our sustainability strategy was designed to strengthen OAB's social impact within its three main strategic pillars: com-

munity partnerships, environment and financial inclusion, to ensure we are making valuable contribution to on the societal level, in parallel with business growth.

"In 2020, as a result of COVID-19, OAB focused its efforts to limit the financial and social impact of the pandemic through several special measures, for which we received commendation."

Oman Arab Bank launched a set of digital banking services to keep pace with the onset of the pandemic, and ensuring that their customers can fulfil their needs from the comfort of their home, limiting the spread of the coronavirus and extending support to the health sector of the sultanate.



Serta unveils huge deal for DSF

Serta, maker of the world's best mattress, announced an unbeatable discount for this year's edition of Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF), Flat 40 per cent discount on all sleep products and accessories.

Shoppers can head to Serta showrooms in Dubai, and Abu Dhabi as well, during the Dubai Shopping Festival starting from December 17 until January 30, 2021, to avail premium mattresses with adjustable base and other sleep products, at unbeatable discounts.

Customers can also visit Serta's flagship store in Dubai Mall to avail discount on exclu-

sive mattress grades like Aristocrat, Lumbar Support 1000, Stellar Hybrid, Cool Breeze, Recharge and many more.

This discount is also available on exclusive premium bedding accessories such as mattress toppers and protectors, duvets, and pillows.

Serta sleep systems offer enough quality sleep so that your mind and body can relax so that you feel refreshed and rejuvenated when you wake up in the morning. Additionally, all Serta products, be it in-store or pre-ordered products are thoroughly sanitized for customer's safety and wellbeing.



Enjoy exceptional discounts at Kashkha stores in UAE

It is the perfect time to top up your wardrobe with the season's must-haves at Kashkha. The Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF) is here and with it the mega sale at the Kashkha stores in the UAE. Take advantage of the special DSF offers available both online and in-stores across the emirates and enjoy fabulous discounts on select items starting from 25 per cent to 75 per cent.

According to the Kashkha management, 'DSF is one of the biggest shopping events in the region's retail calendar and at Kashkha we are delighted to reward and indulge our customers with unbeatable discounts. On offer at our stores and online platforms is a superb selection of jalabiyas, hijabs, modest wear and nightwear at incredible prices.'



Combining classic with contemporary designs, Kashkha is a celebration of Arabian style and heritage.

Amit Yadav, senior marketing manager, Kashkha, said, "DSF is the perfect time to explore our latest collections and avail our lucrative online and in-store offers.

Our brand echoes the aspirations of modest buyers with a spectacular range of traditional and modest garments for every occasion."

The DSF promotion at Kashkha is available until January 30, 2021.

Established in 2003 in the UAE, Kashkha is a leading international retail brand for contemporary Arabic fashion.

Weaving tradition with modern style, Kashkha offers a superb range of women's clothing for every occasion with a wide selection of jalabiyas, hijabs, modest fashion and nightwear. Kashkha has over 30 stores in all the major shopping malls across the UAE, France, Singapore, Oman, Qatar, Malaysia, Indonesia, Djibouti, Morocco and Lebanon.

CIBAFI submits comments to IFRS Foundation

Aligned with its role as an advocate of the Islamic Financial Services Industry (IFSI), the General Council for Islamic Banks and Financial Institutions (CIBAFI), the global umbrella of Islamic financial institutions, announced that it has submitted its comments to the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) Foundation Trustees on their Consultation Paper on 'Sustainability Reporting'.

The Consultation Paper has been issued by IFRS Foundation Trustees in September and is open for public consultation until December 31, 2020, to assess demand for global sustainability standards and, if demand is strong, assess whether and to what extent the Foundation might contribute to the development of such standards.

CIBAFI thanked the IFRS Foundation Trustees for giving the opportunity to the Islamic Fi-



ancial Services Industry to comment on the Consultation Paper. CIBAFI feedback comprised the following key points.

First, in order to bring transparency, accountability, efficiency and consistency in the information shared about sustainability by the financial institutions, a global set of internationally recognised sustainability reporting standards is

needed and the IFRS Foundation appears best equipped to do this in an authoritative and appropriately governed way. Subject to sufficiently wide acceptance of its role, the development of a sustainability standards board (SSB) to operate under the governance structure of the IFRS Foundation would be an appropriate approach to achieving further consistency and global comparability in sustainability reporting.

Second, it is recommended for the governance structure of the SSB to include people from organisations that issued reporting standards and work to identify the common elements among the most important existing standards and address their limitations in order to develop harmonised and global standards. In addition, it would be appropriate for the governance and operational structures to include people

with some experience of Islamic finance to ensure that the particularities of Islamic finance are taken into consideration while developing the standards for wider implementation.

Third, it is recommended that SSB could first start preparing and issuing a framework that will guide and support its work in general. Once the guiding framework is established and adopted, SSB could start developing climate-related financial disclosures taking into consideration the convergence that exists particularly with that of the Financial Stability Board's Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD).

However, SSB should, in parallel, begin the longer-term process of broadening its scope into other areas of sustainability reporting. CIBAFI continues to support the Islamic Financial Services Industry.

DAILY CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

1 Aleutian WWII base

5 Chic

10 ___ Lap: famed Australian horse

14 SA wood sorrels

18 Fields of Rippling Rhythm

19 Pentateuch scroll

20 "Boola Boola" college

21 Cook a steak

22 RED (3)

25 Narrow moon valley

26 Place for 44 Down

27 Menu in Montauban

28 ___ over: capsized

29 Heidi's stamping ground

30 Shaping machine

31 Goddess of the hunt

32 Zoologist Dian

35 "Too ___ loved you!": St. Augustine

36 Surpass

39 Fall flower

40 RED (2)

42 "___ clear day..."

43 Heyerdahl

44 Time untold

45 Animal fat

46 Make ___ for it: flee

47 Former atomic org.

48 WHITE (2)

52 Bob Cratchit's job

53 Yeats's "The ___ of Innisfree"

55 Quibblers split them

56 Exchange tennis shots

57 Prepared for printing

58 Erstwhile Hearst rebel

59 CA NV lake

60 "Messiah" composer

62 Vice ___

63 Not up to snuff

66 Does a lawn job

67 BLUE (2)

69 Betake oneself

70 Wearing shoes

71 Actor Brad

72 Soil sweetener

73 Cavil

74 Sun. talk

75 RED (2)

79 Crete's capital

80 Set sail

82 Tidal flood

83 Debutante's dip

84 Wickerwork willow

85 Vestibule

86 Fertilizer clay

87 Dasher's partner

89 Fragment

90 Port ___: Papuan capital

93 Old Norse poems

94 "THREE CHEERS

FOR THE ___!"

97 "___ You Glad You're You?"

98 "A Death In The Family" author

99 French toast word

100 Lang syne

101 Fearless Dillon or Damon

102 Upon my ___!

103 Trollop

104 ___ Scott decision

DOWN

1 Cleo's bosom companion?

2 Ellington's "Take ___ Train"

3 Retained

4 Conciliator

5 Like a zebra's coat

6 Specks

7 Ancient name for the Saone river

8 Seance sound

9 "___-Nine Tails"

10 Like a costly victory

11 Waste-maker?

12 On the sheltered side

13 "The Crying Game" actor

Stephen

14 Countries of Asia

15 WHITE (2)

16 Concorde wing: Fr.

17 Citizen Kane's "Rosebud"

21 Beat one's ___

23 "Oklahoma!" aunt

24 Hollywood western

28 Used a check improperly

30 End, as a subscription

31 French composer Marcel

32 Deadly

33 Tessie or Milo

34 BLUE (2)

35 Knight's weapon

36 Head to head exams

37 Harden

38 Hanky ___

40 "The Little Engine That ___"

41 Winglike

44 Artist's stand

46 Permit

48 Bill, of "Oliver Twist"

49 Midwest terminal

50 Dustin, in "Midnight Cowboy"

51 Shankar's music-maker

52 Silver salmon school

54 Concluded

56 Sibelius's "___ Triste"

58 Popular pasta sauce

59 Mets, Nets, Jets, etc.

60 "Steppenwolf" author

61 Hunt's "Abou Ben ___"

62 Cast a ballot

63 Wedding sine qua non

64 Buenos ___

65 Settle a loan

67 Forty ___

68 Denzel

Washington film: 1989

71 Cheapskate

73 Caverns of NM

75 Most ironic

76 Subscribed again

77 Observe

78 Like a fairy tale heavy

79 Healed

81 Upward climb

83 Art, of "The Honeymooners"

85 Large sea duck

86 Castle ditches

87 Perfume measure

88 Ambiance

89 "___ My Heart" golden oldie

90 ___ wear department, for one

91 Become hazy

92 Seasonal tide?

94 Uncooked

95 St. Anthony's cross

96 Hall-of-Famer Roush

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

There's an open invitation for change calling your name in the cosmos. The sun spends the day in a strong alignment with Uranus, delivering an exciting boost of energy towards your career path. Where can you free yourself up to let more of your talent and skills shine in your field of choice? Lean into any new ventures that offer you more space to be yourself in the workplace.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

It's no surprise to you that your career has been undergoing some major changes. It may even feel scary to see new pathways open up, as the tired, reliable ones begin to fall to the wayside. Sunday's skies encourage you to break the mould and welcome change with an open heart on the job front, as the life-giving sun supportively aligns with authenticity-demanding Uranus.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Your work-life balance is in a true state of flux. You're learning where your boundaries run thin with overworking yourself, as well as where you need a little more organisation and efficiency. Sunday's skies make it easy to incorporate the healthy changes that have been patiently waiting in the wings on this front, as the sun and alternative-offering Uranus align.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

The universe has big plans for you in the coming years. Just this last year you've begun to answer the major wake-up call happening around your identity, independence, and individuality. This ongoing story is illuminated today, as the sun forms a strong pact with Uranus, helping you launch into new opportunities for self-expansion, growth, and continued learning.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Though you normally have your nose in the little things, you may find that your world only seems to be getting bigger. The universe is working to help you align yourself with an educational path that fits the true tone of your life. The energising sun reaches out to Uranus this afternoon, helping illuminate the right path to follow with your creative vision.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You come equipped with a natural fear of standing in the limelight of your creative abilities. You can thank your ruling planet, serious Saturn, for that quality. Even so, you still find yourself fascinated by the concept of sharing something that is uniquely your own. Today's skies work to push you further into that desire and make radical changes to get there.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

The two Twins inherent in your sign represent the unconscious and conscious mind at play. A new story has been unfolding behind the scenes with the 'unconscious twin', as you've begun to listen more carefully to the quiet whisperings of buried feelings and untold stories. Today's skies help you make important breakthroughs in this mental arena, as the sun aligns with Uranus.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

There's always more to learn about love. It's part of your mission here on Earth—to uncover these varied mysteries surrounding special interpersonal connections. Major changes have been underway in the intimacy department, and you'll need to lean into keeping things fresh and authentic to stay afloat. Today's skies help you do just that, as the sun and change-hungry Uranus align.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

The cosmos have had you performing psychoanalysis on yourself. A whole new leg of this work has just begun in the last year—specifically taking place around your home, family, and early upbringing. Important breakthroughs or new developments on these highly sensitive fronts are likely to make their way into your awareness, as the sun and radical-thinking Uranus connect.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Getting your personal goals on the same page as your partnership goals is no easy feat. Yet, you've been trying to make room for both of them to simultaneously grow and prosper. The sun forms a supportive pact with Uranus, allowing room for healthy change and lightbulb moments. It's an ideal day to try to hash out any unclear details in order to form a plan for moving forward.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Your experience of relationships will go through some major changes. These changes aren't random, they're critical to your continued growth in the intimacy department. Today's skies highlight this ongoing story, as the sun and Uranus align. This combination sheds light on healthy changes needing to be embraced and honest truths that need to be spoken.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You've only just begun to find your voice. In the last year, you've started exploring the prospect of new educational opportunities and allowing your personal stories to flourish through creative projects. The energising sun and change-bringer Uranus form a supportive pact, creating a strong impetus to break out of the mould and follow new emerging threads of enthusiasm.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The headquarter of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are situated at

a. Vienna

b. Geneva

c. Rome

d. Paris

2. The main crop of Meghalaya is

a. rice

b. wheat

c. barley

d. sugarcane

3. The major minerals found in Uttar Pradesh are

a. limestone and dolomite

b. rock phosphate and dolomite

c. copper and graphite

d. None of the above

Answers: 1: a 2: a 3: a

KIDS COLOURING



DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

BOGGLER

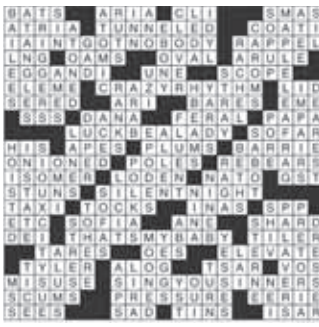
E	A	U	J
R	G	S	S
U	E	R	U
E	T	P	H

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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



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



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Ubaid Ullah and Ebrahim star in Arm Alpha win

LOCAL CRICKET

Young Ubaid Ullah celebrated his 21st birthday in style on Friday as he picked four wickets for just 26 and Sanuth Ebrahim struck a half-century to steer Arm Alpha to a six-wicket win over Renaissance CT in an Oman Cricket Premier Division (50-over-a-side) clash at Al Amerat.

Batting first, Renaissance was dismissed for 131 in the 41st over. Complimenting Ubaid's devastating spell was Ahmed Fayyaz Butt, who picked three for 21. Sufyan Mahmood top-scored with a fighting 51. Sanuth Ebrahim's defiant 56 saw Arm Alpha home in the 31st over with six wickets in hand. Rafi Ullah took two wickets.

BRIEF SCORES:

Premier Division: Renaissance 131 all out in 40.1 overs (Mahmood 51, Fawad Ali 25; Ubaid Ullah 4-26, Fayyaz Butt 3-21) lost to Arm Alpha 132-4 in 30.4 overs (Ebrahim 56; Rafi Ullah 2-36).

A Division (50-over-a-side):

SARCO 281-7 (Murad Khan 88, Shahbaz Khan 28; Amir Hussain 2-48, Sultan Ahmed 2-47) beat Ernst & Young 205 all out in 44.4 overs (Sultan Ahmed 51, Farhan Afzal 41; Ajay Menon 3-25, Guru Kotian 3-41, Dileepa Srilal 2-25, Sandip Patel 2-47).

B Division (30-over-a-side):

Orient Travels/Gitacs 239-7 (Arif Hussain 100, Rafique al Balushi 48; Rajesh Shetty 2-39, Noushad Haneefa 2-49) beat LC Tech 105 all out in 17.3 overs (Abdul Rauf 21; Ihsan Khan 6-41, Gurvir Singh 2-14, Arif Hussain 2-27).

B Division: PDORC 184-9

(Aditya Sapra 49, Asadullah Asghar 42, Nadeem Ahmed 41; Nadhir Ghulam 2-26, Abdul Ghani al Balushi 2-30, Hisham Shafi 2-35, Ismail al Balushi 2-50) lost to OCT Al Hail-A 188-5 in 28.4 overs (Shoaib Abdul Ghani 104, Nadeem Ahmed 2-31).



Ubaid Ullah



Sanuth Ebrahim



Arif Hussain



Shoaib Abdul Ghani



OOC board of directors and other members pose for a group photo after the conclusion of the OOC General Assembly at the OOC headquarters on Thursday

Golf, cycling, TT associations come under OOC umbrella

Our Correspondent
Muscat

It was an expected decision but had to be formally ratified.

On Thursday, the Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) General Assembly welcomed three new sports associations - cycling, golf and table tennis - to their fold.

The three new associations were formally approved as OOC

members after the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth had earlier approved the switch from their status as sports committees to respective sports associations.

The memberships of Oman Golf Association (OGA), Oman Cycling Association (OCA) and Oman Table Tennis Association (OTTA) into the OOC were unanimously approved during the general assembly.

During the meeting, the OOC activities in 2019 was reviewed including various projects of the sub-committees and the programmes of Oman Olympic Academy.

The general assembly also gave the nod for the postponement of the OOC board elections. The new dates are expected to be after the hosting of 2021 Tokyo Olympic Games. OOC chairman Sayyid Khalid

bin Hamad al Busaidi presided over the general assembly. In his address, he called upon the members to prepare a draft on ways to promote Oman's Olympic participation and submit a new sports strategy in line with the requirements of the new statutes and regulations of the various sports associations and the OOC.

The draft and plans will be later submitted to the Ministry of

Culture, Sports and Youth for approval.

The general assembly members expressed their highest gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik al Said for the continuous support to the sports and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth under the leadership of H H Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said for the cooperation between the ministry and the OOC.

FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Barca loom for expected new PSG coach Pochettino

Paris, France - Mauricio Pochettino is widely reported to be Thomas Tuchel's successor as Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) coach and the No 1 item on the Argentine's in-tray will be February's date with Barcelona.

Tuchel was reportedly given his marching orders on Thursday, four months after guiding the Qatari-backed club to their first ever Champions League final, August's 1-0 defeat to Bayern Munich. The German, whose dismissal has yet to be officially confirmed by the club, leaves the Parc des Princes having secured a last-16 Champions League clash with Barca and PSG sitting third in Ligue 1, a point shy of leaders Lyon.

Pochettino's opening match in charge will be January 6's trip to Saint-Etienne on Ligue 1's resumption after the winter break.



A file photo of Mauricio Pochettino

Then, on February 16, the 48 year old has his first massive test against his compatriot Lionel Messi's Catalans, with the return leg on March 6. Pochettino was let go after five and a half years at Spurs in the aftermath of leading the north London side to their first ever appearance in a Champions League final against Liverpool in 2019.

Although he has yet to win any silverware the former PSG

defender's stock is high in managerial circles. The Parisians will be keen to complete his signing and avoid missing their man who has been linked to the likes of Real Madrid, Manchester United and Barca in recent months.

Pochettino is due to team up with Neymar, Kylian Mbappe and other well-heeled company at PSG's first post-Christmas training session on January 3.

While the club refrained from

making any public comment about the abrupt change in personnel, France World Cup winner Mbappe took to Instagram to note Tuchel's departure. "Unfortunately it's the law of football but no-one will forget your time here," Mbappe said. "You wrote a great line of the club's history and I say thank you coach," he added.

Pochettino arrives at PSG with his successful stint at Spurs preceded by a season at Southampton.

His maiden post as a coach was at struggling Espanyol, where in 2009 his first match in charge was against his expected February foes, Barcelona. He earned plaudits for saving the Spanish outfit, where he played under Marcelo Bielsa in 1998, from relegation.

AFP



Greg Norman

Australian golf legend Greg Norman hospitalised

Miami, US - Australian golf champion Greg Norman said on Friday he has been hospitalised with COVID-19 symptoms, posting an Instagram photo of himself in a hospital bed.

The 65 year old Aussie, a former world No 1 who won the 1986 and 1983 British Opens, had said on Thursday he was suffering from virus symptoms despite testing negative on Tuesday and quarantining in his Jupiter, Florida, home.

On Christmas, Norman posted a photo of himself with medical equipment in the background, an NFL Pittsburgh Steelers mask over his lower face and the caption: "This sums it all up. My Christmas Day."

He posted that he wanted to "get this (virus) behind us never to experience it again."

Norman had said he was experiencing a mild fever, cough, aches and pains and a headache.

He competed in last week's PNC Championship at Orlando with his son Greg Jr, finishing in a share of ninth. Norman spent more than 300 weeks at the top of the world rankings and was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2001.

AFP

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FIFA postpones U20, U17 World Cups

COVID-19 IMPACT

Paris, France - FIFA has postponed next year's U20 World Cup in Indonesia and U17 tournament in Peru until 2023 due to coronavirus.

"The COVID-19 pandemic continues to present challenges for the hosting of international sporting events and to have a restrictive effect on international travel, explained football's governing body in a statement on its website.

"The global situation has

failed to normalise to a sufficient level to address the challenges associated with hosting both tournaments, including the feasibility of the relevant qualification pathways."

It added that FIFA looked forward to working with both host countries 'to organise successful tournaments' in 2023.

The two events follow other international football competitions to fall victim to the virus, with Euro 2020 held over until next June, the Copa America

moved to the same date, and the Africa Cup of Nations, held over until January 2022.

City's Jesus, Walker, out until New Year

London, UK - Manchester City forward Gabriel Jesus and defender Kyle Walker will miss the busy festive period after contracting coronavirus, the English Premier League club said on Friday.

Two members of staff have also tested positive for the virus with

Brasil's Jesus and England's Walker set to be sidelined until January 6's League Cup semifinal with Manchester United due to a ten-day quarantine.

"All four personnel will now observe a period of self-isolation in accordance with Premier League and UK Government protocol on quarantine," City said. The players will sit out Saturday's match with Newcastle, Monday's trip to Newcastle and January 3's visit to Chelsea.

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India's Jasprit Bumrah (left) appeals successfully for the wicket of Australia's Joe Burns on the first day of the second Test at the MCG on Saturday

Bumrah and Ashwin run through Australia

**AUSTRALIA VS INDIA
SECOND TEST: DAY ONE**
Melbourne, Australia - India's bowlers did all that could be asked of them on the opening day of the Boxing Day Test as they removed Australia for 195 led by Jasprit Bumrah (4-56), R Ashwin (3-35) and a superb debut by Mohammed Siraj with the home side unable to post a half-century between them on Saturday.

Faced with just under an hour to bat at the end of the day, and the 36 all out still fresh in the memory, a thunderous first over from Mitchell Starc - among the finest you will see to start an innings - concluded with Mayank Agarwal being pinned lbw having done well to survive the first five deliveries.

Even with just 27,615 spectators (itself a triumph for many reasons) the ground reverberated to the excitement of what could be about to unfold, but debutant Shubman Gill and the experienced Cheteshwar Pujara took the sting out of the mini session - aided by Gill being dropped on four at slip by Marnus Labuschagne - to the ex-

tent that they scored at three-and-a-half an over.

Bumrah was excellent throughout, Ashwin got the better of Steven Smith for the second time in the series (Smith's first Test duck in four years) and Siraj, filling the shoes of Mohammed Shami, bowled with pace and movement, his second spell reading 9-4-16-2 including a classic working over of fellow Test rookie Cameron Green.

Ashwin was outstanding, claiming three of the top seven having been introduced in the 11th over by stand-in captain Ajinkya Rahane. The opening wicket of the day was also a working over as Joe Burns battled outside off stump before getting a thin edge against Bumrah in the fifth over.

Matthew Wade undid the good work on the stroke of drinks when he tried to launch Ashwin over the leg side. However, the dismissal owed everything to the fielding brilliance of Ravindra Jadeja who held onto the catch over his shoulder despite a near collision with Gill, and after taking the ball was still able to avoid trampling his teammate.

Smith was unable to get off

the mark when he glanced a delivery off his pads to Pujara at leg slip who held a sharp chance. Australia were 38 for three.

For 28 overs either side of lunch, Labuschagne and Head did a solid repair job although Labuschagne looked for all the world to have gone lbw on 26 when he was sweeping Ashwin only for the ball-tracker to show the delivery clearing the stumps.

Rahane brought Bumrah back and the latter did the impact in an over that included two no-balls. He found Head's outside edge from an around-the-wicket line and the captain took a sharp catch around fourth slip. Labuschagne (48) was dismissed when he clipped Siraj towards leg gully where fellow debutant Gill took a sharp catch.

It was clear Tim Paine, who survived a borderline run out on 6 when he was saved by a missing frame, wanted to provide more urgency, but it was a struggle for Green who kept hitting the field and he fell to a perfect set up. The control and precision of the dismissal from Siraj capped a superb first day for him in Test cricket.

In the next over Paine became the latest to be caught behind square, turning Ashwin to leg slip. Without their captain to marshal them, it was a tall order for the last three wickets to lift the total too far, but Nathan Lyon's 20 took them to 195.

Cricinfo

SCOREBOARD		
AUSTRALIA 1ST INNINGS		
J Burns	c Pant b Bumrah	0
M Wade	c Jadeja b Ashwin	30
M Labuschagne	c Gill b Siraj	48
S Smith	c Pujara b Ashwin	0
T Head	c Rahane b Bumrah	38
C Green	lbw b Siraj	12
T Paine	c Vihari b Ashwin	13
P Cummins	c Siraj b Jadeja	9
M Starc	c Siraj b Bumrah	7
N Lyon	lbw b Bumrah	20
J Hazlewood	not out	4
Extras:	(b 10, nb 3, w 1)	14
TOTAL: 195 all out in 72.3 overs		
Fall of wickets: 1-10, 2-35, 3-38, 4-124, 5-134, 6-155, 7-155, 8-164, 9-191, 10-195		
Bowling: J Bumrah 16-4-56-4, U Yadav 12-2-39-0, R Ashwin 24-7-35-3, R Jadeja 5-3-15-1, M Siraj 15-4-40-2		
INDIA 1ST INNINGS		
M Agarwal	lbw b Starc	0
S Gill	not out	28
C Pujara	not out	7
Extras:	(nb 1)	1
TOTAL: 36 for one in 11 overs		
Fall of wickets: 1-0		
Bowling: M Starc 4-2-14-1, P Cummins 4-1-14-0, J Hazlewood 2-0-2-0, N Lyon 1-0-6-0		

Gritty Williamson lifts NZ after early Pakistan strike

**NEW ZEALAND VS PAKISTAN
FIRST TEST: DAY ONE**

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand - An unbeaten 94 by a gritty Kane Williamson had New Zealand at 222 for three in the face of a concerted Pakistan attack at stumps on day one of the first Test in Mount Maunganui on Saturday.

Henry Nicholls was the other not out batsman on 42 as New Zealand recovered from being 13 for two after Pakistan's baby-faced destroyer Shaheen Afridi removed openers Tom Latham and Tom Blundell cheaply on a green, seaming wicket.

In a 120-run stand, filled with determination and concentration in difficult conditions, Williamson and Ross Taylor pulled New Zealand back into the game.

Taylor hit ten fours and a six as he attacked the bowling while Williamson took a more conservative approach.

"Obviously we're happy with where we're at," Taylor said. "You had to try and take them on or just try and get through it."

"You expect that on a day one wicket. It definitely flattened out and it's probably a little bit two-paced at times and I'm sure it's only going to get more uneven over the next couple of days."

After Afridi split the pair with a masterful piece of bowling to remove Taylor for 70, Williamson and Henry Nicholls added a further 89.

Taylor was set up to fall by Afridi who bowled full, short then a bouncer in successive deliveries and followed with a good-length, rising ball that Taylor could not resist slashing at. But he succeeded only in feathering the ball to Mohammad Rizwan behind the stumps.

The 20 year old Afridi, standing 1.99m (6ft 6in) tall, also removed Latham for four and Blundell for five to end the day with three for 55. Mohammad Abbas, while not taking a wicket, kept the batsmen pinned down and conceded only 25 runs off his 21 overs.

Taylor, in his 104th Test, could not help but be impressed with



New Zealand's Kane Williamson bats against Pakistan on Saturday

Afridi playing his 12th.

Afridi's opening onslaught had New Zealand at two for 13 before Williamson and Taylor combined in a century partnership, their tenth together.

By stumps, Williamson had faced 243 deliveries after being in the middle for all but the first three balls before Latham was dismissed.

The closest Pakistan came to dismissing the New Zealand captain came before lunch with Williamson on 18 when Shan Masood spilled a difficult one-handed chance low to his left.

Naseem Shah was the unfortunate bowler and the teenaged quick was to suffer again when he tempted Nicholls, on six, to hook a short ball only for Mohammad Abbas, waiting for the catch at long leg, to drop the regulation chance.

It was a continuation of the good fortune going Nicholls' way after he was dropped five times on his way to 174 in his last innings against the West Indies.

AFP

SCOREBOARD		
NEW ZEALAND 1ST INNINGS		
T Latham	c Azhar b Afridi	4
T Blundell	c Shah b Afridi	5
K Williamson	not out	94
R Taylor	c Rizwan b Afridi	70
H Nicholls	not out	42
Extras:	(lb 3, nb 4)	7
TOTAL: 222 for three in 87 overs		
Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-13, 3-133		
Bowling: S Afridi 20-5-55-3, M Abbas 21-11-25-0, F Ashraf 13-5-30-0, N Shah 15-1-51-0, Y Shah 16-2-56-0, S Masood 2-1-2-0		

QUICK RUN

Jackman, former England seamer and broadcaster, dies

Robin Jackman, the former Surrey and England seamer who went on to become one of the leading broadcasters in South African cricket, has died at the age of 75. Jackman, who made his Test debut in 1981 at the age of 35, claimed 14 wickets at 31.78 in his four England appearances, and also featured in 15 ODIs between 1974 and 1983. However, he was arguably most famous for the match that he did not play, at Guyana on England's tour of the West Indies in 1980-81, when his connections to Apartheid South Africa - through his wife Yvonne, and through his cricketing association with the country - led to the cancellation of the second Test of the series. He passed away at 3.30pm South Africa time on Christmas Day, and is survived by his wife Yvonne and two daughters.

Former England batsman Edrich dies at 83

England's former 'fearless' opening batsman John Edrich has died at the age of 83, the England and Wales Cricket Board announced on Friday. Diagnosed with leukaemia in 2000 the left-hander who played for county side Surrey scored 103 first-class centuries. He played 77 Tests, scoring 5,138 runs at an average of 43.54. ECB CEO Tom Harrison said: "With John's passing, we've lost a prolific and fearless batsman - one of the select few who have scored more than 5,000 runs for England. "His duels with some of the world's best fast bowlers were legendary, and it's a testament to his ability that his 310 not out against New Zealand in 1965 remains the fifth highest Test score by an English batsman."

South African players raise fists in anti-racism gesture

South African players raised their fists Saturday in an anti-racism gesture at the start of their two-Test series against Sri Lanka in Centurion, in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. The team issued a statement that said the players had on multiple occasions declared their support for the campaign against racial injustice and 'wanted to own our journey'. The players were criticised for not 'taking a knee' ahead of a recent series against England as had been done by other sporting teams following the death of George Floyd in the US earlier in the year.

Shadab, Imam ruled out of NZ tour

Shadab Khan has been ruled out of the remainder of the New Zealand tour and from the upcoming home series against South Africa after being diagnosed with a high-grade injury to his left thigh. Batsman Imam-ul-Haq has also been ruled out of the ongoing New Zealand tour because of his left thumb fracture and he will fly back to Pakistan on Sunday. Khan missed the ongoing first Test in Mount Maunganui with the same injury and MRI scans have confirmed a fresh tear in his thigh for which he has been advised six weeks of rest.

Cricinfo

Indian cricket board approves ten-team IPL from 2022

Ahmedabad, India - The BCCI has approved a ten-team IPL from 2022. The decision was ratified by the BCCI's general body comprising the state associations at the board's annual general meeting on Thursday in Ahmedabad. Deciding on two additional teams was among the main points on the agenda for the board's 89th

AGM; with less than four months left for the next IPL, it was decided to stick to eight teams for the 2021 edition.

Another important point was to discuss cricket's possible inclusion in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. The BCCI deferred taking a stand on it and will instead discuss it at a special general meeting in early

2021. With the ICC becoming more optimistic about the inclusion of cricket in the 2028 Summer Olympics, the body had recently sent a questionnaire to all member countries asking them to quantify the 'potential financial benefits' they could accrue from their respective governments if cricket was included in the Olympics.

The biggest decision at the AGM concerned the expansion of IPL, which the BCCI has been discussing since the successful organisation of the recent edition in the UAE despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is understood that at the meeting on Thursday, both Sourav Ganguly and Jay Shah, the BCCI president and

secretary, stressed that the IPL must become bigger, to provide more opportunities to more players worldwide while adding new cities to the IPL map.

The board members - the state associations - accordingly decided that the IPL can comprise up to ten teams from the 2022 edition and authorised the IPL governing council to

finalise the preparations for the addition of the new teams. That means the 2022 IPL could have nine or ten teams.

The state associations and the BCCI office-bearers agreed that time constraints would prevent an additional franchise in 2021, which would remain an eight-team tournament.

Cricinfo

De Silva, Chandimal put Sri Lanka in box seat



Sri Lanka's Dinesh Chandimal (left) celebrates with his teammate Niroshan Dickwella upon reaching 50 against South Africa on Saturday

**SOUTH AFRICA VS SRI LANKA
FIRST TEST: DAY ONE**

Centurion, South Africa - Dinesh Chandimal and Dhananjaya de Silva raised Sri Lanka from 54 for three on Saturday, before each producing effective but contrasting innings that were each brought to a close by misfortune, rather than any significant flaws of their own.

Their 131-run stand not only turned around a day that seemed to be going poorly, but also set Sri Lanka on track for their highest ever total in South Africa - their 340 for six at day's end on the cusp of beating the previous best: 342 at Newlands in 2012.

Sri Lanka scored at four runs

per over across the day - de Silva leading the way with a strike rate of 75 during his innings of 79.

That de Silva had to retire hurt with seemingly a serious thigh injury, though, will worry the visitors, who need him for his off-spin almost as much as they do for his batting.

No South Africa bowler went at less than three runs per over. Even Anrich Nortje, who occasionally crossed 150kph, and was frequently in the mid-140kph range, was at times taken down by de Silva and other members of the Sri Lanka top order.

Wiaan Mulder took three wickets, but was perhaps fortunate - he had Kusal Perera

caught behind chasing a shortish wide ball in the morning, then had a ball leap dramatically off the surface to take Chandimal's bat handle in the third session (his lbw against Niroshan Dickwella was all him, though).

Nortje, Lungi Ngidi and Lutho Sipamla took a wicket apiece. Keshav Maharaj found some turn toward the end of the day, but was largely forced to try and contain the Sri Lanka batsmen, even as they frequently used their feet to him and tried to attack.

While Chandimal top-scored for the day, hitting 85 off 161, there was little doubt that de Silva's was the more impressive

SCOREBOARD		
SRI LANKA 1ST INNINGS		
D Karunaratne	b Ngidi	22
K Perera	c de Kock b Mulder	16
K Mendis	c Ngidi b Nortje	12
D Chandimal	c du Plessis b Mulder	85
D de Silva	retired hurt	79
N Dickwella	lbw b Mulder	49
D Shanaka	not out	25
W Hasaranga	b Sipamla	18
K Rajitha	not out	7
Extras:	(b 8, lb 8, nb 5, w 6)	27
TOTAL: 340 for six in 85 overs		
Fall of wickets: 1-28, 2-54, 3-54, 4-284, 5-296, 6-320		
Bowling: L Ngidi 16-2-54-1, L Sipamla 14-1-68-1, A Nortje 18-3-60-1, W Mulder 18-3-68-3, K Maharaj 19-3-74-0		

innings. He reached his fifty with the most effortless shot of the all - a square drive off Mulder - and continued to prosper, eleven fours and a six bejeweling his stay.

Cricinfo

ANSARI FOR ABU DHABI T10

Former Oman pacer picked by Pune Devils at T10 League Players' Draft; tournament begins on January 28

Ashok Purohit
Muscat

Former Oman bowler Munis Ansari, whose sling bowling action has given him the tag - Oman's Malinga - has been picked by Pune Devils for the upcoming edition of the Abu Dhabi T10 League.

The T10 tournament that features eight franchises and has some of the biggest names in international cricket will be held at Sheikh Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi, UAE, from January 28-February 6, 2021.

The 36 year old Ansari is the only Oman cricketer to be picked for the star-studded event that has eight icon players - Chris Gayle (Team Abu Dhabi), Thisara Perera (Pune Devils), Shahid Afridi (Qalandars), Sunil Narine (Deccan Gladiators), Andre Russell, (Northern Warriors) Dwayne Bravo (Delhi Bulls), Shoaib Malik (Maratha Arabians) and Isuru Udana (Bangla Tigers).

In his exclusive remarks to *Muscat Daily* after being drafted as their final pick by Pune Devils during the auction held last week, Ansari said, "I am delighted to be part of such a top-class league. It came as a surprise to me as I was only recently contacted. I am looking forward to giving my best."

"I have been performing consistently over the past couple of years in domestic cricket. My goal is to make a comeback into the national team [Ansari last played for Oman in 2018]."

The pacer, who plays for Oman Cricket's Premier Division giant Muscat CT, added, "To be part of a league that has some of the biggest names is an honour for me. It will be a great experience and opportunity for me to learn as I continue my attempts



A file photo of Oman's Munis Ansari celebrating a dismissal during a T20I game

to make a comeback into the national team."

Ansari thanked his employers - Muscat CT - and in particular, team manager Madhu Jesrani, for all his support and said, "Madhubhai has backed me always. As the T10 league is officially sanctioned by the ICC, I will

have to take permission from my employers and Oman Cricket (OC) to take part. I am expecting a mail from my franchise - Pune Devils on Sunday. Once I receive it, I will seek permission from OC and my employers to take part."

Pune Devils is owned by Alpha Sports and among

Ansari's teammates are international stars like Sam Billings of England, Ajantha Mendis, Chamara Kapugedera of Sri Lanka and Hardus Viljoen of South Africa.

Devils had recently retained Pakistan pacer Mohammed Amir and signed Sri Lankan

allrounder Thisara Perera as their icon player. South African star Jonty Rhodes is the coach.

On Thursday, the eight franchises - defending champions Maratha Arabians, Bangla Tigers, Delhi Bulls, Northern Warriors, Deccan Gladiators, Qalandars, Team Abu Dhabi and

Pune Devils - picked an impressive line-up of players from a pool of 600 international cricketers at the Players' Draft in Abu Dhabi.

In a press statement, Devils co-owner Krishan Kumar Chaudhary said, "We are happy with the squad that we have

selected and we know all our 14 players are talented and will give their best to win the tournament. "We have selected the players on the basis of our requirement and have filled all the positions that we were looking out to fill. We have high hopes on head coach Jonty Rhodes and are sure that he will bring the best from each individual."

Abu Dhabi T10 is the world's only ten-over cricket tournament licensed by the Emirates Cricket

I have been performing consistently over the past couple of years in domestic cricket. My goal is to make a comeback into the national team

MUNIS
ANSARI

Board (ECB). It is the first-ever internationally approved ten-over format competition. Matches have a duration of 45 minutes a side totalling 90 minutes of play. The tournament is played over ten days, with a round-robin followed by semifinals and the final.

PUNE DEVILS SQUAD:

Icon player: Thisara Perera.
Team: Mohammad Amir, Hardus Viljoen, Chamara Kapugedera, Sam Billings, Ajantha Mendis, Devon Thomas, Darwish Rasooli, Nasir Hossain, Kennar Lewis, Asif Khan, Mohammad Boota, Dinesh Kumar, Vriitya Aravind, Karan KC, Munis Ansari.

@ashokmuscat

FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

United miss out on second spot

Aston Villa soar into top six with a 3-0 drubbing over Crystal Palace

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

London, UK - A late Axel Tuanzebe own goal prevented Manchester United moving up to second in the English Premier League (EPL) after a 2-2 draw at Leicester, as Aston Villa moved into the top six with a 3-0 victory over Crystal Palace on Saturday.

A share of the spoils between the sides in second and third at the King Power Stadium means Chelsea have the chance to move into second when they visit Arsenal later, with the Gunners desperately in need of a win to ease their fears of a relegation battle at the other end of the table.

United missed out on equalling a Premier League record of 11 straight away wins as for once this season they paid for not finishing strongly.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men had come from behind in each of their previous away league games this season, but twice went in front through Marcus Rashford midway through the first half and Bruno Fernandes 11 minutes from time.

"One point is not the worst result but we are disappointed we didn't get away with three," said Solskjaer.

"We had loads of big chances and we could've finished it off. They are a very dangerous side."

Harvey Barnes's blistering strike levelled for Leicester before half-time and United were undone by Jamie Vardy's movement in the box late on as the veteran striker latched onto Ayoze Perez's cross and his shot



Manchester United's Bruno Fernandes (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Leicester City in Leicester on Saturday (AFP)



Aston Villa's Anwar El Ghazi (right) celebrates with teammate Ollie Watkins after scoring against Crystal Palace on Saturday (AFP)

deflected in off the unfortunate Tuanzebe.

"It's important for the development of us as a team and

as a squad that we can come from behind against a really, really good side, a top side, and get the result," said Leicester

manager Brendan Rodgers.

Villa transformed

Villa's transformation from just staying up on the final day of last season to contending for Europe continued as they held on a man down for the full second half to beat Palace 3-0.

The Eagles were thrashed 7-0 by Liverpool last weekend and got off to another dreadful start as Bertrand Traore turned in the rebound after Vicente Guaita saved Ollie Watkins's first effort.

A tussle between Tyrone Mings and Wilfried Zaha resulted in a yellow card for both and moments later when Mings blocked off Zaha, the England

international was dismissed in first-half stoppage time.

However, Villa soaked up the pressure and the ten men extended their lead when Kortney Hause forced the ball home from close range after Watkins's header came off the bar.

Watkins also played a part in the third as he teed up Anwar El Ghazi to fire in off the far post for his fourth goal in four games.

Fulham edged to within a point of safety with a 0-0 draw at home with Southampton. The Londoners were without manager Scott Parker as he was isolating due to a family member testing positive for coronavirus. AFP

Hagi extends Rangers run, Celtic turnaround continues at Hamilton

SCOTTISH PREMIERSHIP

Glasgow, UK - Ianis Hagi fired Rangers to a 1-0 victory over Hibernian on Saturday as the Scottish Premiership leaders extended their winning streak to 12 games.

Steven Gerrard's side have not dropped points since they last faced Hibernian in September to maintain a 16-point lead over Celtic, who were 3-0 winners at Hamilton.

Bidding to stop Celtic winning ten Scottish league titles in a row, Rangers are in pole position as the new year looms, with the two sides set to meet at Ibrox on January 2.

Celtic's far leakier defence has been the difference between the sides so far this campaign, but Neil Lennon's men still have three games in hand to haul themselves back into title contention should the win the Old Firm derby next weekend.

The Scottish champions made

it three straight league wins on top of lifting the Scottish Cup last weekend to bounce back from a disastrous run of results that had fans protesting outside Celtic Park for Lennon to go earlier this month.

In horrendous weather conditions as wind and rain lashed over New Douglas Park, Celtic had to be patient against second-bottom Hamilton.

However, the floodgates opened after Odsonne Edouard opened the scoring from the penalty spot as the French U21 international then teed up Leigh Griffiths for his third goal in as many games.

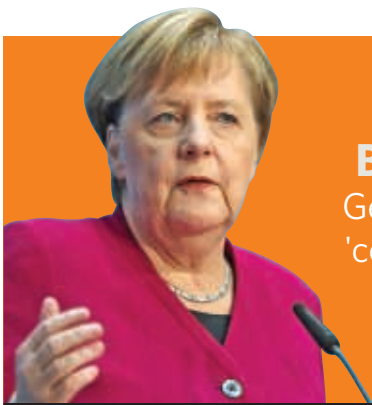
David Turnbull then tapped home the third after Edouard's header came off the post.

OTHER RESULTS:

Aberdeen 2 St Johnstone 1, Ross County 0 St Mirren 2, Dundee United 1 Motherwell 1, Kilmarnock 1 Livingston 2. AFP



Rangers' Ianis Hagi celebrates after scoring against Hibernian on Saturday



BREXIT DEAL IS 'GOOD OUTCOME'
German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she was 'confident' a Brexit deal hammered out between the European Union and the UK on Thursday was a 'good outcome'

BUSINESS

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2020

MUSCAT DAILY 13

Oman's non-oil exports drop 13%; re-exports rise 22%

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's non-oil exports dropped by nearly 13 per cent in the first nine months of 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic impacted global demand and caused disruption in international trade, particularly in the second quarter of this year.

Total value of the sultanate's non-oil exports dropped to RO2.155bn during the January-September period of this year compared to RO2.469bn worth of shipments recorded in the same period of last year, according to statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCISI).

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Middle East and Asian economies hard this year, the sultanate's exports to its main trading partners in the region and Asia sharply dropped due to the weak demand and supply-chain disruptions caused by the pandemic during the second quarter.

While the sultanate's non-oil exports to Saudi Arabia plunged more than 24 per cent to RO348.8mn in the first nine months of 2020, exports to the



While the sultanate's non-oil exports to Saudi Arabia plunged more than 24 per cent to RO348.8mn in the first nine months of 2020, exports to the UAE decreased by 3.7 per cent to RO434.5mn

UAE decreased by 3.7 per cent to RO434.5mn this year. Exports to Qatar increased by 2.5 per cent to RO175.7mn.

Oman's non-oil shipments to

India fell 7.4 per cent to RO212.8mn during the first nine months of 2020 compared with RO229.9mn in the corresponding period of last year. Exports

to the United States decreased 6.4 per cent to RO150.6mn during the January-September period on a year-on-year basis.

The sultanate's exports to other countries combined declined more than 16 per cent to RO833.2mn this year compared with RO995.2mn recorded in the first nine months of 2019.

The export of base-metals and their related products, which account for a major chunk of

Oman's non-oil exports, decreased 1.2 per cent to RO622.6mn in the first nine months of this year from RO630mn worth of shipments in the same period of 2019.

The export of chemical products plunged by 36 per cent to RO438.4mn during the January-September period of 2020 from RO685.2mn recorded for the same period of 2019. The export of mineral products, however, in-

creased by 5.8 per cent to RO276.8mn.

On the other hand, reopening of the economic activity in the third quarter around the world helped the sultanate to grow its re-exports significantly. The NCISI data showed that the total re-exports from Oman grew by more than 22 per cent in the first nine months of 2020 to RO1.243bn compared to RO1.017bn in the same period of the previous year.

The value of re-exports to the UAE surged by nearly 38 per cent to RO407.4mn in the first three quarters of 2020, while re-exports to Qatar jumped 74 per cent to RO360.7mn this year against RO207mn recorded in the same period of 2019.

Malaysia this year emerged as another important destination for re-exports from the sultanate as the re-exports to the South-east Asian nation surged to RO73.3mn in the first nine months compared with below RO2mn level recorded in the previous year. Re-exports to Iran, however, dropped by 68 per cent to RO54.6mn in the first nine of 2020 against RO170mn in the same period a year ago.

Oil prices rise on Brexit deal

London, UK - Global oil prices rose on Friday as the European Union and Britain agreed on the post-Brexit trade deal after many months of negotiations.

During weak pre-Christmas trading, international benchmark Brent crude traded at US \$51.37 per barrel in London on Friday, an increase of 0.25 per cent from the previous day's closing price.

American crude benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) closed at US\$48.30 per barrel at the same time for a 0.37 per cent increase after ending the previous session at US\$48.12 a barrel.

Investors will closely watch developments after a Brexit deal was struck on Thursday to allow the UK to formally leave the European Union (EU) by the end of this year.

The deal will ensure the UK avoids leaving the bloc without a trade pact, while supporting oil prices amid the economic slowdown caused by the pandemic.

While the higher number of coronavirus cases around the world is still pressuring oil prices, the promise of vaccine rollouts offers hope of economic recovery to prop up oil demand. Agencies

Sur Industrial City explores new opportunities to boost investment

Muscat - In line with the efforts made by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Mada'ayn) to localise investment projects and provide job opportunities for the national cadres, Sur Industrial City has concluded a project of exploring investment opportunities in the major industries operating in the industrial city.

Supported by Oman LNG, Oman India Fertiliser Company (Omifco) and Phoenix Power Company, the new project aims at creating value added projects and consequently link them to

the needs of the major factories to promote circular economy and supply chain efficiency.

In a press release, Eng Abdulqadir bin Salim al Balushi, director general of Sur Industrial City, said that this project represents an output of a study that was carried out last year with the aim of boosting investment volume in the industrial city. He said Oqood Business Development, a company incubated at Mada'ayn's National Business Centre, has implemented this project.

"The promotional campaign of the investment opportunities

in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate will be launched by the beginning of next year in coordination with the concerned bodies," Balushi said.

He added that Sur Industrial City is planning to hold a meeting in the beginning of next year that will bring together representatives of major companies and owners of SMEs in the industrial city with the aim of enhancing effective communication channels between the two sides.

"It is significant to bring these sides together to contribute to the growth of the existing indus-



Eng Abdulqadir al Balushi

tries in Sur Industrial City. In partnership with the major companies in Sur Industrial City, the focus will be placed on the local-

isation of sustainable projects that contributes to enhancing In-Country Value and capital turnover in the sultanate," Balushi pointed out.

Several investment opportunities were announced earlier by Sur Industrial City to be developed by the private sector, which include the establishment of workforce township, shipyard complex, and sewage treatment plant. The projects are expected to enter the implementation phase by the beginning of 2021.

"More investment opportunities will be announced in 2021 for

the private sector in health and hotel support services, and vehicle/truck maintenance centre," Balushi said.

He emphasised that Mada'ayn aims through its annual and five-year plans that are based on Oman's Vision 2040 to support industrial innovation projects and business incubators. "An initiative will be launched by Sur Industrial City in cooperation with a private company in the industrial city to establish a business incubator and offer the services of Industrial Innovation Centre at Sur Industrial City," Balushi in-

formed.

Until mid-2020, the total volume of investments in Sur Industrial City exceeded RO2.045bn, marking a growth rate of 0.67 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. The number of workforce at the industrial city increased to 4,111, noting an Omanisation rate of 49 per cent.

The total number of localised projects in Sur Industrial City reached 127 by mid-2020, and the total area of the industrial city reached 36,1mn sqm, which makes it the largest industrial city in terms of area.

Full text of post-Brexit deal released

London, UK - Britain and the European Union on Saturday published the full text of the post-Brexit trade agreement aimed at governing their relationship when the UK definitively leaves the bloc's single market in just five days' time.

The document, which is more than 1,200 pages long, lays out detail on trade, law enforcement and dispute settlement among other arrangements between Britain and the EU after the UK leaves the single market and customs union on December 31.

In the forward to the copy of the text published by the UK government, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the agreement had been 'carefully judged to benefit everyone' and preserve 'free trade for millions of people in the United Kingdom and across Europe'.

"While we made our fair share of compromises during the negotiations, we never wavered from the goal of restoring national sovereignty," he added.

Senior UK government minister Michael Gove wrote in The Times newspaper that Thurs-



EU chief negotiator for Brexit Michel Barnier (centre) is watched by a Greek representative carrying a folder containing the 2,000 page 'Brexit Trade Deal' in Brussels on Friday (AFP)

day's agreement would allow Britain to bring 'innovation and investment to parts of the country that have endured economic decline'.

He added there were still 'significant changes' to be prepared for by businesses in the short term.

To ratify the deal, Britain's parliament has been recalled to sit on December 30. A vote in favour is virtually assured after the UK's main opposition Labour Party said its MPs would back it.

In Brussels, the European Commission has proposed the agreement be applied on a provi-

sional basis until February 28, 2021. The European Parliament will be asked for its consent to the deal in 2021 and for the process to be concluded the Council, which brings together the executives of all 27 member states, must adopt the decision. AFP

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MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSM declines despite improved activity

The benchmark index of the Muscat Securities Market (MSM) posted weekly decline last week despite the improved trading activity during the week.

The MSM30 index ended the week down by 0.36 per cent. The Financial index dropped 0.56 per cent and the Services index dropped 0.81 per cent. The Industrial index ended the week higher by 1.55 per cent. The MSM Shariah index rose by 0.45 per cent.

The value of traded securities was higher by 29.12 per cent during last week as compared with the previous week numbers.

Local news

► Bank Muscat updated during the week on SICO's offer for majority stake in Saudi-based Muscat Capital. Muscat Capital has a book value of approximately SAR80mn (RO8.04mn) as at end of June 2020. SICO will acquire 72.71 per cent stake in Muscat Capital through transfer of all its treasury shares to Bank Muscat. This would result in Bank Muscat owning approximately 9 per cent shareholding in SICO upon completion of the transaction. The transaction is subject to regulatory approvals in Oman, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Bahrain-based SICO had assets worth

BHD187.9mn as at the end of September 2020, and a share capital of BHD56.61mn. Carried worth of treasury shares is BHD5.32mn.

Oman Telecommunication Company (Omantel) is evaluating a number of offers for its tower network, which the state-owned firm expects could raise more than US\$500mn. Bids from 'specialized companies' are undergoing technical, commercial and legal evaluation, Omantel said in a statement on Monday. The transaction is still at an evaluation stage, and it is not yet possible to ascertain its full financial impact on the company, the nation's largest telecommunication firm said.

Al Anwar Holding Company invited shareholders to attend EGM in order to study the proposal to amend the name of the company from Al Anwar Holding SAOG to Al Anwar Investments Company SAOG and to study a proposal to amend the objectives and activities of the company.

Al Anwar Ceramic Tiles Company announced plan for capacity expansion, where capacity is to be increased from the current capacity of around 16mn sqm per annum to around 23mn sqm per annum. The additional 7mn sqm capacity will be added in two phases. The first phase of about 3.5mn



(Muscat Daily)

sqm will commence immediately and is expected to be completed in the fourth quarter of 2021, followed by phase two. The investment is intended to significantly enhance the product portfolio of the company. The stock reacted positively to the news and ended the week up by 10.6 per cent and its at 52 weeks high.

As part of the initiatives to shore up government revenues, the sultanate is all set to overhaul the subsidy on public service system in a phased manner during the next five-year period

from January 2021 till 2025. Accordingly, the government has approved the removal of subsidies for electricity and water, which will eventually see prices gradually rising for all including citizens, expatriates, and large companies in the industrial sector.

Oman's Tax Authority has announced the imminent expiry of taxation incentives offered to private sector establishments for taxes due during 2020. The incentives were announced earlier by the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling develop-

ments resulting from coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic with a view to handling the economic impacts of the pandemic and the resumption of business activities. In a statement received by Oman News Agency (ONA), the Tax Authority urged all tax payers to submit their declarations and disclosure accounts of the fiscal year ending December 31, 2019 and any other accounting period or fiscal year ending after this date.

The foreign direct investment (FDI) in Oman reached RO15.06bn at the end of the

first quarter of 2020, according to the data of the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). Praising the efforts made by the sultanate in promoting world trade, officials of the World Trade Organization (WTO) said that Oman is a supportive partner in the activities of the WTO, with a long

GCC markets

► Economic activity in the UAE recovered partially in the third quarter, but the bounce back remained fragile, according to the Central Bank of UAE (CBUAE). In its 'Quarterly Economic Review, Third Quarter 2020', the CBUAE has projected real total GDP growth for the year 2020 to contract by 6 per cent, higher than the earlier forecast of a 5.2 per cent contraction for the year. The real non-hydrocarbon GDP projected to decline by around 5 per cent while the hydrocarbon GDP is also projected to shrink.

The UAE's oil production fell by 4.1 per cent year-on-year in the second quarter and by 17.7 per cent in the third quarter, in line with the agreement by OPEC+. For 2021, CBUAE foresees real total GDP to grow by 2.5 per cent and non-hydrocarbon real GDP by 3.6 per cent.

Gold has been gaining on weaker dollar as the historic Brexit deal was awaited. The

precious metal could see further gains if the US stimulus impasse is resolved. Spot gold price is headed for the biggest advance in a decade this year.

Recommendation

► Globally, investors are watching developments on the two new strains of coronavirus, while many countries have initiated mass inoculation procedures. Meanwhile, the UK and the European Union have unveiled a historic post-Brexit trade accord after negotiators worked through the night putting the finishing touches to a compromise on fishing rights. Regionally, most markets reacted positively to the COVID-19 vaccine announcements and recovery in oil prices.

Locally, we saw investor interest in almost all sectors especially the financial sector. Opening up of economic activities and vaccine euphoria is feeding positive investor sentiment.

We believe that next week will likely see big funds further consolidating their positions before the year-end. We advise investors to watch any changes announced in the board of directors, any dividend announcements as well as macroeconomic news likely to precede the final budget statement announcement.

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India's economy is recovering fast: RBI

Mumbai, India - The Indian economy is recovering faster than expected and may post positive growth in the third quarter of current financial year, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said in its report on the state of the economy.

'Indian economy is pulling out of COVID-19's deep abyss and is reflatting at a pace that beats most predictions,' the central bank said in its report.

It said the economic conditions continued to improve through November on the back



of the uptick in agriculture and manufacturing activity.

'Financial conditions embodied in interest rates are perhaps at their easiest in decades. Although there are headwinds, steadfast efforts by all stakeholders could put India on a faster growth trajectory,' the report said. The report said growth impulses that have emerged augur well for revitalisation of the economy. Policy stimulus by the government and the RBI are intended to nurture these growth

sprouts to greater strength.

Efforts are underway to ensure a calibrated unlocking of the economy with cognisance and caution about the virus, according to the RBI's report.

'While we remain vigilant, we must now turn to alleviating the scars left by pandemic and revive the economy. The horizon has lighted up with the spate of positive news on the vaccines, and a steady rise in recoveries,' the central bank added.

ANI

India's PhonePe processes over 11mn insurance premiums

New Delhi, India - The leading Indian digital payments platform PhonePe said it processed over 11mn insurance policy premium payments in the last one year. The company provides customers with a simple and secure option to pay insurance premiums for over 30 insurers. The need for this feature has been strongly validated with PhonePe witnessing strong and active par-

ticipation from tier-2 and tier-3 cities with 80 per cent of the premiums being paid by customers residing in these markets, it said.

"The digital payments landscape is rapidly changing the way people are transacting and investing. Insurance as a sector is benefiting immensely from these macro trends," said Ankit Gaur, director of business at PhonePe.

"Digital payments will only

continue to grow in popularity and we are on course to achieve our goal of building a truly open payments platform for a billion Indians."

PhonePe is a digital payments platform with over 258mn registered users. Using PhonePe, users can send and receive money, recharge mobile, DTH, data cards and pay at stores.

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China launches bid to become commodities market player

London, UK - China, a big raw materials consumer, hopes to position itself as a global commodities marketplace with its launch of a new futures contract on the popular copper market.

The Shanghai International Energy Exchange (INE), a division of the Shanghai Commodity Exchange, opened the contract for the so-called eternal metal to foreign investors on November 19, following several trial runs - including one in oil - in 2018.

Copper contracts already existed in China but exclusively for domestic trading.

"The launch of bonded copper futures is necessary for the continued growth of China's copper industry," INE has said.

Philippe Sebillé-Lopez, of the Geopolia Institute, called it was a shrewd move by China, given its reliance on certain commodities to power its economy.

"The greater the Chinese market share for a given raw material, the more Shanghai will be able to attract foreign investors," he said.

The world's factory accounts for around half of global copper production but it faces an uphill



struggle to win business.

Although large brokerage companies want a presence in Shanghai, its trading volume remains very low compared with London, by far the bigger sister in the relationship.

London has historically dominated exchanges. The London Metal Exchange (LME), which was founded in 1877, proclaims itself the 'world centre' for industrial metals trading, especially non-ferrous metals such as copper, aluminium, lead and zinc.

The LME, a subsidiary since 2012 of the HKEX - owner of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange - has significant technical advantages

to retain its pre-eminence.

They include a network of warehouses around the world as well as a degree of liquidity and flexibility that its superior size provides. "It also has the date structure - you can trade for any single day," Marc Bailey, head of Sucden trading house, told AFP.

"That uniqueness makes it extremely attractive to trade," he added.

Sebillé-Lopez nonetheless sees an opening for Shanghai.

"Each new contract is interesting because it presents margin opportunities," compared with other markets, he added.

Sucden has not yet opened its

exchanges on INE to its customers, and just trades itself on the new market primarily because of currency conversion benefits.

Another disadvantage for investors is that the INE and its contracts are denominated in the Chinese yuan, which Beijing keeps a firm control of.

But the copper launch is also the latest step in China's slow evolution towards freer convertibility of its currency.

The price of copper is tracked particularly because it is often considered a good indicator of the health of the world economy. AFP

UK faces challenges after Brexit deal

London, UK – Britain is set for a new chapter after securing a hard-fought post-Brexit trade deal with the European Union as EU envoys gave the accord, reached only after months of tortuous negotiations, a sober welcome.

Britain and the EU struck a trade deal Thursday after 10 months of intense negotiation allowed them to soften the economic shock of Brexit. When the UK leaves the EU single market at the New Year it will not now face tariffs on cross-Channel commerce, despite breaking off half a century of close partnership.

"We've taken back control of our laws and our destiny. We've taken back control of every jot and tittle of our regulation in a way that is complete, and unfettered," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared.

"There was no great joy because a divorce is not really good news," one EU diplomat told AFP.

Member state envoys to the EU were 'sober enough' in their response, the diplomat said, and the text – all 1,200 pages and in English – 'will now be examined to make sure there are no hidden details which could cause a problem'.

The envoys are expected to meet again on Monday to get the ratification process started, the diplomat added.

As for Britain, the accord means the country will now not tumble off a trade 'cliff-edge' come January 1, avoiding a



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson gestures as he holds a press conference to update the nation on the post-Brexit trade agreement. (AFP)

mountain of harmful tariffs and quotas.

But major changes are inevitable as London definitively quits the EU single market and free movement with the bloc comes to an end after nearly half a century of integration.

"We shouldn't underestimate the economic shock Britain will experience," another European diplomat told AFP.

Britain has been in a standstill transition period still subject to the bloc's rules since formally leaving the EU on January 31.

Standing in front of a Downing Street Christmas tree in a video message late Thursday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson vaunted the hundreds of pages of text as a 'good deal for the whole of Europe' and a 'present' for Britain.

The address was 'a victory speech', Anand Menon, director of the UK in a Changing Europe think-tank, told AFP.

"Boris Johnson was elected Prime minister to get Brexit done, he has now definitively got Brexit done," Menon said.

Johnson has come under

fierce criticism for his management of the country's coronavirus outbreak, which has so far left almost 70,000 dead, the heaviest toll in Europe.

In recent days, thousands of trucks have been backed up at Channel ports, after France and other European partners blocked crossings over rising cases of a new virus variant believed to spread faster.

With ferry and tunnel crossings unusually staying open on Christmas Day and British soldiers carrying out virus tests,

there were signs of the logjam clearing on Friday.

Some had pointed out that the transport chaos, which raised fears of shortages of fresh produce, could be a glimpse of what awaited the country if it crashed out of the EU single market without a deal.

The EU has offered Britain unprecedented tariff- and quota-free access to its single market of 450mn consumers.

But it has in return secured London's commitment to respect its always-evolving rules in some

areas such as environmental protection, labour regulation and tax, aiming to avoid Britain undercutting companies inside the bloc.

The UK has also signed up to guarantees that it will not abuse state aid to firms to seek an unfair advantage.

It was the question of fish that emerged as the last stumbling

We've taken back control of our laws and our destiny. We've taken back control of every jot and tittle of our regulation in a way that is complete, and unfettered

BORIS JOHNSON

block this week when London pushed to reduce EU fishing fleets' share of the estimated 650mn euro (US\$790mn) annual haul by more than a third.

The final agreement settled on a 25 per cent cut to be phased in over a five-and-a-half year period.

EU officials have promised to support their fishing sector through the painful cuts, a major downside of a deal European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen called 'fair and balanced' overall.

'Relief rather than celebration'

For Britain, 'that a deal has been agreed at all is in many respects a remarkable achievement,' the Times newspaper said.

Nevertheless, the final package is 'a source of relief rather than celebration', it added, with new restrictions including an end to free movement into the UK for European workers and into the EU for Britons.

Young people will be hit by Britain's withdrawal from the continent-spanning Erasmus student exchange programme, to be replaced by a home-grown scheme named after pioneering computer scientist Alan Turing.

"The deal is hardly the end of the process. Now that (Johnson) has delivered on his promise to get Brexit done, his challenge is to make a success of it," the Times warned.

The left-leaning Guardian was harsher, saying that 'Johnson deserves no credit for dodging a calamity that loomed so close because he drove so eagerly towards it'. In fact, the newspaper added, the deal 'prescribes an immediate downgrade for the UK economy'.

British MPs are set to debate the agreement on Wednesday, but there is little doubt it will be approved after the opposition Labour party pledged its backing.

On the European side, provisional approval by national capitals must be followed by a vote in the European Parliament in early 2021. AFP

What we know on UK, EU post-Brexit trade pact

Brussels, Belgium – The European Union and Britain have agreed a post-Brexit trade deal after almost ten months of tortuous negotiations to govern ties when the UK exits the single market.

Here is what we know so far about the 2,000-page accord – still yet to be published – that covers areas from fishing to future competition after December 31.

Tariffs

The deal means there will be no tariffs or quotas on goods produced in the UK and EU moving between the two sides.

British exports still have to comply with EU health and safety standards and there are strict rules governing products made with parts originating outside the EU or UK.

London has hailed the lack of tariffs as a major positive of the deal -- but it simply helps maintain part of the benefits Britain already enjoyed as a member of the bloc.

Fishing

Future access for EU fisherman to Britain's rich water was one of the thorniest – and politically combustible – issues, and the last piece of the puzzle to fall into place before the deal could be announced.

Britain had insisted it wanted to take back full control of its waters while EU coastal states sought to guarantee their fleets could keep fishing in UK waters.

In the end the two sides reached a hard fought compromise that will see EU boats gradually relinquish 25 per cent of their current quotas during a five-and-a-half year transition period.

After that there will be annual negotiations on the amount of fish EU vessels can take from British waters -- and if Brussels isn't happy it can impose economic measures against the UK.



Level playing field

Another major stumbling block was the so-called 'level playing field' regulations that the EU insisted on to prevent British firms having an advantage over European rivals if London lowers standards in future, or subsidises industries.

The UK had fought hard to avoid having a system put in place that could see Brussels able to force it to follow its rules on such issues as environmental or labour regulations and state aid.

But the UK government admitted the deal allowed for either side to impose 'countermeasures' if they believe they are being 'damaged' subject to arbitration.

Customs

Britain will leave the EU's customs union along with the single market at the end of the year, meaning that businesses face new red tape for imports and exports across the Channel.

The UK said the agreement allows for the recognition of 'trusted trader' schemes that could cut bureaucracy on both sides, but it is yet to be seen how widely this can be applied.

Security

The EU says the agreement 'es-

tablishes a new framework for law enforcement and judicial co-operation in criminal and civil law matters'.

London said the deal will see the two continue to share DNA, fingerprint and passenger details and see them cooperate through the EU's Europol.

Brussels says 'security cooperation can be suspended in case of violations by the UK of its commitment for continued adherence to the European Convention of Human Rights'.

'Big changes'

Despite the agreement, both sides warn that 'big changes' are coming from January 1 for people and businesses around Europe.

Citizens of the UK and EU will no longer enjoy free movement to live and work between the two. 'The free movement of persons, goods, services and capital between the UK and the EU will end,' Brussels said.

'The EU and the UK will form two separate markets; two distinct regulatory and legal spaces. This will create barriers to trade in goods and services and to cross-border mobility and exchanges that do not exist today – in both directions.'

AFP

US fails to agree to boost stimulus

Washington, US – Republicans on Friday blocked an effort to amend the hard-won pandemic relief package to more than triple direct payments to struggling Americans, something demanded by President Donald Trump.

After months of partisan bickering, legislators late Monday finally approved a US\$900bn stimulus package to help families and businesses struggling to survive the hit to the economy from the coronavirus before millions lose their benefits.

The legislation includes one-time payments of US\$600 to most taxpayers, but Trump dropped a bombshell on the celebrations this week, hinting he might veto the bill unless the amount was increased to US\$2,000.

Democrats, who have been pushing for months to increase pandemic support, cheered his statement, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi challenged Republicans to support an amendment to boost the dollar amount.

The Democratic-controlled House of Representatives held a Christmas Eve 'pro forma' session, normally a brief affair with little business, in an effort to win



Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi speaks during a press conference on Capitol Hill on December 20 in Washington, DC (AFP)

bipartisan approval to send the revised payments to Trump's desk for signature.

But Republicans refused to agree to the change. "So we do not have unanimous consent," said Michigan Democrat Debbie Dingell, who was acting as speaker pro tempore.

Pelosi immediately lambasted Republicans and vowed to call the House back on Monday to approve the amendment in a regular session.

"Today, on Christmas Eve morning, House Republicans

cruelly deprived the American people of the US\$2,000 that the President agreed to support. If the President is serious about the US\$2,000 direct payments, he must call on House Republicans to end their obstruction," she said in a statement.

Later Thursday, Pelosi said the bill has been sent to the White House and called on Trump to sign.

"The House & Senate are now sending this important legislation #ForThePeople to the White House for the President's signa-

ture. We urge him to sign this bill into law to give immediate relief to hard-working families!," Pelosi tweeted.

The stakes are high, especially if Trump vetoes the bill: About 14mn jobless workers will lose their pandemic unemployment benefits right after Christmas, and millions more face losing their homes when an eviction moratorium expires at the end of the year.

And the stimulus measure is wrapped up with a US\$1.4tn funding bill, meaning the government will be forced to shut down at midnight Monday if Trump does not sign the bill.

It is highly unusual for a president to veto legislation that enjoys overwhelming bipartisan support, but Trump has never shied away from flaunting tradition.

Late Wednesday he also vetoed the bill that funds defense operations, even as lawmakers vow to return Monday to override his action and approve the measure.

They could do the same with the pandemic stimulus bill, but Trump could simply sit on it, meaning it cannot take effect. AFP

Turkey hikes main interest rate to 17%

Ankara, Turkey – Turkey's central bank has hiked its main interest rate to 17 per cent in what economists greeted as a sign that the financially troubled country was embracing monetary orthodoxy once again.

The decision means that Turkey's policy rate has shot up by 6.75 percentage points in just a month – a stark contrast to many countries' decisions to bring borrowing costs down to help revive economies badly hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

The sharp move higher follows two years in which it was held steady or lowered due to

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's unconventional belief that higher rates cause inflation.

That policy saw the Turkish lira lose roughly a third of its value against the dollar as the central bank burned through its reserves in an effort to prop up the currency.

The accompanying rise in the annual inflation rate to above 10 per cent forced Erdogan to reshuffle his economic team and appoint market-friendly former finance minister Naci Agbal as central bank chief last month.

The lira managed to claw back about 10 per cent against the

dollar after the change on market expectations that traditional monetary policy was returning to Turkey.

"Today's meeting will provide further reassurance to investors that the shift to orthodoxy is here to stay," Capital Economics analyst Jason Tuvey said in a research note. "We think that the (central bank) has probably now done enough and expect the one-week repo rate to be kept at 17 per cent for at least the next six months or so."

The lira gained nearly one per cent in value and was trading at around 7.57 against the dollar

about an hour after the rate decision.

The statement issued after Agbal's second monthly central bank policy meeting Thursday focused heavily on fighting inflation. The central bank now expects inflation to rise to above 14 per cent this year – the highest in Europe.

The bank 'has decided to implement a strong monetary tightening, in order to eliminate risks to the inflation outlook, contain inflation expectations and restore the disinflation process as soon as possible,' it said in a statement. AFP

Cards from Iraq bring Christmas cheer

Qaraqosh, Iraq - It wasn't Santa on a sleigh, but it was close: Just before dusk on Christmas Eve, a busload of volunteers pulled into the Iraqi Christian town of Qaraqosh to deliver holiday happiness.

Under a pinkish sky, they disembarked from their charter bus with cardboard boxes full of Christmas cards, bearing handwritten messages from across Muslim-majority Iraq.

'A special greeting to our Christian brothers,' read one card, signed in the overwhelmingly Muslim city of Basra the previous day.

On foot, members of Iraq's Tahawer (Dialogue) initiative and other volunteers delivered some 1,400 cards across the northern town, which was ravaged by extremist rule after the Islamic State group advanced east across the Nineveh Plains in 2014.

"It's a beautiful initiative," said Rand Khaled, after receiving a Christmas card outside the Syriac Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception in Qaraqosh.

She was dressed in her Christmas Eve finest, with a chic chocolate-coloured coat shielding her from the cold.

"We need initiatives like this every once in a while, because people who don't know these areas absolutely should get to know them," Khaled told AFP.

Iraq's Christians number around 400,000 today, down from some 1.5mn before the US-



An Iraqi volunteer delivers to residents of the northern Christian town of Qaraqosh Christmas gift packages on the Christmas Eve on Thursday (AFP)

led invasion toppled longtime dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003.

It is a tiny minority in a country of 40mn people, most of whom are Shiite Muslims.

A special symbol

The cards came from all over Iraq: From the capital Baghdad and the Shiite shrine city of Najaf, from mainly Sunni Arab Salahaddin province in the west and

the Kurdish city of Dohuk in the far north.

They were packed into dozens of boxes and transported up to 950km through military checkpoints before reaching

Qaraqosh.

"I don't know how to describe it," said Nishwan Mohammad, Tahawer's programme manager.

"People were ecstatic - they never expected someone to

come visit them, much less bring them letters from all over Iraq," he told AFP.

In addition to the handwritten messages, each card bore a special hand-drawn symbol of the



province from which it was sent.

Those from Basra - signed by sheikhs, university students and even fishmongers - featured the port city's emblematic new bridge across the Shatt al Arab waterway with Santa and his reindeer flying overhead.

Those from Baghdad showed part of the capital's much loved Tahrir (Freedom) Monument.

And the cards from Salahaddin bore an image of the spiralled Great Mosque of Samarra, which was designed to look like the ancient Mesopotamian ziggurat - but also roughly resembles a Christmas tree.

Pharmacists, tailors, a linen shop owner and a cellphone salesman were among the signatories there.

Since the extremists of IS were pushed out of Qaraqosh in 2016, the town has slowly started to rebuild thanks to funding by international organisations and its residents' own savings.

AFP

207 killed in Ethiopia attack, says EHRC

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia - A total of 207 people were killed on Wednesday in an attack by gunmen in western Ethiopia, the country's top rights group said, more than doubling a previous count.

The independent government body had on Wednesday said 100 people were killed in their sleep and crops burned in a pre-dawn assault in the Metekel area of the Benishangul-Gumuz region.

'133 of the victims were adult men and 35 were adult women. Seventeen children, one of whom a six-month-old baby, and 20 elderly persons were killed,' the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) said in on Twitter late on Friday.

Mostly inhabited by ethnic Shinasha, Oromo and Amhara people - the last two making up Ethiopia's most numerous groups - the Metekel area has suffered a string of deadly attacks in recent months.

Local leaders blame ethnic Gumuz people for the violence.

Following Wednesday's attack, 'effort is underway to identify the victims with the help of survivors and identity cards', the EHRC said.

The body repeated its appeal for 'relevant authorities to provide urgently humanitarian assistance to the victims and persons displaced by the attack'.

It added that around 10,000 had fled the Bekuji Kebele area and made for the city of Bulel, around 40km away, which is already sheltering 'thousands of displaced persons'.

AFP

Turkey's Defence Minister flies to Libya, says official media

Istanbul, Turkey - Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar travelled to Libya on Saturday flanked by top military officers to inspect Turkish units in the war-torn country, the official Anadolu news agency reported.

The unscheduled visit comes after eastern Libya strongman Khalifa Haftar called on his fighters to 'drive out' Turkish forces backing the UN-recognised government, as talks drag on to end a long-running war in the oil-rich nation.

Turkish support for the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli helped stave off an offensive by Haftar with Russian, Egyptian and UAE backing in April 2019.

The sides struck a ceasefire agreement in October formally ending the fighting and setting the stage for elections at the end of next year.

But Haftar said there would 'be no peace in the presence of a coloniser on our land', in an address to mark Libya's 69th anniversary of its independence on Thursday.



This file photo shows Fayez al Sarraj (right), the Prime Minister of Libya's Government of National Accord meeting with Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar, in the Libyan capital Tripoli on July 3 this year (AFP)

'Drive out' Turkish forces: Haftar

"We will therefore take up arms again to fashion our peace with our own hands... and, since Turkey rejects peace and opts for war, prepare to drive out the occupier by faith, will and weapons," Haftar said.

Libya was thrown into chaos after a 2011 NATO-backed uprising toppled and led to the killing of long-time dictator Moammar Gadhafi.

Wracked by violence since then, the North African country has become a battleground for tribal militias, extremists and mercenaries and a major gateway for desperate migrants bound for Europe.

Two rival camps now vie for power, with Haftar's eastern-based administration pitted against the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), recognised by the United Nations and backed by Ankara.

Turkey's help with military advisers, materiel and mercenaries helped the GNA push back Haftar's forces from the gates of Tripoli earlier this year.

Haftar, who is backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia, spoke after Ankara's parliament this week adopted a motion extending the deployment of soldiers in Libya by 18 months.

'Dead letter'

"Officers and soldiers, get ready," Haftar said on Thursday, calling out to hundreds of soldiers on parade in a military barracks in the eastern port city of Benghazi.

At the same time, the GNA-head in Tripoli, Fayez al Sarraj, called on Libyans to 'turn the page on disagreements to achieve stability'. This will only happen through 'solidarity between political forces', he said.

A ceasefire signed in October under the aegis of the UN, and generally respected, has allowed the rival parties to return to the negotiating table.

AFP



Governor of Morocco's capital Rabat, Mohamed Yacoubi (third from left) welcomes US Presidential advisor Jared Kushner (centre) and Israeli National Security Advisor Meir Ben Shabbat, in Rabat on Tuesday (AFP)

Netanyahu invites Moroccan King

Jerusalem - Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Morocco's King Mohammed VI held a telephone conversation during which the Israeli Prime Minister invited the King for a visit, Netanyahu's office said on Friday.

The phone call comes three days after an Israeli delegation signed a US-sponsored normalisation agreement with Morocco in Rabat.

'The leaders congratulated each other over the renewal of ties between the countries, the signing of the joint statement with the US, and the agreements between the two countries,' a

statement from Netanyahu's office said.

'In addition, the processes and mechanisms to implement the agreements were determined,' it added.

The North African country is the third Arab nation this year to normalise ties with the Jewish state under US-brokered deals, while Sudan has pledged to follow suit.

During the 'warm and friendly' conversation, Netanyahu invited Mohammed VI to visit Israel, the statement from the Prime Minister's office added.

AFP

Turkish pro-Kurdish opposition TV station shuts after 26 days

Istanbul, Turkey - A private Turkish TV station that aired pro-Kurdish opposition views has shut down less than a month after launch, raising press freedom concerns in a country often chastised by rights groups.

Olay TV, owned by businessman and former minister Cavit Caglar, began broadcasting on November 30 and was pulled off the air on Friday.

Its staff announced its closure live on air.

Caglar said he pulled out of the venture because the station's editorial line veered too close to the pro-Kurdish opposition, while the editor claimed he had bowed to government pressure.



This Olay TV screengrab shows the channel's executive editor Suleyman Sarilar during a programme on Friday

Executive editor Suleyman Sarilar said on air that the network had aimed to maintain equal distance from every segment in Turkey's polarised society. "But we have seen that we can no longer keep up with this kind of broadcasting ... Cavit (Caglar) said he was under intense pressure from the government and that he cannot move forward," he claimed.

The Olay TV broadcast stopped following Sarilar's announcement.

Caglar said in a statement that Olay TV abandoned impartiality and was close to the line of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) - accused by the govern-

ment of links to outlawed Kurdish militants.

"I have been active in center-right politics and served this country. I was unsettled by the broadcasts of Olay TV's editorial team," he said.

"I shared my concerns with my business partner, as (Olay TV) moved from impartial to pro-HDP broadcasting. When I offered to 'create balance by including some additional colleagues in the channel', my partner did not accept it."

"I informed him that I would not be able to continue under those circumstances and had to leave the network."

AFP

Indian PM Modi makes fresh appeal to farmers

New Delhi, India - Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday offered to hold fresh talks to end a stalemate over new agricultural reforms, in his latest push to win over farmers protesting for almost a month against the move.

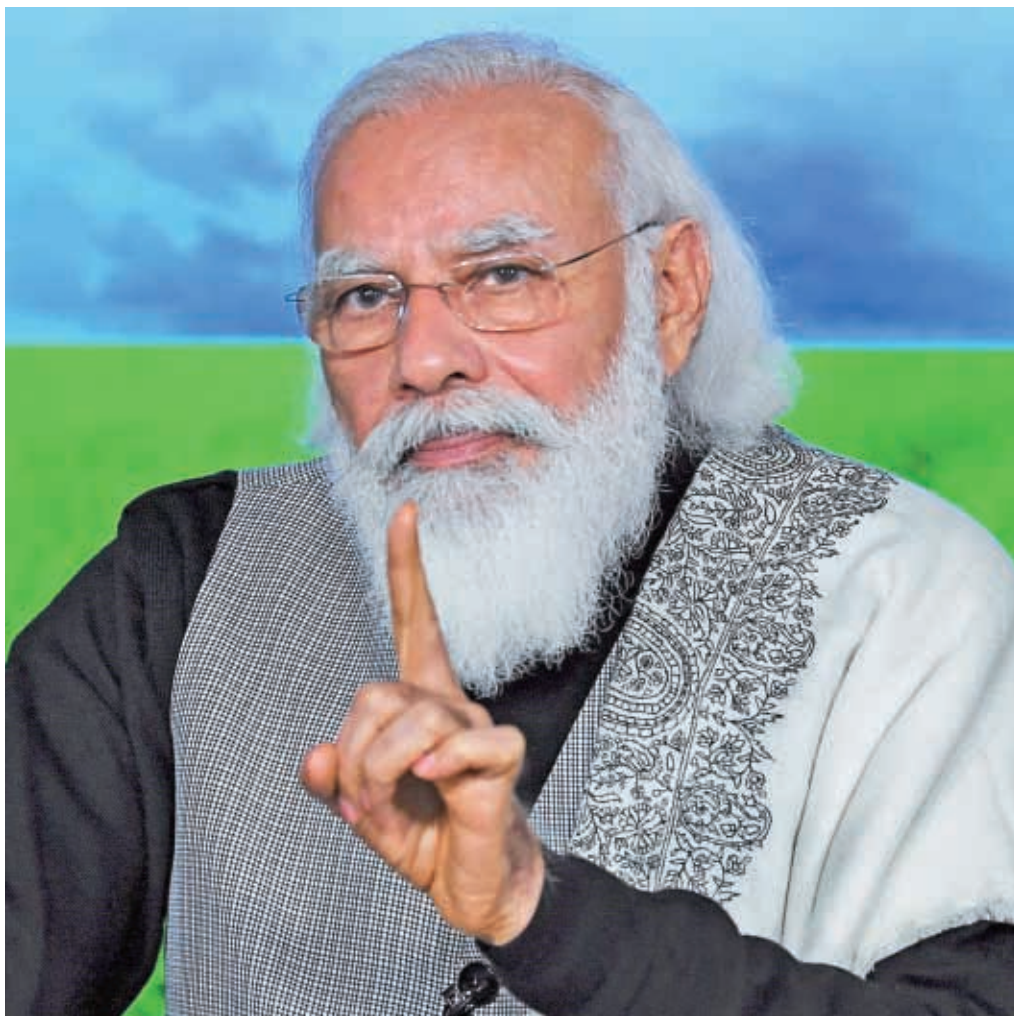
Tens of thousands of farmers have been camping out near several entry points to New Delhi since November 26 against three new laws they say will lead to dismantling of regulated markets.

They also fear the government would stop buying wheat and rice at guaranteed prices, leaving them at the mercy of big corporates.

In a speech beamed live to millions of farmers across the country, Modi sought to allay their misgivings, insisting the laws, passed in September, would give them the freedom to sell their produce 'anywhere and to anyone they like'.

"Lies are being spread that the local mandis (markets) will shut down, the minimum support price will be stopped... don't be misguided by those having political motives," Modi said. "I am saying this with humility that we are ready to discuss every issue of the farmers, even with those (political parties) who are against us, for the sake of our farmers."

Modi also released US\$2.5bn to 90mn farmers under a financial scheme that he launched last year. Under the direct cash transfer scheme, small farmers get



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing the farmers to announce the release of the next instalment of financial benefit under a national scheme through a video conference, in New Delhi on Friday (AFP)

₹6,000 (US\$82 approx) in four instalments in a year.

Modi also interacted with seven farmers from different states via a video conference in which they praised the government's various farm schemes.

Agriculture employs about 70

per cent of India's 1.3bn people and accounts for 15 per cent of its US\$2.7tn economy.

But in recent decades farm incomes have stagnated, and experts say the sector badly needs investment and modernisation.

Farmer unions have de-

manded a total repeal of the laws and warned of a bigger agitation if their demands are not met.

Several rounds of talks between ministers and farmer leaders have failed to produce a breakthrough so far.

AFP

Family praises Pakistan's bid to stop release of Daniel Pearl murderers

Islamabad, Pakistan - The father of slain American journalist Daniel Pearl on Friday welcomed Pakistan's decision to challenge the verdict of a local court ordering the release of a militant convicted of murdering their son in 2002.

"We are heartened to hear that the government of Pakistan is filing an appeal against the release order so that our son's murderers will remain in jail," Daniel Pearl's father Judea Pearl tweeted.

The decision by Sindh High Court to release the accused comes months after it sparked outrage for overturning the murder conviction and death sentence of Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, and acquitted three other men connected to the case.

The four are being held under the emergency orders of the local government while an ongoing appeal against their acquittals is heard in the Supreme Court, but defence lawyers argued against their continued detention in the south of the country.

"We refuse to believe that Pakistan government and Pakistani people will let such a travesty of justice tarnish its name and justice will prevail," Judea said, referring to the latest court order. "We also have full confidence in the Supreme Court of Pakistan to provide justice for our beloved son and reinforce the paramount importance of the freedom of the press," he added.



Sheikh Aslam (right), a relative of one of the accused in the murder of US journalist Daniel Pearl, and his lawyer Nadeem Azhar speak with media representatives outside a prison, in Karachi on Thursday (AFP)

In a written order issued on Thursday, the Sindh court ordered that all four 'be released from jail forthwith on the receipt of this order'.

A lawyer representing Sheikh and his co-defendants said the court had found there was 'no valid reason for depriving them of their freedom'.

Sindh government spokesman Murtaza Wahab said, "We will definitely file an appeal against the Sindh High Court verdict."

He did not specify any timeframe, however, stressing that 'legal proceedings take time'.

Sheikh, a British-born extremist who once studied at the London School of Economics and had been involved in previous kidnappings of foreigners, was arrested days after Pearl's abduction and later sentenced to

death by hanging.

In January 2011, a report released by the Pearl Project at Georgetown University following an investigation into his death made chilling revelations, and said that the wrong men had been convicted for Pearl's murder.

The investigation, led by Pearl's friend and former *Wall Street Journal* colleague Asra No-mani and a Georgetown University professor, claimed the reporter was murdered by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the alleged mastermind of the September 11, 2001 attacks, not Sheikh.

Pearl was South Asia bureau chief for *The Wall Street Journal* when he was abducted in Karachi in January 2002 while researching a story about extremists.

AFP

QUICK TAKES

Two cops killed in Kabul blast

Two Afghan policemen were killed as three separate 'sticky bombs' exploded in Kabul on Saturday, the latest violence to hit the Afghan capital. The policemen were killed when a sticky bomb attached to their pick-up truck exploded in a central district of Kabul, police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz said. A civilian was also hurt in the blast, he said. Two security personnel were wounded in another similar bomb attack targeting a second police pick-up truck in a western district of Kabul, Faramarz said. A third bomb also exploded in the city but caused no casualties. In recent months, Kabul and several other provinces of Afghanistan have been rocked by deadly violence, including bombings, rocket attacks and targeted killings.

Mali's French soldier shoots two others

A French soldier deployed to Mali as part of the Barkhane force fighting extremist insurgents has wounded two comrades with a pistol while drunk, the army headquarters said Saturday. The confrontation under the influence happened overnight from December 24 to 25 at a base in Gao in eastern Mali. "Two soldiers from the same unit were getting on each other's nerves. One soldier wounded two of his comrades with his service weapon," army spokesman Frederic Barbry said. One of the two men was wounded very lightly, while the other's injury was more serious although not life-threatening. Both were flown out following the shooting and brought to hospital in France. Military police are investigating the incident and 'once the probe is finished, (the shooter) will be flown home', Barbry said.

Three UN peacekeepers killed in Central Africa Republic ahead of national polls

Bangui, Central African Republic - Three UN peacekeepers have been killed by unidentified combatants in the Central African Republic, the United Nations said, as the country prepares for a general election and fighting continues between rebels and government forces.

The news came after a rebel coalition called off a ceasefire and said it would resume its march on the capital, as well as the arrival of troops from Russia and Rwanda to shore up the government of the resource-rich country.

'Three peacekeepers from Burundi were killed and two others were wounded' following attacks on UN troops and Central African national defence and security forces, the UN said in a statement Friday.

The assaults took place in Dekoa, central Kemo Prefecture, and in Bakouma, in the southern Mbomou Prefecture, it said, without providing further details.

Stephane Dujarric, spokesman for the UN Secretary-General, strongly condemned the latest incident, and called on the CAR authorities to investigate the



A convoy of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) passes by an election poster, in Bangui on Friday (AFP)

'heinous' assaults. He also warned that 'attacks against United Nations peacekeepers may constitute a war crime'.

Ahead of the presidential and legislative elections to be held on Sunday, 63 year old incumbent President Faustin Archange Touadera has accused his pred-

ecessor Francois Bozize of plotting a coup. Bozize - who is under UN sanctions and barred from running - denies the charges.

On Tuesday a militia briefly seized the country's fourth biggest town, before it was retaken by security forces backed by UN peacekeepers.

Meanwhile the Constitutional Court on Saturday rejected final appeals by the opposition to postpone Sunday's vote.

At least six candidates had filed appeals arguing that insecurity in the country, and the recent withdrawal of one of the candidates, justified delaying the polls.

Rebel groups launched an offensive a week ago threatening to march on the capital Bangui, in what the government described as an attempted coup, but their progress was halted with international help.

However, a three-day ceasefire brokered ahead of the elections fell apart Friday with the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) announcing that it would resume its push for the capital.

The CPC - whose components are drawn from militia groups that, together, control two-thirds of the country - was created on December 19 by armed groups who accused Touadera of trying to fix the vote.

Clashes resumed on Friday in Bakouma, about 800km north-east of Bangui, according to Vladimir Monteiro, spokesman for the UN's MINUSCA peace-keeping force.

MINUSCA said on Thursday that a 300-strong contingent of Rwandan reinforcements had arrived in the country. Russia has also sent at least 300 military instructors to bolster the CAR's forces ahead of the polls.

AFP

Russia says intercepted IS plot

Moscow, Russia - Russia's FSB security service said on Saturday it had foiled an attack planned by a cell loyal to the Islamic State (IS) extremist group in the country's unstable southern republic of Dagestan, arresting four people.

'Members of the group planned to detonate an explosive close to an administrative building belonging to security services, followed by an armed attack against interior ministry employees' in regional capital Makhachkala, the FSB said.

As well as arresting four 'members of the international IS terrorist group', investigators found 'firearms and bladed weapons, a large amount of ammunition and an explosive device', it added, along with mobile phones containing 'exchanges with organisers located abroad'.

On December 17, police killed two attackers targeting security forces in Russia's neighbouring republic of Chechnya.

Six people were also killed during an October 'counter-terrorism' operation in Chechnyan capital Grozny.

AFP

Hong Kong florist helps prisoners send Christmas gifts

Hong Kong, China - Samantha burst into tears when she opened the box from florist Elise Ip on Christmas Day. It was a surprise gift from her boyfriend, in custody for joining last year's Hong Kong protests.

'She loves dogs but she loves me more,' he had written on a paper slip sent from a detention centre and relayed to Ip via a prisoner support group organised by former social welfare legislator Shiu Ka-chun.

After reading it, Ip found

Samantha, who wished to use a pseudonym, a cactus in the shape of a puppy's head.

"Receiving this is a great support to me," Samantha told AFP.

"Those in custody don't really have opportunities to send flowers or gifts to us."

Samantha is one of more than 50 relatives and friends who have received gifts ordered behind bars and prepared by Ip, who initiated the free 'Send Flowers With You' project in July.

"I hoped it would make people

inside and outside the prisons feel closer to each other," Ip said.

"With every story told in each delivery, I also wish to remind the world that many have sacrificed their normal and happy life for the city."

More than 10,000 people in Hong Kong have been arrested and thousands prosecuted for joining the massive, often violent pro-democracy protests that convulsed the Asian financial centre for seven months from June 2019.

The number of those remanded has been rising, and protecting prisoners' rights has become increasingly difficult after pro-democratic legislators were forced out of the city's legislature.

Authorities have also tightened rules around official visits.

Shiu, who used to represent the social welfare sector in the legislature, formed a concern group, 'Wall-Fare', earlier this year.

AFP



Elise Ip prepares a gift as part of a project to send flowers and gifts to relatives on behalf of prisoners arrested following last year's protests (AFP)

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

EU readies vaccine rollout as new virus strain spreads

Paris, France - The European Union teed up a vaccine rollout Saturday, even as countries in the bloc were forced back into lockdown by a new strain of the virus, believed to be more infectious, that has spread from Britain to France and Spain and even as far as Japan.

The pandemic has claimed more than 1.7mn lives and is still running rampant in much of the world, but the recent launching of inoculation campaigns has boosted hopes that 2021 could bring a respite.

First doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine arrived in hard-hit Italy, Spain and France on Saturday morning ready for distribution to elderly care facilities and hospital staff.

"We'll get our freedom back, we'll be able to embrace again," Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio said as he urged Italians to get the shot.

Vaccinations in all 27 European Union countries will begin on Sunday, after regulators approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on December 21.

Several countries including France, Spain, Japan, Denmark, Lebanon, Germany, Australia and the Netherlands have reported cases of the new strain, which has sent jitters through already overstretched health services.

Over 25mn total infections have been recorded in Europe, according to an AFP tally on Friday, and Russia on Saturday said it had topped 3mn.

The UK itself passed 70,000 coronavirus deaths on Friday and is confronted with surging infections from the new strain.

Six million people in the south and east were locked down from Saturday, making for a total of 24mn nationwide.

December 26 also brought a third national lockdown in Austria, with all non-essential stores shut - but ski stations remaining open. The lockdown and curfew is slated to last until January 24.

New variant

The first French case of the new coronavirus variant was found



Medical workers unbox packages of vaccines during the first shipment of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines, at the premises of a pharmaceutical warehouse in the Greek capital of Athens, as the country faces a new wave of COVID-19 infection on Saturday (AFP)

Vaccines are offering the world a way out of this tragedy. But it will take time for the whole world to be vaccinated

TEDROS ADHANOM GHEBREYESUS



in a citizen resident in Britain who arrived from London on December 19, the French Health Ministry said late on Friday.

They are asymptomatic and self-isolating at home in Tours in central France, and contact-tracing has taken place for the health professionals who treated him.

In Spain, four cases were confirmed in Madrid on Saturday.

The father, mother and sister of a young man who arrived in Madrid by plane last week have tested positive for the coronavirus variant, it added.

The young man is suspected to have the new variant as well but Spanish authorities are waiting for the results of a polymerase chain reaction PCR test

to confirm this.

"The patients are not seriously ill, we know that this strain is more transmissible, but it does not cause more serious illness," Madrid regional deputy health chief Antonio Zapatero told a news conference.

"There is no need for alarm."

The new strain of the virus, which experts fear is more contagious, prompted more than 50 countries to impose travel restrictions on the UK, where it first emerged.

Bottlenecks of thousands of trucks in southern England were ebbing Saturday, after France lifted a 48-hour entry ban for drivers with a negative coronavirus test and kept its Calais port open on Christmas Day.

South Africa has detected a

similar mutation in some infected people, but on Friday denied British claims its strain was more infectious or dangerous than the one originating in the UK.

In Asia, Tokyo reported a record 949 new daily cases, with the figure for Japan as a whole recently topping 3,000 per day. Thailand has also seen a new outbreak linked to a seafood market near Bangkok infect almost 1,500 people.

Don't squander the sacrifices: WHO

In Australia on Saturday there was little sign of the usual Boxing Day sale rush on the streets of Sydney. Residents largely heeded the state premier's request they stay home faced with a new virus cluster.

"Even when we entered the store there were less than ten people," shopper Lia Gunawan told *The Sydney Morning Herald* after queueing up for the sales.

Across the world, people are being urged to respect social

distancing guidelines, as the World Health Organization urged people not to 'squander' the 'great, heart-wrenching sacrifices' people had made to save lives.

"Vaccines are offering the world a way out of this tragedy. But it will take time for the whole world to be vaccinated," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned on Friday.

In the Vatican Friday, Pope Francis had pleaded for 'vaccines for all' in his traditional Christmas message.

"I call on everyone, on leaders of states, on businesses, on international organisations, to promote cooperation and not competition, to find a solution for everyone... especially the most vulnerable and most in need in all regions of the planet," Pope Francis said.

In Turkmenistan, President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov claimed licorice root could cure COVID-19 without citing any scientific evidence.

AFP



A registered nurse prepares a syringe with the Moderna vaccine at a health centre in Boston on Thursday (AFP)

Virus cases close to 80mn

Paris, France - The novel coronavirus has killed at least 1,750,780 people since the outbreak emerged in China last December, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP at 11:00 GMT on Saturday.

At least 79,758,000 cases of coronavirus have been registered. Of these, at least 50,405,700 are now considered recovered.

The tallies, using data collected by AFP from national authorities and information from the World Health Organization (WHO), probably reflect only a fraction of the actual number of infections. Many countries are testing only symptomatic or the most serious cases.

On Friday, 8,389 new deaths and 485,359 new cases were recorded worldwide. Based on latest reports, the countries with the most new deaths are: The United States with 1,414 new deaths, followed by Mexico with 665 and the United Kingdom with 570. The United States is the worst-affected country with 330,279 deaths from 18,761,363 cases. At least 6,298,082 people have been declared recovered.

After the US, the hardest-hit countries are Brazil with 190,488 deaths from 7,448,560 cases, India with 147,343 deaths from 10,169,118 cases, Mexico with 121,837 deaths from 1,372,243 cases, and Italy with 71,359 deaths from 2,028,354 cases.

The country with the high-

Based on latest reports, the countries with the most new deaths are: The United States with 1,414 new deaths, followed by Mexico with 665 and the United Kingdom with 570

est number of deaths compared to its population is Belgium with 165 fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by Slovenia with 121, Bosnia-Herzegovina with 119, Italy 118, Republic of North Macedonia 115.

Europe overall has 543,993 deaths from 25,183,892 cases, Latin America and the Caribbean 495,436 deaths from 15,085,477 infections, and the United States and Canada 344,999 deaths from 19,295,507 cases.

Asia has reported 214,966 deaths from 13,660,777 cases, the Middle East 88,512 deaths from 3,875,731 cases, Africa 61,930 deaths from 2,625,723 cases, and Oceania 944 deaths from 30,898 cases.

As a result of corrections by national authorities or late publication of data, the figures updated over the past 24 hours may not correspond exactly to the previous day's tallies.

AFP

Russia crosses 3mn COVID-19 infections

Moscow, Russia - Russia on Saturday passed three million confirmed coronavirus infections, as authorities hold out against reimposing a national lockdown while the country is battered by a second wave.

Official figures showed that a total of 3,021,964 cases have been detected, with 54,226 deaths. In the past 24 hours, 29,258 new infections and 567 deaths were registered in Russia, fourth on the list of hardest-hit countries worldwide.

Since winter began, each week has brought new records for new cases and deaths, with epicentres in capital Moscow and second-largest city Saint Petersburg.

Poorer regions of the country also report a troubling picture. Nevertheless, official figures point to a lower death rate from the virus in Russia than in western Europe or the US, something President Vladimir Putin has boasted about for months.

But Russian authorities only count as COVID deaths those where an autopsy confirms the



Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin holds a vial with Sputnik V vaccine (AFP)

virus was the main cause.

Statistics agency Rosstat in October recorded 50,000 more deaths than in the same month last year. And between March and October, there were 165,000 excess deaths compared with the same period in 2019, suggesting the true toll of the pandemic is far higher than authorities will admit.

AFP

China hails its 'extraordinary' success curbing virus ahead of WHO probe into the origins

Beijing, China - China's ruling Communist Party leaders have congratulated themselves on their 'extremely extraordinary' success in handling the COVID-19 outbreak domestically, ahead of a World Health Organization probe into the disease's origins.

China faced a barrage of criticism at home and abroad over its initial handling of the virus, which emerged in the central city of Wuhan last December.

China's Politburo, the top decision-making body of the Communist Party, said late on Friday that the party leadership 'played a decisive role in leading ... China in prevailing over the rare risks and challenges this year'.

'At the critical moment ... the Party Central Committee took a long-term view ... achieving an extremely extraordinary glory in this extremely unusual year,' state news agency Xinhua reported, citing a statement issued after the two-day meeting.

China has largely curbed the spread of the virus, and was one



A health worker in a protective suit takes a swab from a child to test for the COVID-19 virus as the city carries out a mass testing programme after new confirmed cases were found, in Dalian on Wednesday (AFP)

of the only major economies to report growth this year. But it has been accused of covering up the initial outbreak, and so contributing to the virus' spread internationally.

At home, Beijing has attempted to stifle criticism by

punishing at least eight whistleblowers. A Chinese citizen journalist who reported on Wuhan's outbreak, Zhang Zhan, has been detained since May and is expected to go on trial on Monday.

Zhang is a former lawyer

who travelled to the city in February to report on the chaotic initial stages of the outbreak, through livestreams and critical essays widely shared on social media platforms banned in China.

The two-day Politburo meet-

ing comes shortly before an international team of WHO experts is expected to arrive in China to investigate the animal origins of COVID-19, during which trip they will visit Wuhan.

An expert from the team told AFP this week that the investigation was 'not about finding a guilty country or a guilty authority', but about 'about understanding what happened to avoid that in the future'.

Beijing has recently attempted to cast doubts on the origins of the virus - the state-run *People's Daily* newspaper said in a Facebook post in early November that 'all available evidence suggests that the coronavirus did not start in central China's Wuhan'.

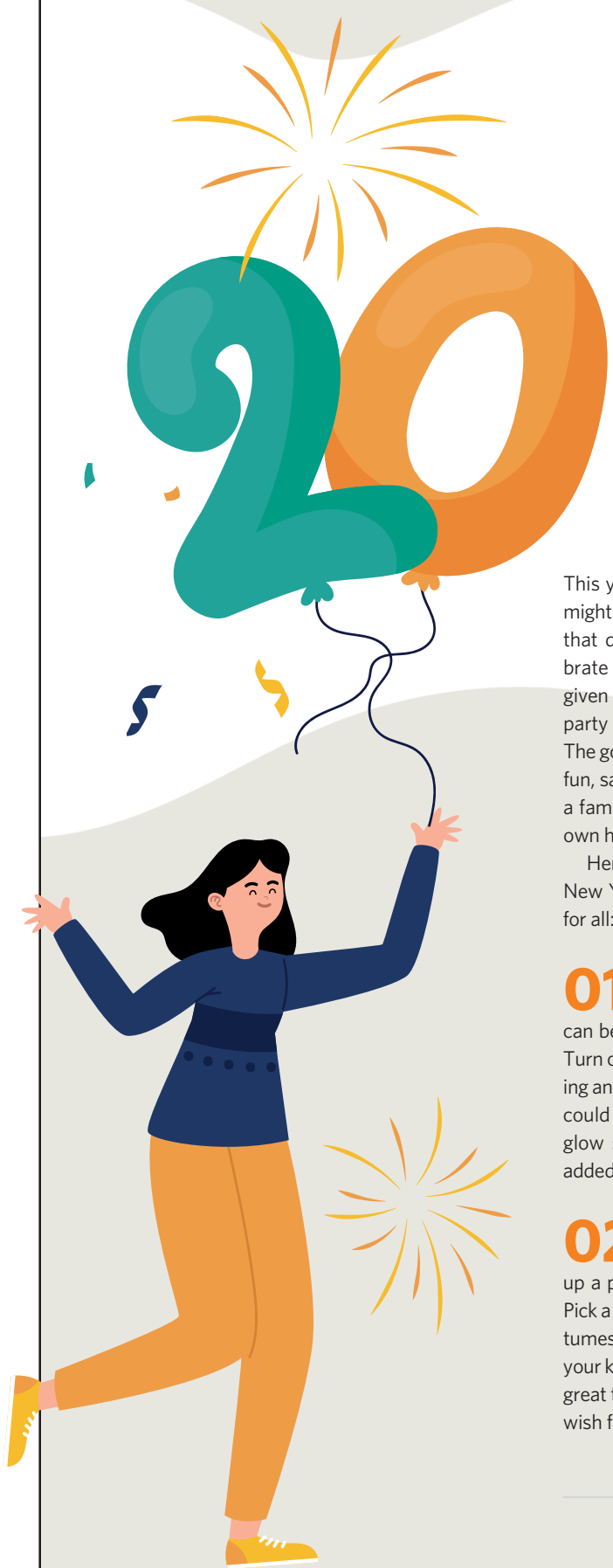
China has also tried to enhance its soft power push during the pandemic - promising to share its vaccines with developing countries, and engaging in 'mask diplomacy' - donating personal protective gear to countries in need.

AFP

10 WAYS TO CELEBRATE

New Year's

EVE AT HOME



This year, New Year's Eve celebrations might not look like they normally do. But that doesn't mean you can't still celebrate with family and friends! In fact, given how difficult this year has been, a party might be exactly what is needed. The good news is that there are plenty of fun, safe ways to ring in the new year as a family right from the comfort of your own home.

Here are a few ideas for making your New Year's Eve celebration a fun event for all:

01

Have a dance party:

With a little planning and spirit, any room can be transformed into a dance space. Turn on some tunes, get the family moving and raise the roof to ring in 2021. You could even turn off the lights and use glow sticks or LED light-up wands for added ambiance.

02

Set up a photo booth:

Make it a night to remember by setting up a photo booth for the kids to enjoy. Pick a corner, pull out old Halloween costumes or find some festive props, and let your kids get creative. The photos can be great to share on your social channels to wish friends a happy new year.

03

Look through old photos or home movies:

As we head into a new year, take a trip down memory lane by looking through old photos or watching home movies. This is sure to put a smile on everyone's face and is a great reminder of how far they've come this past year.

04

Create a family time capsule:

Ask each family member to write down their wishes and dreams for 2021. Then, seal responses in a box or jar with other memorable items to open next New Year's Eve.

05

Board games, anyone?

Get the family energised with a little competition. Find a few games everyone can enjoy or host a tournament of your family favourites. Consider giving out some fun prizes to keep everyone engaged.

06

Glam up everyday objects:

Kids love sparkle! Add glitter to playdough or slime and let them play. Use number cookie cutters to spell out 2021.

07

DIY dessert bar:

Set up a dessert bar, and let your kids create a confetti-themed treat with some

08

Have a virtual hangout:

Carve out some time and say 'Hi' to family and friends you haven't been able to see. This is a great way to keep the kids occupied and get some face time with grandparents or others who might be isolated.

09

Watch an early countdown:

Nothing says New Year's Eve like a good countdown. Organise a creative countdown or watch programmes prepared in advance on television to rev up your mood.

10

Make party favours:

Pick up some party favours at a local store or better yet, make them at home. There are plenty of great tutorials online for fun party favours the kids will enjoy. Try your hand at making confetti poppers, a fun take on a celebration staple. What better way to ring in the new year than with some fun party poppers the kids will enjoy making and eating.



Whatever you end up doing, don't forget to take some time to reflect on this past year and celebrate the year to come.
10...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1... Happy New Year!
(BPT)

‘Paint me a thought’ Christmas art exhibition

at Matti Sirvio Art Galleria, Jawharat al Shati Complex

Photo by Syed Fasiuddin



REMBRANDT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

A virtual exhibition to keep you occupied over the festive season

There are several virtual art exhibitions currently on, which can be viewed by art lovers and enthusiasts from all over the world.

Although many art galleries and

museums now offer limited in-person experiences, nearly every major art institution has also made its exhibitions and collections accessible online. So, if you're seeking something to keep you

occupied over the Christmas festive season, you can view incredible exhibitions from the comfort of your home. Reproduced here are some stunning portraits of 17th century Dutch

painter Rembrandt. A collaboration between The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), The Getty Collection, Hammer Museum, Norton Simon Museum and Timken Museum

of Art, 'Rembrandt in Southern California' displays all of Rembrandt's paintings on view throughout Southern California on a single website (<https://rembrandtinsocal.org/>).



Self portrait
(Norton Simon Museum)

Rembrandt drew inspiration from his own features and drew, etched, and painted several dozen self-portraits, many of which entered contemporary collections.

In this painting, made at the height of his fame, Rembrandt tucks his left hand into the front of a garment that is an imaginative variation on a sixteenth-century tabard, or gown, lined in red. The heavy gold chain, which alludes to receipt of a high honor, is an invented accolade intended to emphasize his status.

The highly convincing physical presence and the play of light over his features are characteristic of his approach in the late 1630s.

The delicate, descriptive brushwork in the face contrasts with the more broadly handled drapery. His still, monumental form and steady gaze convey self-assurance and distinction.



Rembrandt Laughing
(The J Paul Getty Museum)

Rembrandt practiced his art with great vigor as in the late 1620s, exploring the representation of emotion through expression and movement.

His pursuits in etching, notably self-portraits looking in the mirror, and painting were closely aligned in these years. *Rembrandt Laughing* is one of a small number of paintings executed on a copper plate, similar to those used for his narrative etchings.

Here, he portrayed himself in the guise of a soldier, as a personal *tronie* (character study). He stands confidently before a plaster wall, bare-headed and long-haired, wearing a polished steel gorget around his neck (a studio prop also found in no. 4), right arm bent akimbo, and brown cloak wrapped over his left shoulder. Dynamic, unblended brushstrokes in the face convey spontaneity, capturing a fleeting moment when, head tilted and teeth flashing, he catches our eye and engages us in his mirth.



Abduction of Europa
(The J Paul Getty Museum)

With this dramatic interpretation of Jupiter's abduction of Europa, princess of Tyre, Rembrandt confidently asserted his status as a worthy member of an elite circle of history painters.

While following the ancient Roman poet Ovid's account closely, his own inclination to express profound human aspects of drama are clearly present: Europa's fingers dig deeply into the bull's neck, and her backward gaze links her directly to her attendants, who register a range of emotions, from horror to resignation.

The same youthful features and animated blonde locks of an unknown young woman (New York, The Leiden Collection) inspired the portrayal of both the princess and the standing woman in red. Rembrandt employed a range of brushwork and textures in this work, from the thin reflections in the water to the bumpy brocades and textured vegetation of the landscape.



Portrait of a boy
(Norton Simon Museum)

The directness and sensitivity of Rembrandt's portrayal of this engaging young boy in semi-historical dress led to its previous identification as the artist's son, Titus.

Although that identification is now rejected, the identity of the sitter and function of the painting, either as a fragment of a larger group portrait or an independent likeness, remains undetermined.

The unfinished state of the painting permits insight into Rembrandt's technique: worked over a mid-brown priming, individual broad strokes whose beginning and end are clearly visible suggest the general form of the boy's torso.

Finely rendered strokes model the more fully described face, and red plumes on the soft black hat are quite freely handled. The loosely executed form on the boy's left arm may be an animal, possibly a monkey.



Portrait of Dirck Jansz. Pesser
(Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

Working quickly and decisively, Rembrandt deftly captured the sitter's resolute character in this early portrait of Dirck Jansz. Pesser, a prominent member of the conservative Protestant Remonstrant community in Rotterdam.

Diffuse light falls gently and evenly across Pesser's face, where the combination of textures and warm tones lends an accessible quality to the likeness. The strikingly free handling—visible in the thickly applied pigment around the eyes, the lively broken strokes of the mustache, and the sinuous edges of the ruff—reveals a more relaxed manner than that of *A Bearded Man in a Wide-Brimmed Hat*, painted the previous year.



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