



His Majesty lauds efforts to improve financial position

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq presided over a meeting of the Council of Ministers at Al Baraka Palace on Thursday.

At the outset of the meeting, His Majesty the Sultan gave thanks and praise to the Almighty Allah for the plentiful riches He has bestowed on Oman and its people. His Majesty the Sultan prayed to the Almighty to perpetuate His bounties on this dear country, its citizens and residents, and to endow all with full

health and blessings.

Then, His Majesty the Sultan reviewed domestic affairs and affirmed that the accomplishments made in various spheres at the national level were the outcome of collaboration of efforts exerted by all officials and institutions of the state. In particular, His Majesty the Sultan commended the role of the government to improve the financial position. He lauded the efforts made to curtail the deficit of state budget and achieve fiscal sustainability, which reflected positively on economic and monetary indices and on Oman's global rating, despite adverse international circumstances and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

His Majesty the Sultan explained that the positive results realised at the economic and

social levels enabled the government to implement a number of programmes and finalise many initiatives and strategic projects.

For the second year of the tenth Five-Year Plan, the first leg in Oman Vision 2040, His Majesty the Sultan gave directives to all departments concerned to exert greater efforts and make these harmonious with the implementation of scheduled plans and programmes. He also urged all to address the challenges that might come in the way and to focus on economic diversification sectors. All should stick to the implementation and follow-up of the programmes to achieve the targets of Oman Vision 2040 and put the national economy on the right track for a healthy growth, His Majesty said.

Continued on Page 02

Royal Decree ratifies state's 2022 General Budget

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq has issued Royal Decree No 1/2022 on the ratification of the state's General Budget for Fiscal Year 2022.

Article 1 ratifies the state's General Budget for Fiscal Year 2022 according to the tables/schedules attached to the decree.

Article 2 instructs all units of the state's admin-

istrative apparatus and other public legal entities to implement the provisions of the decree, each within the scope of its prerogatives.

Article 3 states that the decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from January 1, 2022.

ONA

See also Page 04

Rains claim 6 lives; low pressure to continue



An overflowing wadi in Dhank, Dhahirah governorate (ONA)

Our Correspondent

Muscat

Six people died during heavy rains on Friday and Saturday in different governorates of the sultanate caused by a low-pressure trough, which is likely to continue to affect Oman's weather till Wednesday.

Capt Munir bin Mohammed al Sinan, Department of Public Relations in Royal Oman Police, told Oman TV that six people died as a result of the rains.

Over 20 others were rescued, according to the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA).

The people rescued were from different wilayats. 'Our rescue teams in the Governorate of South Batinah managed to rescue two people after they were left stranded in a valley in the wilayat of Rustaq. They are in good health,' CDAA said in a statement.

The weather is expected to be cloudy over most governorates with the trough of low pressure continuing until January 5, ac-

ording to the latest weather update from the National Multi Hazard Early Warning System.

In a statement issued on Saturday, it said, 'The weather is expected to be cloudy over the governorates of Musandam, North Batinah, South Batinah, Muscat, Buraimi, Dhahirah, Dakhliyah, South Sharqiyah and North Sharqiyah with chances of rain and occasional thunder-showers accompanying fresh winds, flash floods, hail and flowing wadis.'

It added that there are chances of thundershowers concentrating over the governorates of Musandam and North Batinah, particularly over the Hajar mountains, in the next two days, while the weather will be partly cloudy with chances of isolated rain over the remaining governorates.

The sea will be moderate along most of the sultanate's coasts with waves of a maximum height of 2m. The sea will become rough during thundershowers along the coast of Musandam and in the Oman Sea with waves of a maximum height of 3m.



South Batinah experts to get free COVID-19 booster dose



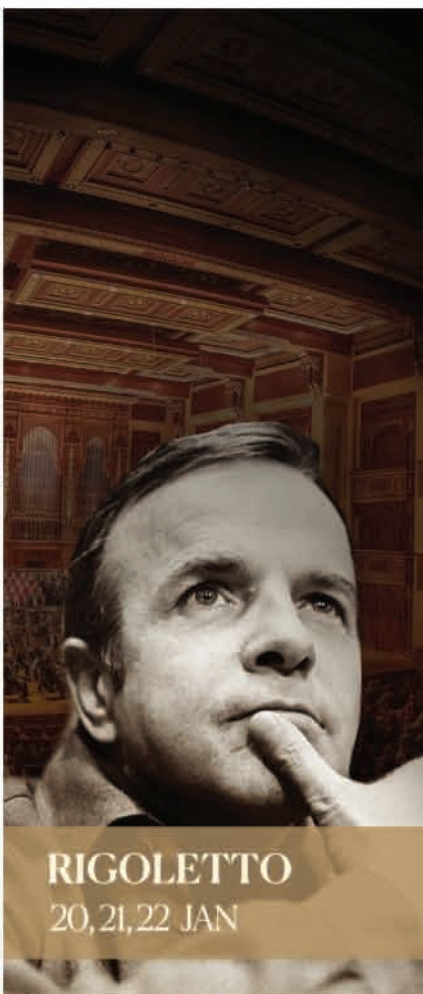
Oman's 2022 budget deficit likely to be lowest since 2014



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HM lauds efforts to improve financial position



Continued from Page 01

As part of the Royal attention accorded to social aspects and the execution of development projects, His Majesty the Sultan affirmed that the tenth Five-Year Plan comprised a number of development projects that have a social dimension (in different governorates), including schools, internal roads and residential areas. In this context, His Majesty the Sultan exhorted the governors to follow up on the implementation of planned projects and to coordinate with the departments concerned.

In his review of the progress made in the National Employment Programme, labour recruitment initiatives and the efforts exerted in civil and military sectors, as well as the private sector during 2021, His Majesty the Sul-

His Majesty urged all individuals of society to adhere to the precautionary health measures

tan laid emphasis on according more attention to ensure the continuation of employment of jobseekers, particularly young people, in different sectors.

After reviewing the integration of efforts made across different institutions of the state and the report of the State Audit Institution for 2020, His Majesty the Sultan underlined the need to devise suitable mechanisms to tackle any challenges to advance public interest.

Referring to the surge in infections with COVID-19 variants

mutating around the world recently, His Majesty urged all individuals of society to adhere to the precautionary health measures endorsed by the authorities concerned in an effort to help protect public health and ensure the sustained operation of institutions of the state and establishments of the private sector.

His Majesty also spoke about Oman's relations with Arab and friendly countries. He expressed his appreciation for the recent exchange of visits and the positive outcome of these efforts. His Majesty underscored Oman's keenness to promote cooperation with all countries of the world and realise the interests of all.

At the conclusion, His Majesty gave Royal directives to accord attention to all issues of interest to the nation and its citizens. ONA

Hotels booked for COVID-19 violations

Muscat - The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) has issued violations against nine hotel facilities for non-compliance with the guidelines on COVID-19 preventive measures.

In a statement, it said, 'In the context of checking hotel and tourist establishments to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has issued violation notices against hotel facilities for non-compliance with the preventive guidelines.'

The ministry called upon all hotel and tourism facilities to follow precautionary measures to prevent COVID-19 in order to avoid legal action, which may result in the closure of the establishment.

SQU announces postgraduate programmes

Muscat - Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), represented by the Deanship of Graduate Studies, has announced the opening of applications for admissions to postgraduate programmes (postgraduate diplomas, Masters and doctoral studies) for Omani and foreign students for the academic year 2022/2023, starting Sunday till February 28.

The university offers a number of scholarships and seats funded by external parties.

Low pressure, rains expected to last till Wednesday



Waterlogging in Ruwi following rains on Saturday



Dark clouds over Qurum on Saturday afternoon before a deluge



Waterlogged roads in Rustaq during rains on Friday



Rain-slick Seeb soon after the first shower on Saturday

Vodafone launches service operations in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Vodafone Oman announced the launch of its service operations in the sultanate under the patronage of H H Sayyid Azzan Kais Tarik al Said on Thursday.

"Connecting for a better future is our company's purpose. We set out to be the pioneers of digital innovation and sustainable growth in our community," said Bader Zidi, CEO of Vodafone Oman, announcing the launch.

"Our main objective is to advance digital progress, initially by bringing next-generation 5G network and cloud service and then subsequently going into ecosystems that reach far beyond telecommunication. Vodafone is positioned as Oman's premier technology company, digitalising lifestyles and society."

Vodafone brings the best of the world to the sultanate in a relevant and uniquely Omani way.



(Supplied photo)

Vodafone's brand positioning, under the slogan 'Together We Can', demonstrates the company's belief that the partnership between technology and society can build a better future

Even before the launch, meaningful in-country value was delivered through employment (95 per cent Omanisation) and a local partnership ecosystem across key sectors. The company's focus is on giving opportunities to small and medium enterprises and the

country's youth.

According to Diego Massidda, CEO of Vodafone Partner Markets and Vodafone Carrier Services, consumers will benefit from unmatched global services such as roaming, international calling and 'next-generation digital applications'.

"We are delighted to welcome Oman to our global Partner Market family," Massidda said.

Vodafone's brand positioning, under the slogan 'Together We Can', emphasises how people, connectivity and technology can address the challenges faced individually and as a society. It demonstrates the company's belief that the partnership between technology and society can build a better future.

"With our launch, we are redefining the way people experience communication by eliminating customer service pain points in the industry. Big Data Analytics and extensive market

research tell us that customers want radically different, innovative and transparent products. I am excited to unveil our 77 launch offer, the first-of-its-kind offering with attractive global features to benefit our customers," said Jan Holzberg, commercial director of Vodafone Oman.

Vodafone's launch offer includes 77GB of data, 777 local voice minutes and 777 local SMS for a period of 77 days. Customers can avail the benefits in Oman and on Vodafone networks worldwide at no extra cost. The full period of 77 days is available for a one-time payment of RO9. The offer is valid until January 31, 2022.

Vodafone has been available since Thursday across the sultanate through the My Vodafone Application on Google Play Store and the App Store and in more than 3,500 outlets across Oman. The full list can be found on www.vodafone.om

Muscat Municipality temporarily suspends online applications

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat Municipality has suspended online applications for municipal services starting January 1, 2022.

A statement issued by Muscat Municipality said, 'We are currently working on updating the municipal e-systems linked to rent contracts, licences and other related services, including amending pricing of services and changing some internal procedures. Therefore, new applications usually made through the website or app for these particular services are suspended, starting from January 1, 2022. We will resume operations at 10am on Saturday, January 8, 2022.'

South Batinah expats to get COVID-19 booster dose free



(Supplied photo)

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to limit the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health (MoH) has announced that the booster dose of COVID-19 vaccine will be free of charge for expatriates in South Batinah governorate.

An MoH official informed that the booster dose will be administered from January 2, 2022, till January 6, 2022.

He added, "The Directorate General of Health Services in South Batinah governorate will provide the booster dose free of charge to expatriate workers, as

The booster dose will be provided free of charge to expatriate workers at the Sports Complex in the wilayat of Rustaq from January 2 to 6 from 8am to 1.30pm

MOH OFFICIAL

well as the first and second doses of the COVID-19 vaccine for expatriate workers who have

not received it yet, at the Sports Complex in the wilayat of Rustaq from Sunday, January 2, until Thursday, January 6, from 8am to 1.30pm."

Many of the COVID-19 vaccination centres have witnessed a good turnout of residents and citizens to receive the third dose in the governorates of Muscat, South Sharqiyah, South Batinah etc.

Urging everyone to take vaccines on time and to opt for the booster dose, the official said that the third jab increases immunity by up to 75 per cent.

Last week, H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, stated that

vaccination centres are open in all governorates for all. "Vaccines are available free of charge to citizens and residents. There is no excuse for not taking the vaccine," he said, without specifying if the booster dose is free of charge for residents, too.

132 new cases

MoH registered 132 new cases of COVID-19 in a 24-hour period on Thursday. With this, the total number of cases in the country rose to 305,489.

No deaths were reported on Thursday, keeping the total number of COVID-19-related deaths in the sultanate at 4,116.

FIRST SUN OF THE YEAR



(Syed Fasiuddin/Muscat Daily)

The first sunrise of 2022 in Muttrah Corniche. Muscat Daily wishes its readers a Happy New Year!

More than 450 SMEs exempted from government licensing fee

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As many as 466 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were exempted from payment of government licence fee, according to the Authority for SME Development.

The authority said that 466 firms got exemption from licence fee as part of the Oman Vision 2040 efforts pursuant to the Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq until December 26, 2021.

The incentives were offered during 2021 to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the SMEs.

The steps for completion of the requirements for exemption from licence fee included updating details of Riyadh Card for selection of exempted activity, cancellation of the establishment's commercial registration and issuance of Riyadh Card.



(Supplied photo)

The total number of SMEs registered with the Authority for SME Development till the end of November 2021 stood at 62,353, compared to 47,802 in the same period of 2020, an increase of 30 per cent, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

Among the governorates, Muscat topped the list with an increase of 31.5 per cent till the end of November, followed by North Batinah with a 30.4 per cent in-

crease, Dakhliyah 25.9 per cent and Dhofar 33.7 per cent.

The number of SMEs registered in Muscat was 21,68, followed by North Batinah with 9,830, Dakhliyah 7,604, Dhofar 5,318, South Batinah 4,742, North Sharqiyah 4,110, South Sharqiyah 3,738, Dhahirah 3,454 and Buraimi 1,321.

The number of SMEs registered in the Governorate of Al Wusta was 831 and 319 in Musandam.

Over 40,000 jobseekers employed in private and public sector units

Muscat - The government of the Sultanate of Oman, under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, exerted efforts to provide employment for jobseekers in the public and private sectors.

Employment was provided for as many as 40,594 jobseekers until mid-December 2021. Among these, employment procedures for 5,910 are underway.

Employment was made through the direct announcement of job vacancies, replacement of non-Omanis, employment-linked training programmes and on-the-job training programmes.

The government also exerted efforts to ensure more than 45,708 private sector workers were not laid off, or exposed to mass termination of services or reduction of salaries. The efforts included negotiation with em-



(ONA)

The government exerted efforts to ensure more than 45,708 private sector workers were not laid off, or exposed to mass termination of services or reduction of salaries

ployers, who were urged to keep the services of the employees or transfer them to other sections to benefit from their services there.

As many as 10,305 Omanis benefited from the Job Security System.



(Supplied photo)

1,700 bundles of khat seized in Dhofar

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Royal Oman Police (ROP) seized more than 1,700 bundles of khat drug from four smugglers, while they were attempting to enter the sultanate illegally on Thursday.

A statement issued by ROP, said, 'Coast Guard Police boats

arrested four smugglers off the coast of Dhofar, while attempting to enter Omani territorial sea, with 1,709 bundles of the drug khat. Legal procedures have been taken against the accused.'

ROP also arrested nine people trying to enter the sultanate illegally last week in three different incidents. On Tuesday December

28, ROP arrested six people trying to the sultanate illegally and seized two boats.

In a statement, ROP said, 'The Coast Guard Police seized two boats, one of which was in Muscat with four intruders on-board in the sea off North Batinah governorate with two intruders.'

On Sunday, December 26, the

Coast Guard Police Command, in cooperation with the Directorate General for Combating Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, seized a boat carrying three infiltrators of Asian nationality while attempting to enter Omani territorial sea off Muscat with more than 46kg of crystal meth in their possession.

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95/2021/MM/PA-21	Valuation of Muscat Municipality Properties	25/- OMR	18/01/2022	03/02/2022	07/02/2022
96/2021/MM/PA-22	Supply of Tools and Pesticides for Insect Control	25/- OMR	18/01/2022	03/02/2022	07/02/2022

- Specialized Companies with a valid registration certificate from Tender Board can obtain tender documents from the website through the following link: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>. Starting from the date of this announcement until the end of deadline mentioned above.
- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically through link mentioned above.
- Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond which is equivalent to (1%) of the total value of the tender to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality and valid for (90) days starting from the deadline for submission.
- Tender not accompanied by a tender bond will be rejected.
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Website: www.mm.gov.om

Oman's 2022 budget deficit likely to be lowest since 2014: MoF

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman this year is expected to record the smallest annual budget deficit since 2014 thanks to the government's Medium-Term Fiscal Plan, according to the Ministry of Finance (MoF).

In a statement to Oman News Agency, H E Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, said that preliminary data points to the fact that the state budget 2022 tends to register the lowest deficit since 2014, despite the fluctuation in oil prices over the past period.

The deficit for Oman's 2022 budget is estimated to be RO1.5bn, constituting 15 per cent of the total revenues and 5 per cent of the country's GDP, which falls within the range of deficits estimated in the Medium Term Fiscal Plan (MTFP).

"This accomplishment is attributed to the government's resolve to stick to the MTFP, both at the level of revenues and spending, with the overall aim of meeting the main objectives and increasing the confidence of lenders and credit rating agencies," H E Habsi said.

A major part of the deficit in 2022 will be financed from external and internal borrowing, while the rest of the deficit, around RO400mn, will be funded through withdrawal from the state's reserves.

H E Habsi said the 2022 budget was drafted in a manner that conforms with the targets



and pillars of the 10th Five Year Development Plan (2021-2025), the first leg in Oman Vision 2040.

Estimated total revenues for 2022 budget stood at RO10.580bn, based on the price of oil as US\$50 per barrel, which is 6 per cent higher than the estimated revenues for 2021.

Oil and gas revenues in 2022

budget have been estimated at RO7.24bn, constituting 68 per cent of total revenues. Non-oil revenues have been estimated at RO3.34bn, comprising 32 per cent of the total.

Total public spending is estimated at RO12.13bn, 2 per cent higher than public spending estimated for 2021, and this includes the cost of public debt

service, which stands as RO1.3bn.

The Minister of Finance affirmed that the most significant objective in drafting public spending estimates was to maintain spending on basic services like education, health, housing and social welfare. This is in addition to maintaining procedures and instruments aimed at im-

proving the business climate and expanding partnership projects undertaken with the private sector, he added.

H E Habsi pointed out that, in case oil prices go up beyond the price endorsed in the budget, priority will be given to using the surplus to cut down the deficit and repay the instalments of loans.

Deficit sharply drops to RO1.2bn in 2021

Muscat - Oman has recorded a sharp drop in budget deficit for the fiscal year 2021 as higher oil revenues and measures taken under the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan helped the government to drastically reduce the shortfall.

The sultanate's government made major milestones in a number of financial, economic and monetary indices for the year 2021.

The GDP at current prices, as at the end of the third quarter in 2021, rose to RO24.2bn. Forecasts point to an expected amelioration of the GDP at current prices to RO32bn for the full year 2021, with a growth rate of 13.8 per cent compared to 2020.

As a result, Oman registered a decline in deficit from an estimated RO4.8bn, as was the case before undertaking fiscal management procedures, to RO1.2bn by the end of 2021, constituting a 75 per cent cut in deficit.

The deficit was down from 15.5 per cent of GDP in 2020 to 3.8 per cent of GDP in 2021.

Last year public spending was brought under control, despite financial challenges, which required allocating extra credit to manage

the situation.

This included addressing the spread of coronavirus and raising the admission capacity of higher education establishments to 31,000 seats.

The government had also allocated RO418mn for the payment of overdue balance of previous years, RO1.2bn for the settlement of financial dues of private sector companies till the end of 2021, and RO200mn to meet the cost of repairing damages resulting from the tropical Cyclone Shaheen.

Part of the additional spending was routed to cover the government's contribution towards capital and operational expenses of the oil and gas sectors due to a delay in procedures to establish Energy Development Oman (EDO).

Oman registered a 68 per cent decline in its debt-to-GDP ratio in 2021 as compared to a planned 83 per cent debt-to-GDP ratio.

All credit rating agencies amended Oman's future outlook during last year to 'stable' and 'positive' status after successive downgrading which started in 2014.

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Emirates upbeat on growth despite Omicron

Dubai, UAE - Aviation giant Emirates said it expects business to grow in 2022 despite the surge in global coronavirus cases fuelled by the Omicron variant.

The Dubai-based carrier said in November it was already on the path to recovery as six-month losses dropped by more than half from a year earlier.

"Despite the recent rise of the Omicron variant and the slight slowdown it brought to our network, we are going into 2022 with optimism," said Emirates CEO Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed al Maktoum. "We've built up some great momentum this year and expect business growth to pick up speed in 2022," he said in a company statement.

"Aviation has always been resilient, and we will continue to work with our industry partners to build back better for our customers and communities."

Emirates President Tim Clark said in November that the carrier expects to return to profitability 'in the next 18 months'.

The carrier posted an April-September loss of US\$1.6bn, compared with losses of

US\$3.4bn during the same period in 2020.

Emirates specialises in long-haul flights, with its fleet composed solely of large A380 and B777 aircraft, dozens of which it grounded amid a lack of passenger traffic.

According to the statement on Thursday, its passenger network by December had reached 128 cities, adding all the carrier's 133 Boeing 777 aircraft and nearly 60 of its A380 fleet are in active service.

Earlier last month, Dubai international airport, one of the world's busiest travel hubs, announced it was fully operational for the first time since the pandemic erupted in March 2020.

According to Emirates, a peak in travel has begun ahead of the New Year, with nearly one million passengers expected to depart and arrive in Dubai between December 30 and January 10.

Dubai, which is heavily dependent on tourism, was one of the world's first destinations to welcome back visitors in July 2020.

AFP

AQUAFINA bottled drinking water

ONLY WHAT'S ESSENTIAL

MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSX inches up as services sector stocks rise

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) ended last week higher by 0.11 per cent. All sub-indices decreased except for Services index which rose by 1.07 per cent on week-on-week basis. Financial and Industrial indices closed lower by 0.34 per cent and 0.23 per cent, respectively. MSX Shariah index also closed lower by 1.35 per cent.

Last week also marked the end of the year 2021 for the Muscat Stock Exchange, which has closed higher by 12.87 per cent on year-on-year, reversing its annual losing streak since 2016.



Local news

►Ooredoo Oman announced that it has entered a roaming pact with Vodafone Oman. The three-year agreement will enable Vodafone Oman to use Ooredoo Oman's national roaming services. Ooredoo Oman expects the agreement with Vodafone Oman to enhance revenue as well as expand its operations.

►Oman's annual inflation further increased in November after a sharp rise in prices for transportation and fish and seafood products during the month.

The sultanate's inflation rate – which is based on the consumer price index (CPI) – increased to 3.56 per cent in November 2021 from 3.35 per cent recorded in the previous month, according to CPI data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). The annual inflation rate in November was at its highest level since 2011.

►The sultanate's consumer prices in November inched up 0.12 per cent compared to October prices, the data showed.

►Sohar Port and Freezone signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Sohar which will see the development of an AI Lab on campus. Signed by Dr Saeed bin Hamad al Rubaie, vice chancellor of the University Technology and Applied Sciences and Omar bin Hamood al Mahrizi, deputy CEO of Sohar Port and CEO of Sohar Freezone, the agreement will see Sohar Port supply the necessary equipment to develop artificial intelligence technology capabilities to benefit the community as well as improve efficiency within the port and freezone.

It is expected that the lab will start operations by end of the first quarter of 2022.

►Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) seeks to establish closed joint stock companies in the sultanate with the aim to develop the economic sectors. Eng Redha bin Juma al Saleh, chairman of OCCI, told Oman News Agency that the chamber is

currently working on the necessary studies to establish such companies, and that some governorates such as Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah and Musandam have started establishing joint stock companies and are currently in advanced stages.

►Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion issued a decision to deduct a percentage of budgets of establishments and companies that are allocated to corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes and channel the sums to Oman Charitable Organization (OCO). The decision (No 205/2021) states that this percentage will enable OCO to play a stronger role in providing charity services to the entitled social segments.

►A utility-scale green hydrogen project due to be launched in the coming years at the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) is anticipated to yield 1mn metric tonnes per annum (mtpa) of green ammonia when it is fully built, according

to the venture's key partners. Hyport Duqm – a partnership of OQ and DEME Concessions (the renewable energy and offshore marine infrastructure arm of Belgium's DEME Group) – is set to be the first of many world-scale green hydrogen projects slated to come on stream in the country over next couple of decades.

►The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, and Fisheries Development Oman (FDO) celebrated laying the foundation of the tuna fishing vessels at the Indian Ocean. The vessels, owned by Al Wusta Fisheries Industries, aim to catch 20,000 tonnes of different tuna fish annually in the first phase.

The catch will enable Oman to get its share of the living aquatic resources in the international waters of the Indian Ocean. In Oman, fisheries, which, is one of the vital sources of national income, is the second source of national income after oil.

►Blockchain Services & Solu-

tions (BSS) Oman, an affiliate of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), said it is deploying Red Hat OpenShift, an open source solution from Red Hat Inc, across its organization for more scalable, consistent application development in order to achieve faster time to market for innovation and to support its expansion strategy.

BSS, part of Oman ICT Group, provides blockchain solutions, services and consulting that enable the use of common digital ledger platforms to record transactions and track assets in distributed networks, offering customers benefits such as reduced operational costs and improved efficiencies.

quiring an unanticipated policy adjustment is now the main macro risk for 2022. The macro focus of the post-pandemic recovery has shifted to inflation.

The original thinking was that there would be a modest and temporary rise in inflation in early 2021 as economies reopened; however, events turned out differently. Price pressures have persisted and broadened more than expected.

And the debate is now whether inflation is transitory and will gradually ease, or whether it is persistent and requires an earlier-than-planned policy response in terms of interest rate hikes to tame inflation.

Regional and global news

Saudi Arabia's King Salman said towards the end of last week that the OPEC+ production agreement was 'essential' to oil market stability and stressed the need for producers to comply with the pact.

The king, in an annual speech to the advisory Shura Council carried on state media, said market stability and balance are a pillar of Saudi energy policy and efforts by the world's top oil exporter to maintain spare capacity had proven important to safeguarding energy supply security.

The end-of-year rally for US equities markets continued, with the Dow and S&P 500 setting new closing records.

The Nasdaq was lower. Investors pulled money out of bonds, with the yield on the ten-year treasury notes soaring to 1.55 per cent, the highest in more than a month. Oil futures rose on Thursday for the sixth consecutive session. As per S&P, persistent high inflation re-

Recommendation

Since the previous week was the last week of 2021, it is a good time to reflect on the market and companies' past year performance as well as on the outlook for 2022. Global stock markets have seen record highs during 2021, while cryptocurrencies and commodities, especially oil, have had an even better rally this year as well.

During the week, most GCC stock markets closed higher. We believe that international and GCC markets will continue to grow due to TINA (There is No Alternative) effect.

Locally, the stock market remained buoyant as well. We advise investors to look for high dividend yielding stocks. We have published our U Capital Yearly Report for 2021, which presents outlook for 2022 and review of the stock market performance for 2021.

The only caveat for the stock markets is negative developments on the Omicron variant front.

Samsung in talks to buy Biogen for \$42bn

New York, US – South Korean multinational manufacturing conglomerate Samsung Group is reportedly in talks to acquire the US biotech company Biogen for more than US\$40bn.

Biogen, which is known for its Alzheimer's drug Aduhelm and a neurology-focused medication pipeline, approached Samsung on a potential deal that could be valued at more than US\$42bn, according to a report in the *Korea Economic Daily*.

The report, which cited unnamed investment banking sources, noted Biogen's relatively stable revenue in comparison with 'cyclical industries like semiconductors', which have driven profit at Samsung.

Founded in 1978 by a team that included Nobel Prize winners Walter Gilbert and Phillip Sharp, Biogen is known for medicines to treat multiple sclerosis in addition to Aduhelm.

The company, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, had revenues of US\$13.4bn last year and finished 2020 with about 9,100 employees.

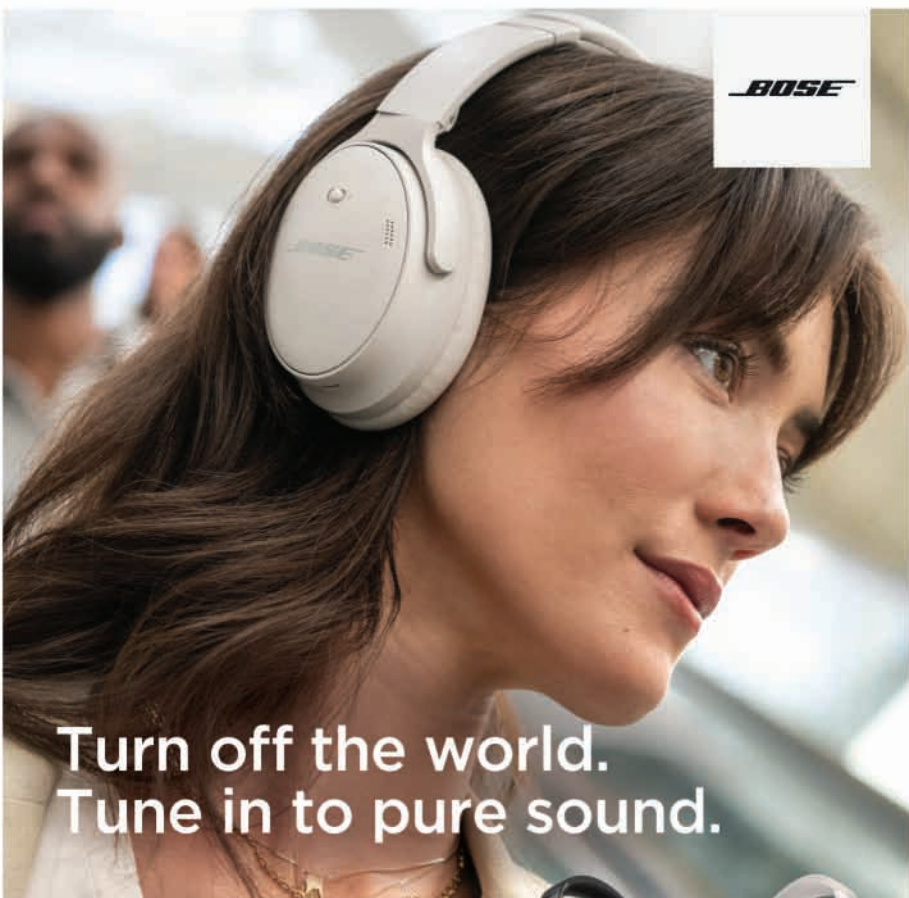
Shares of Biogen have fallen nearly 50 per cent from its June peak due in part to doubts about the efficacy of Aduhelm. On December 20, Biogen announced that it was slashing the price of the drug roughly in half.

The world's top chipmaker, Samsung is best known for its electronics division, which reported a 28 per cent jump in operating profit in the most recent quarter to 15.8tn won (US\$13.5bn).

Biogen and Samsung Biologics currently have a joint venture to develop, manufacture and market biosimilars.

AFP

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AUCTION ANNOUNCEMENT

Al Ghubrah Power and Desalination Company LLC (GPDC) and Wadi Al Jizzi Power Company LLC (WJPC) announce the following auctions:

SR.	Auction No.	Material to be sold	Location	Date of site visit	Last submission date
1	GPDC/2021/3	Used Materials and Cables	Al Ghubrah North	9/1/2022 to 12/1/2022	16/1/2022
2	WJPC/2021/1	Used Materials and Cables	Wadi Al Jizzi Power Plant (Sohar)	9/1/2022 to 12/1/2022	16/1/2022

Terms and conditions:

- Offers to be submitted in an envelope sealed, with red wax addressed and titled with the auction name and auction No. to the Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee without mentioning the name of the bidder.
- Offer should be dropped in the tender box at the Nama Holding reception before 1.00 pm, time of the Sultanate, on Sunday 16 January 2022.
- Each bid should be accompanied with a temporary insurance, in the form of a bank guarantee or a cheque certified from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate, covering (1%) of the total bid value and valid for a period of (90) days from the last date for submission of offers, addressed to the "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee of GPDC" / "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee of WJPC".
- Who wins the auction or part of it commits to pay its value in cash or certified bank check in the Sultanate during a period of three days from the day of notification.
- Provide separate offers of the two locations (Al Ghubrah Power and Desalination Company LLC and Wadi Al Jizzi Power Company LLC) as per site visit.
- The buyer must transfer the materials within four (4) weeks from the date of payment in Al Ghubrah Power and Desalination Company location and within (6) six weeks in Wadi Al Jizzi Power Company location. In case the buyer does not transfer the purchased materials during the specified period, they will be confiscated for the benefit of the company, and the buyer will not be entitled to claim compensation and bear all resale expenses.
- The buyer bears all risks involved in materials transfer or reuse.
- The buyer can quote for any item line as per attached lists.
- Bidders can preview the materials during working hours on the dates specified above, from 9:00 am until 12:00 pm with all PPE.

To preview the materials at Al Ghubrah Power and Desalination Company, please contact Mr. Ibrahim Al Hadi Tel: (0096899884074/98085311) and Mr. Ahmed Hassan at Wadi Al Jizzi Power Company Tel: (009689666464) or Email: saif.bousaidi@GPDC.nama.om.



Location to submit the offer :Nama Holding
In Beach One Building, 3rd Floor (Units 305 & 307) Shatti Al Qurum
P.O Box 850, Post Code 116, Sultanate of Oman.
Phone Number : +968 24559200 / 277



Sohar Freezone signs first animal vaccine manufacturing facility land lease agreement

Sohar Freezone signed a land lease agreement with the National Veterinary Vaccine Company (NVVCO) to establish its first animal vaccine manufacturing facility at the Freezone.

In a signing ceremony held at Hormuz Grand Hotel Muscat, under the patronage of H E Dr Ahmed bin Nasser al Bakri, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Recourses, H E Khalid Mohammed Abdulhaleem Radhi Ambassador of Egypt to the sultanate of Oman, CEO of Sohar Freezone Omar al Mahrizi and Yaqoob bin Mansoor al Ruqaishi, chairman of NVVCO finalised the agreement which will see an animal vaccine manufacturing facility on 10,000 square meter land capable of producing 144mn doses per year to treat and prevent illnesses such as Foot Mouth Disease and Bird Flu.

NVVCO also signed a second agreement with the Veterinary



Serum and Vaccine Research Institute in Egypt who will provide consultations, scientific and biological research and technical support to the facility.

Ruqaishi, said, "The National Veterinary Vaccines Company was established to meet the demand for commonly-used vaccines in the Livestock sector. Vaccinating livestock is essential for maintaining healthy farms, flocks and herds, increasing production and preventing economic loss to livestock breeders and poultry producers. Being based at SOHAR, we are able to use the Port and Freezone's world-class facilities to produce, transport and export vaccines to key markets across the Middle East and North Africa and increase the market share of Omani-made products."

He also added, "We aim to make the sultanate among the countries that produce veterinary vaccines and strengthen the biosecurity programs for animal

health in the country."

Speaking after the event, SOHAR Freezone CEO, Mahrizi, said, "We are proud to welcome the National Veterinary Vaccine Company to SOHAR. This is one of the first pharma projects at the Freezone and we hope it will encourage further investments in a sector of high potential. It will make a significant contribution to several of Oman's key industries, including agriculture and food sectors and generate new revenue streams for the national economy."

The production of 144mn animal vaccines will play a major role in protecting animal health and public health as well as greatly reducing the need for antibiotics to treat animals and ensuring Omani food products meet international import standards. Established in 2019, the National Veterinary Vaccine Company is a joint venture with Oman Food Investment Holding Company.

Oman Post reminds customers to renew box subscriptions

Oman Post, a member of Asyad Group, is reminding customers to renew their PO Box subscriptions. With annual rates for individuals and corporates starting from just RO20, Oman Post's PO Boxes ensure the reliable and timely arrival of all kinds of correspondence, from letters and packages, to magazine subscriptions, bills, etc. available for collection 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Nasser al Sharji, chief executive officer of Oman Post & Asyad Express said, "At Oman Post, we continue to transform postal services, offering more innovative solutions and enhancing our customer experience. Our PO Boxes remain extremely popular, offering users security, privacy, and, with branches in locations across Oman, convenience."

"With their own private postal address that is accessible whenever they need it, it's an added value to their daily lives."



As part of its strategy to deliver excellence to more customers, Oman Post added 960 PO Boxes in 2021 alone, and is planning to open new outlets in commercial centers and industrial areas in the coming period. In addition to PO Boxes, Oman Post offers a full suite of postal services for individual and corporate customers across the

sultanate. Ranging from regular, registered and express mail to parcel shipping, it also offers business-focused services and customised storage spaces, as well as e-services like ePost and Matjar.

Subscribers can renew their PO Box through Oman Post's branches across the sultanate or online via Oman Post | PO Boxes

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi celebrates significant milestones in its first operational year

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi, the UAE's ultra-low-fare national airline, the joint venture established between ADQ and Wizz Air Holdings plc, announced its outstanding operational results for 2021.

During its first operational year, Wizz Air Abu Dhabi launched more than 34 destinations including Alexandria (Egypt), Athens (Greece), Baku (Azerbaijan), Bahrain, Belgrade (Serbia), Kutaisi (Georgia), Kyiv (Ukraine), Muscat (Oman), Odesa (Ukraine), Sarajevo (Bosnia), Sohag (Egypt), Tel-Aviv (Israel), Tirana (Albania) and Yerevan (Armenia) among others. The airline has successfully operated more than 1,080 flights since its launch in January 2021, with 506 flights taking place in the fourth quarter of the year.

Kees Van Schaick, managing director of Wizz Air Abu Dhabi commented, "We are proud of what has been achieved since



launching our operations in the emirate of Abu Dhabi. Through collaboration with key stakeholders, we have been able to grow and expand our network to more than 34 destinations despite all the challenges we have faced. This has helped us play our role in attracting tourists into the emirate and build on our ambitions to expand our network to even many more destinations. Our aim is to serve a large segment of travellers and provide them with affordable packages

with great memories and experiences to remember. We look forward to continuing our contribution to enhancing the development of the aviation and tourism sectors in the emirate of Abu Dhabi and achieving many more successful milestones in the coming years."

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi has introduced a new segment of travel in the UAE in line with its socio-economic vision. The launch of the airline highlighted the importance of bringing in a bold new

frontier for ultra-low fare travel in the region. Wizz Air Abu Dhabi has contributed to supporting the UAE and Abu Dhabi's efforts towards the post-pandemic tourism recovery and driving the UAE capital's ongoing economic diversification strategy.

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi provides ultra-low fare, hassle-free and efficient travel options for people looking to explore a wide range of attractive destinations in the UAE and abroad. The airline has a young fleet composed of four brand new state-of-the-art Airbus A321neo aircraft, offering the lowest fuel burn, emissions and noise footprint. Wizz Air Abu Dhabi has the lowest environmental footprint among its competitors in the region, supporting long-term sustainability.

The airline has also introduced a new era of sanitised travel across its network, with enhanced hygiene measures to ensure the health and safety of passengers and crew.

The darker accent: Bentley Introduces GT Mulliner Blackline

Bentley has introduced a Mulliner Blackline specification for its GT and GT Convertible, building on the popularity and success of the striking Blackline external treatment, which is offered as an option across the full Bentley range.

By bringing a daring, black alternative to the exterior chrome-work on Bentley's class-leading Grand Tourer, Mulliner is presenting a darker side to the ultra-luxury brand's popular four-seater, complementing the myriad options available to its clients.

Created by the skilled craftsmen at Mulliner, the GT Mulliner Blackline features a host of exterior changes in comparison to the current GT and GT Convertible Mulliner derivatives, delivering an additional contemporary twist on ultimate luxury to its pinnacle GT models.

The new option is in response to the increasing demand for black versions of brightware, with 38 per cent of Continental GT family orders globally now including this option.

For the Blackline version, all of the exterior brightware excluding the Bentley 'Winged B' badge



turns black, as does the radiator grille bezel. In place of the satin silver upper mirror caps typical of a GT Mulliner, for the Blackline version the mirrors are finished in gloss Beluga black.

The signature Mulliner matrix wing vents are also blackened, and finished with bright Mulliner branding. The radiator grille re-

mains black with bright edges to the 3D design and the lower bumper grilles are also finished in black.

The GT Mulliner Blackline models feature 22" painted black rims, with self-levelling badges featuring a chrome ring. Alternatively, a black Mulliner wheel with contrast polished 'pockets'

will be available in the near future.

The sumptuous, striking interior of the GT Mulliner Blackline remains unchanged from the existing Mulliner edition, allowing customers to enjoy any colour combination they choose as part of Mulliner's limitless offering, or one of eight recommended

three-colour combinations, using Bentley's wide palette of hides and threads.

As part of the standard Mulliner Driving Specification, the interior incorporates Bentley's unique 'Diamond in Diamond' quilting for the seats, doors and rear quarter panels, featuring both contrast and ac-

cent stitching running through the diamond layout.

With almost 400,000 stitches in the cabin of each car, each diamond contains exactly 712 individual stitches, all precisely aligned to point to the centre of the diamond it creates. A true mark of unrivalled automotive craftsmanship.

Depending on region, customers are able to choose between Bentley's now iconic 6.0-ltr twin-turbo W12 delivering 635 PS (626 bhp), or the dynamic 4.0 ltr V8, which offers 550 PS (542 bhp), both of which provide grand touring range with the effortless performance expected of a pinnacle Grand Tourer.

The addition of the Blackline edition to the Mulliner range of GT models reinforces Bentley's position as the world's leading manufacturer of luxury sporting Grand Tourers, whilst offering bespoke solutions for the most discerning customers who want cars as unique as their own personalities. In short, a contemporary twist on the world's ultimate luxury coupé.

Bentley Mulliner is renowned throughout the automotive

world for crafting some of the most individual Bentleys ever created and has hand-built more than 1,000 unique cars for discerning customers who want their car to be completely suited to their personality.

As the pinnacle of bespoke motoring, Bentley Mulliner is the birthplace of coachbuilding and the oldest automotive coachbuilder in the world, operating three distinct divisions, each with its own artisanal specialism.

Bentley Mulliner Coachbuilt allows customers to work closely with a team of specialist designers via the personal commission guide to create or enhance their own unique vehicle - the Bentley Mulliner Bacalar is the first such example.

The Bentley Mulliner Classic offering features classic models, each individually handcrafted by a team of specialists from Mulliner, starting with the Blower Continuations Series. Finally, Bentley Mulliner Collections will continue to offer customers luxury-focused derivatives of the core range, as well as the opportunity to personalise and further enhance their new Bentley.

Phillips announces placement of Zubair Corporation CEO

The Phillips Group, a global executive search firm, today announced Niels Bormans, former Deputy Group CEO at Ghobash Group and CEO of Aban Investment, has been appointed the new Group CEO of The Zubair Corporation.

The Zubair Corporation, founded in 1967, is one of the most important economic multi-activity conglomerates in the sultanate, which operates in various sectors including; energy, engineering and contracting, real estate and hospitality, finance, banking and investments, automotive, IT and electrical equipment and furniture.

Bormans, originally from the Netherlands and working in the region for the past five and a half years, will report to Rashad al Zubair as he joins The Zubair Corporation today.

Bormans will be responsible for each of the Corporation's subsidiaries. He has been tasked with future proofing the business in its entirety. He will capitalise on upcoming trends for legacy businesses while developing new sources of revenue and net profit to counter act and benefit from recent market disruption.

Commenting on the appointment, Shane Phillips, CEO of The Phillips group, said, "I would like to congratulate Niels on his appointment. We interviewed many strong candidates but Niels was one of the few who was able to fit the unique requirements of the Middle East, Business, Conglomerate



Family Office."

"Having a repertoire of strategy, private equity, and hands-on operational experience made him an easy top choice for us as a search firm, a sentiment that was echoed by the Zubair Corporations Board. We look forward to following the success of his contribution towards achieving the Corporation's present and future roles in the national economy and supporting the institution's vision, mis-

sion and objectives by carrying out the tasks entrusted to him. We wish him success and the best of luck in his next endeavour."

Bormans added: "I am delighted to have been selected for the role of CEO at such an established and well-respected company like Zubair Corporation. Rashad is someone I hope to learn from as well as supporting the company's growth through these new times

we are all facing. I am personally expecting great things from the Corporation. Watch this space."

With the company's vision in mind, The Phillips Group identified critical success factors like leadership skills, the ability to drive scale and set a vision which will drive the desired results.

The Phillips Group uses a bespoke, intricate assessment process designed to test each critical success factor indi-

vidually. The process took approximately four months to complete.

In addition, The Phillips Group has recently placed other high-level positions such as; CEO of National Finance Company in Muscat Oman, Tariq Sulaiman al Farsi. CEO of Tim Hortons Middle East, Hesham Almekkawi as well as the CEO of Al Maha which will be announced during the first week of January.

Mubadala Investment and Stonepeak to sell Cologix

Mubadala Investment Company and Stonepeak, a leading investment firm specialising in infrastructure and real assets, today announced an agreement to sell Cologix - the largest private interconnection and hyperscale edge platform in North America. The transaction is expected to close in early 2022.

Cologix will be transferred from Stonepeak Infrastructure Fund II LP and co-investors (Fund II) to another Stonepeak-managed vehicle comprising a combination of some existing Fund II investors and a number of new third-party investors.

Mubadala has been a co-investor in Cologix with Stonepeak Fund II LP since January 2020. This partnership has fueled further growth, both organic and inorganic via M&A to make Cologix a premier interconnection and hyperscale edge platform. Since 2017, Cologix has invested approximately US\$1bn of incremental capital in building out the company's footprint through various organic and inorganic initiatives.

Cologix is North America's leading network-neutral interconnection and hyperscale edge data centre company with more than 600 networks and over 300 cloud providers across the platform. The com-

pany provides critical IT infrastructure to more than 1,600 customers through its operations that span 40 interconnection and hyperscale data centers in 11 North American markets.

"Our success as a leading investor lies in our ability to identify uniquely-placed quality businesses to venture into, and equally importantly, assess monetisation opportunities to ensure that we maintain significant capital growth and a healthy portfolio of business investments. We firmly believe that our involvement with Cologix ticked all those boxes from the outset and we are pleased to have contributed to this successful partnership," said Khaled al Qubaisi, CEO, Real Estate and Infrastructure Investments at Mubadala.

"Mubadala is very proud of its positive involvement in the latest chapter of Cologix's journey and of the collaborative and constructive engagement with Stonepeak. Most of all, we enjoyed our collaborations and work with the board, its management and the wonderful team at Cologix, and wish them all the best on the next stage of their transformational journey," said Mounir Barakat, executive director of Digital Infrastructure Investments at Mubadala.

M&S unveils its new Plant Kitchen range

Leading British retailer, Marks & Spencer (M&S) operated by Al-Futtaim Group unveiled a vibrant vegan selection from their Plant Kitchen range, encouraging customers to invite more nutrient rich ingredients into their daily lives.

Kicking off the year fresh and fully invigorated, M&S is imparting this mindset on customers as they reveal their extensive Plant Kitchen. Many of us know that eating less meat is better for your health and for the planet, and with a little help from their game-changing Plant Kitchen range, they've got heaps of inspiration to help discover more plant-based meals in 2022.

Marks & Spencer has also teamed up leading organisation Meat Free Monday to encourage customers and their families to



go plant-based for one day a week.

M&S Nutritionist, Sophia Linn said: "When it comes to tackling climate change, it can feel difficult to make a difference. But changing our diets to incorporate more plants is one of the simplest ways to reduce your carbon emissions. We're thrilled to be teaming up with Meat Free Monday to help inspire customers to give it a go and make 2022 a more plant-based one."

Viewpoints: Sohar International Chairman's Forum to discuss 'Step by Step: A Journey to Now'

Sohar International is set to conduct its 9th Virtual Viewpoints Session scheduled to be held on 5 January, 2022 (Wednesday). The event will be live-streamed via the Zoom app and will commence at 7:30pm welcoming its guest speaker - Mary Louise Gorno who is the managing director of Ingenuity International LLC and specialises in organisational governance, succession planning, and leadership issues. To join the conversation and benefit from the wealth of knowledge transfer, Sohar International invites all to register for free through its corporate website www.soharinternational.com.

Commenting on the platform, Mohammed Mahfoudh al Ardhi, chairman, Sohar International said, "The insightful conversa-



Mohammed Mahfoudh al Ardhi

tions with industry leaders have truly inspired our Viewpoint viewers and listeners. With growing popularity and traction, it gives me immense pride to state that the forum has garnered much appreciation from the community, and was recently honoured with the coveted 'OER Business Excellence Award' for creating a world-class knowledge platform, at the recent OER



Mary Louise Gorno

Business Summit 2021."

The upcoming Viewpoints edition targets university students, as well as people from private and public sectors, especially the new-age entrepreneurs, and professionals who will become future leaders. The session will give participants the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogues with the speaker, connect with industry

leaders and enhance individual leadership skills.

"Viewpoints has hosted several well-known international experts in the past, and this time we are delighted to welcome Mary Louise Gorno who will take the topic beyond just standard leadership skills to highlight the need to encourage even established leaders to adopt a more courageous approach to tackling different scenarios, therefore transforming challenges into opportunities," added Ardhi.

In line with the topic of discussion, 'Step by Step: A Journey to Now', Gorno will touch on various aspects of courageous leadership and why it is instrumental to driving change. With a passion to empower executives, she will discuss the importance of courageous leadership, and

engage in a conversation about living a life of purpose and consequence.

Gorno has been actively leading CEO and board practices for Fortune 500, mid-cap, and privately-owned companies and has more than two decades of experience in marketing, media and strategic planning. In the past, she led global business-building responsibility for Walt Disney, Reebok Inc, and the Procter & Gamble Company.

As a board and CEO advisor, she specialises in organisational governance, succession planning, and leadership issues.

With several successful editions in the past, Viewpoints has been conducting engaging, productive and dynamic sessions which have encouraged creative thinking amongst professionals.

Ain Dubai celebrates its first New Year's Eve in grandeur

The world's largest and tallest observation wheel Ain Dubai hosted unique parties, experiences, entertainment, light and drone shows before the official New Year's Eve Countdown by Omega & Rivoli on the LED wheel and fireworks rung in the New Year to truly cement its position as the ultimate celebration destination.

Taking place on the Ain Dubai Plaza overlooking JBR and the palm, the Rockstar Party NYE Party in Plaza, held in partnership with Rockstar Energy Drink, featured top DJs playing party tunes, pop-up bars and food stations. Five DJs took to the decks across the night including Dijok, Teejae, S.o.n.y.a, Dean Curtis and Felix AJ playing a variety of tunes throughout the night as guests enjoyed the food, drinks and



party vibes.

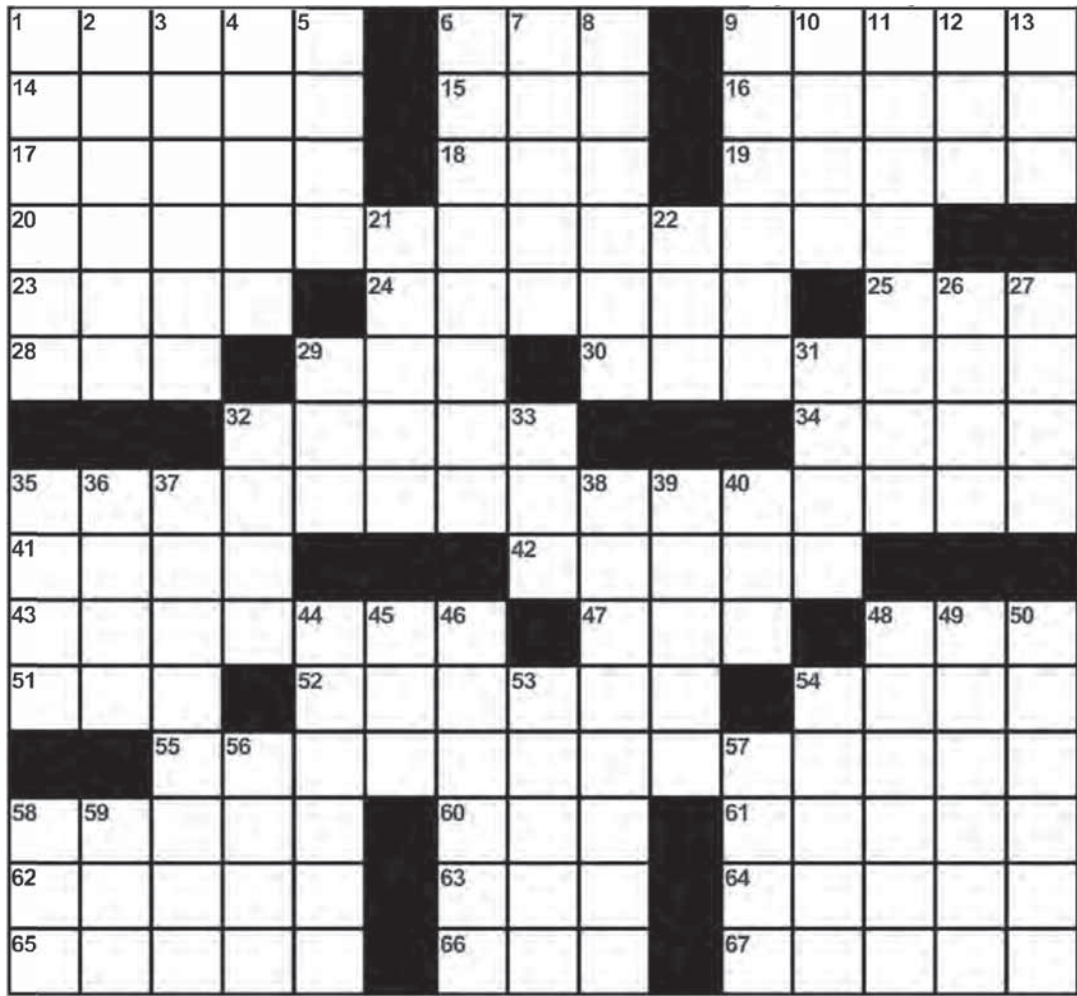
Guests were wowed by an array of cabin experiences with highlights including various F+B packages, live entertainment, party packs, souvenir photos and of course the best view of the fireworks in the city. The Bluewaters Drone show brought a spectacle of wonder to the skies for all guests, as hundreds of drones lit up the Dubai skyline with a wow-worthy choreography which dazzled and inspired.

Ain Dubai is the world's largest and tallest observation wheel, standing at over 250m. The record-breaking monument offers unrivalled and unforgettable social and celebratory experiences as well as 360-degree views of Dubai in premium comfort - all at heart of Bluewaters, the sophisticated, must-visit is-

land destination. The 48 passenger cabins that circle the enormous circumference of the wheel have capacity to carry more than 1,750 visitors at once.

A prestigious asset of Dubai Holding's entertainment portfolio, Ain Dubai has quickly become recognised as one of the Middle East's most remarkable landmarks which has elevated the aesthetic of Dubai's skyline. The world-class, landmark entertainment venue delivers extraordinary and customisable one-of-a-kind experiences for every occasion. Ain Dubai plays a strategic role in supporting Dubai's long-term vision to strengthen its global position as a key tourism hub, continuing to build on the emirate's reputation as a leader in the global leisure and entertainment landscape.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Fighting tools
- 6) Wiretapper's device
- 9) Confiscate
- 14) Plato's marketplace
- 15) Olympics monogram
- 16) "... of God" (1985 movie)
- 17) Prepare for dry dock
- 18) Hilo welcome gift
- 19) More than dislikes
- 20) Thing about to detonate
- 23) Genealogy symbol
- 24) TV scan line pattern
- 25) Pi follower
- 28) "Is it soup_?"
- 29) Bard's "above"
- 30) Did some wishful thinking
- 32) TV studio sign
- 34) Attachment to "plane" or "smith"
- 35) Was perfect on the mound
- 41) Musical composition evoking rural life (var.)
- 42) Chop-chop, to Chaucer
- 43) Lowers in rank

- 47) Wall-climbing greenery
- 48) Beaver's handiwork
- 51) Psychic power
- 52) One of Saturn's moons
- 54) Trigonometric ratio
- 55) Was rude, in a way
- 58) Make amends
- 60) Tokyo of old
- 61) Marks from a flogging
- 62) _ Carlo
- 63) ATM digits
- 64) Say
- 65) Handy things that go around the world?
- 66) "Affirmative"
- 67) "Austin Powers" star
- DOWN**
- 1) Like a recall candidate
- 2) Give a cold shoulder to
- 3) Frozen dessert
- 4) Cleveland Indians' nickname
- 5) Certain cooking herb
- 6) Balkan republic
- 7) Manual consultants
- 8) Merriment
- 9) African desert
- 10) Old-fashioned exclamation

- 11) The Web
- 12) Center of Arizona?
- 13) Silly start?
- 21) Be fearful of
- 22) Previously named
- 26) Roll call call
- 27) Landfill problem
- 29) "Out of many,_" (e pluribus unum)
- 31) Give a "PG" to
- 32) Nobel Peace Prize place
- 33) Retrovirus component
- 35) Sandcastle's undoing
- 36) Exalting poems
- 37) Orchestral piece
- 38) Points of view
- 39) Port in a storm
- 40) Frost-covered
- 44) What good things come in?
- 45) Sushi fare
- 46) Droopy-eyed
- 48) Prepare pupils for an exam?
- 49) It's over a buck
- 50) Multiple misters (abbr.)
- 53) Young Munster
- 54) Full of beef fat
- 56) "Golden rule" word

- 57) Like one third of a triathlon
- 58) Adams of Hollywood
- 59) Word before "little," "late" or "much"

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
It's a great time to initiate a new project as long as you choose the right partner for it. Pay close attention to the chemistry between the two of you. Can you keep your mind focused on the task at hand when they're around? Make sure you make a good combination. Their strengths should correspond with your weaknesses, and vice versa. Move forward with making exciting things happen. Make sure you have a specific agenda in mind.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
Whether you feel comfortable doing it today or not, you have to start expressing yourself more clearly. Share your feelings! If you're feeling good, let folks know. And if you're feeling grumpy, let them know even sooner! Keeping people informed about your every emotion might seem self-involved, but it's not. When you're working in a group, you make sure the group members know what mood you're in.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
Thinking on your feet is one of your best skills, and it's one you haven't used in a while. Luckily, you'll get to use it today when some last-minute changes interrupt your carefully laid plans. This is going to be a little bit confusing, but it's also going to be a lot of fun! Any kind of stimulation, good or bad, will be enjoyable. The only thing that would make this day more enjoyable is if you can share it with someone you care about.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
Don't shy away from a task that requires a lot of organisational skills today. You have what it takes to make order out of any mountain of chaos! Plus, if you take on this arduous task, you'll earn major brownie points. It's time to get more strategic about your public persona. Your reputation counts, and it's up to you to make it shine brightly. It's okay to be greedy about getting more attention right now. It's a very wise move to get yourself noticed.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
Be careful that you don't get a reputation for being indecisive right now. The people in power are looking for someone who can move things forward with no hesitation, not a wishy-washy person who always worries about what might happen if they do one thing over another. Mull over an intimidating idea for too long and you'll only give it power over you. It's time to grab the bull by the horns and just make a decision.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Explore a new culture today. It will help you appreciate your own a little bit more. Try some ethnic food you've never had. Listen to some music from a country you've never been to. Watch a subtitled movie made in an exotic locale. Have a conversation with someone who speaks another language. These experiences will help you get back in touch with what makes you who you are and what areas you need to develop.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
It seems like everyone has more disposable income than you have right now, and they're inviting you along to some social events that seem to require greater amounts of it than you're comfortable spending. You're stuck between a rock and a hard place. Do you tell them it's too pricey for your budget and make them feel sorry for you, or do you go along with it and resent the expense? When in doubt, do what's best. They'll understand you.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
A personal relationship you've been struggling with will finally start to feel like it's back in balance again. They had their issues and you had yours, but now it looks like you're both back on the same page again. Try to get together with this person today and just be normal with them again. Keep the conversation light and don't rehash the same things you've been rehashing. You both deserve a break from all that heavy introspective stuff.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
It's always nice to be flexible and try to get along with people, but today you should stick to your guns about what you want to do. Don't let groupthink hijack your sense of what's right or wrong, and don't be afraid to disagree. If you become less wishy-washy, you'll send a very clear signal to other people that you aren't one to be underestimated. Pushing your own agenda is not only a perfectly valid thing to do, it's recommended.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
When a suggestion is a good one, you should take it, appearances be damned! Go ahead and take the good advice of friends and associates. Who cares if that means they'll know how much influence they have over you? By doing what they suggest, you're doing the right thing and that's all that matters. You can't worry about looking like you're completely independent now. It's never a good idea to cut off your nose to spite your face.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
Perhaps the most wonderful thing about inviting a new person into your life is that they bring new concepts and new ideas with them. Make some time soon to get together with this person and toss ideas back and forth. Not only will it be immense fun for both of you, but it will be a great way to grow your relationship. And when your brains connect like this, mutual growth is all but guaranteed. You will become a good team.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
Hey, loosen up there! You can't become too obsessed with every detail in life. Everything is what it is. Some things can be changed and some can't. You'll be doing yourself a huge favour by understanding the difference between the two, especially in your personal life. Problems could arise in a partnership if you're unwilling to let things go. You can't change a person; you can only communicate how their behaviour affects you.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- 1. The significance of the lotus symbol is
 - a. culture and civilisation
 - b. peace
 - c. justice
 - d. sign of mourning, in protest
- 2. The number of judges in European Court of Human Rights are
 - a. 5
 - b. 11
 - c. 47
 - d. 15
- 3. The Roman governor and principal assassin in the murder of Julies Caesar was
 - a. Marcus Junius Brutus
 - b. Marco Polo
 - c. Leon Trotsky
 - d. Karl Markx

Answers: 1. a 2. c 3. a

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

P	L	P	Y
A	R	I	L
O	N	I	L
A	O	T	T

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER

A

E

S

H

N

S

R

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Pandemic clouds world's New Year party

Emergence of Omicron variant pushes the number of daily cases past 1mn for the first time

New York, US - The world ushered in 2022 on Saturday with scaled-back celebrations due to new restrictions aimed at slowing soaring COVID-19 cases - although hope remained for a better new year.

New York revived its New Year's Eve ball drop in Times Square in limited form, Paris nixed its fireworks show over rising Omicron cases and London's pyrotechnic display was broadcast on TV to discourage crowds.

The past 12 months saw a new US president and a fresh Adele album, the first spectator-free Olympics, and dreams of democracy from Afghanistan to Sudan and Hong Kong crushed by authoritarian regimes.

But the pandemic - now entering its third year - still dominated. More than 5.4mn people have died since the coronavirus was first reported in central China in December 2019.

Countless more have been sickened or subjected to lockdowns and virus tests.

The year 2021 started with hope as life-saving vaccines reached around 60 per cent of the world's population, although many of the poor still had limited access while others refused to receive a shot.

As the year drew to a close, the emergence of the Omicron variant pushed the number of daily new COVID-19 cases past one million for the first time, according to an AFP tally.

France on Friday became the latest country to announce Omicron was now its dominant coronavirus strain.

In Britain, the United States and even in Australia - long a refuge from the pandemic - the variant's prominence is driving record numbers of new cases.



Fireworks go off on Copacabana beach to mark the New Year in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on Saturday (AFP)

To party, or not?

New York brought back to life its annual New Year's Eve ball drop in Times Square after skipping the event last year over rising infections.

But the scaled-down event welcomed fewer revellers than in previous years, with about 15,000 people - all required to show proof of vaccination - allowed in.

One couple had travelled all the way from Memphis in the southern state of Tennessee to attend the festivities.

"This is a dream of ours. This is one of our bucket lists to see the ball drop on New Year's, and we got vaccinated because of this," Chroni Stokes told AFP.

"We weren't going to get vaccinated at first, but we read

the CDC and the guidelines and so we got vaccinated just to come to this."

Elsewhere, from Seoul to San Francisco, celebrations were again cancelled or curtailed in the face of the infection surge.

In Madrid's Puerta del Sol about 7,000 people - half the usual capacity - rang in the new year by eating grapes, one for each time the clock chimed up to 12.

Dubai went ahead with its celebrations undeterred, with 36 fireworks displays at 29 different locations.

But authorities warned they would fine anyone in attendance not wearing a mask.

Police officers patrolled the Champs-Elysees in Paris, which was lit with glittering red lights

and festooned with '2022' balloons, also on the lookout for people without masks.

Most people were simply asked to wear one, but some who argued were fined.

"It is constraining to put on the mask... but it's no problem to follow the rule," said Antoine Pham, smiling. The 38-year-old and his partner had come from Belgium to Paris for the evening.

In Sydney, which normally bills itself as the 'New Year's Eve capital of the world', the vast harbour where people gather to watch the city's fireworks was notably uncrowded.

With tourists still unable to enter the country and many residents fearful of the rapid spread of Omicron, tens of thousands were estimated to

have attended, rather than the usual one million-plus.

Still, the city saw in New Year's Eve with a bang - igniting six tonnes of technicoloured fireworks that lit up the Opera House and floating barges.

"I'm just trying to focus on the positive things that happened this year," 22-year-old medical student Melinda Howard told AFP ahead of the show.

In Tunis, authorities cited a rise in virus cases for the last-minute cancellation of festivities. In contrast, South Africa - the first country to report Omicron back in November - lifted a curfew late on Thursday to allow festivities to go ahead.

A new-year tragedy struck in India, where at least 12 people

died and 13 were injured in a stampede at a religious shrine during Saturday's early hours. Pilgrims had gathered to offer New Year prayers, officials said.

Crowds still arrived

In Rio, celebrations on Copacabana Beach went ahead in a scaled-back format, although crowds still arrived at the traditional party spot.

After last year's festivities were cancelled due to COVID-19, it was a comparatively muted return.

A ban on musical performances, traffic and public transport made for a more measured atmosphere on the city's famed beach.

"I was expecting many more people, and stress, but it's calm,

Hopefully the year 2022 is going to be better for all of us. Everyone in the world needs a big change

OSCAR RAMIREZ

I like it," said Colombian neuroscientist Alejandra Luna (28), whose hope for 2022 is to 'kiss and cuddle without thinking much about it'.

In Mexico City, authorities cancelled a number of mass outdoor events, including a music concert on one of the capital's main boulevards, following an increase in coronavirus cases.

Trying times

The World Health Organization has warned of trying times ahead, saying Omicron could lead to 'a tsunami of cases'.

Many Western leaders have been hesitant to reimpose the strict controls seen in 2020, for fear of sparking a new economic downturn.

But on-again-off-again restrictions have still prompted frequent, vocal and occasionally violent anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine and anti-government protests.

US President Joe Biden urged unity for the new year in a video message, during which he also praised 'extraordinary' Americans.

Hope remains that 2022 may bring a new, less deadly phase of the pandemic.

"Hopefully 2022 is going to be better for everyone," said 31-year-old reveller Oscar Ramirez in Sydney.

"Everyone in the world needs a big change."

AFP

UK hospital staff absences double as virus surges

London, UK - Hospital staff absences due to COVID-19 have more than doubled in a month in England as the virus surge puts strain on beds, according to data published on Friday.

The number of hospital staff ill or self-isolating due to the virus rose from 11,375 on November 29 to 24,362 on December 26, NHS England said.

The 'sharply increasing staff absences' coincide with 'a 10-month high for the number of patients', warned national medical director Stephen Powis. The number of patients in hospital with COVID-19 in the UK reached 11,898 on Wednesday, the highest level since early March, and a rise of 40 per cent in a week.

"We don't yet know the full scale of rising omicron cases," Powis acknowledged.

The National Health Service (NHS) 'is on a war footing and staff remain braced for the worst', he added.

The UK is one of Europe's worst-hit countries with a death toll of 148,421. It reported 189,846 new cases on Friday, slightly above Thursday's figure and a new record.

NHS England reported that only 67 per cent of COVID-19 patients were receiving treatment primarily for the virus, however, with others testing positive after being admitted with other conditions.



NHS workers assist public as they drive into a test centre close to the Royal Surrey County hospital in Guildford, southern England (AFP)

NHS England has already started building temporary field hospitals to contain a possible overspill of inpatients if beds in main hospitals become full.

It plans to make available as many as 4,000 'super-surge beds', in some cases using existing hospital facilities such as gyms or education centres.

It is also trying to free up hospital beds by sending medically fit patients to care homes, hospices and even hotels.

Despite the surge in cases, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has opted not to increase virus curbs over the festive period in England, unlike the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister is focusing on encouraging the public to take up booster jabs, so far administered to more than 33

million. In a New Year's Eve message he urged people to 'make it your New Year's resolution - far easier than losing weight or keeping a diary'.

The UK medical regulator MHRA also announced on Friday that it has approved Pfizer's new antiviral pill for over-18s.

The Paxlovid pill for high-risk people with COVID-19 was authorised last week by the US Food and Drug Administration for those aged 12 and over.

Pfizer says clinical trials prove the pill reduces hospitalisation and deaths among at-risk people by 90 per cent.

The UK government announced earlier this month that it had signed deals to buy more than 4mn courses of Pfizer's Paxlovid and US rival Merck/MSD's molnupiravir.

AFP

British Queen announces knighthood for ex-British PM Blair, virus fighters

London, UK - Queen Elizabeth II on Friday announced a knighthood for former prime minister Tony Blair, while the traditional New Year's Honours also decorated officials who spearheaded Britain's fight against COVID-19.

The Queen personally appointed Blair as Knight Companion of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, the most senior order of knighthood.

She previously knighted former Conservative prime minister John Major in this way in 2005.

Blair, now 68, defeated Major with a landslide Labour victory in 1997 and spent a decade in office.

His successes included securing peace in Northern Ireland. But he was widely reviled at home for his support for the 2003 US-led war in Iraq.

Blair said, "It is an immense honour to be appointed Knight Companion of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, and I am deeply grateful to Her Majesty the Queen."

The main New Year's Honours list gave knighthoods to Chris Whitty, the UK government's chief medical advisor, and England's deputy chief medical officer Jonathan Van-Tam, who in particular has gained a cult following over his colourful use of metaphors in-



L-R: Chief medical advisor Chris Whitty, deputy chief medical officer Jonathan Van-Tam, former PM Tony Blair

volving football and trains at Downing Street news conferences. The Queen's traditional annual honours recognise the achievements and contributions of people across Britain, including a minority from the worlds of showbiz, sport and politics.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson then signs off on the choices, before the Queen awards the honour at ceremonies during the year.

This time nearly one in five honours were virus-related, the Cabinet Office said.

"[The recipients] have inspired and entertained us and given so much to their communities in the UK or in many cases around the world," Johnson said.

The chief scientific advisor to the government, Patrick Vallance, became a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath after receiving a knighthood in 2019. His counterparts in Scot-

land and Wales were also knighted on Friday.

Vallance said he was 'really pleased' honours were going to 'those that have been working tirelessly as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic'.

There was a damehood for Jenny Harries, chief executive of the UK Health Security Agency, a government agency created during the pandemic.

The UK's medicine regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, in December 2020 became the world's first to approve the Pfizer vaccine. Its chief executive, June Raine, also becomes a dame.

Daniel Craig (53), who played James Bond for the fifth and final time in *No Time To Die*, released September, was made a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George, a rare honour that author Ian Fleming

bestowed on his fictional Bond.

The US producer of the Bond films for over two decades, Barbara Broccoli, has been made a CBE, or Commander of the British Empire for services to film, drama and philanthropy.

Actress Joanna Lumley (75), who played champagne-quaffing Patsy in the BBC series *Absolutely Fabulous*, said she was 'thrilled and touched beyond words' at becoming a dame.

Songwriter Bernie Taupin (71), who together with Elton John composed hits such as *Rocket Man* and *Candle In The Wind* was made an OBE (Officer of the British Empire).

Former Spice Girls star Melanie Brown was made an MBE (Member of the British Empire) for her work with domestic violence charity Women's Aid.

AFP

Senior Ennahdha party official held in Tunisia as ‘preventive measure’

Tunis, Tunisia - Plainclothes officers in Tunisia’s capital on Friday arrested a senior official of the Ennahdha party which played a central role in the country’s politics until a power grab by President Kais Saied.

Tunisia was the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring revolts of a decade ago but civil society groups and Saied’s opponents have expressed fear of a slide back to authoritarianism a decade after the revolution that toppled longtime dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali.

Ennahdha condemned the arrest of Nouredine Bhiri, a former justice minister and deputy president of the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha, as a ‘dangerous precedent’.

“Plainclothes agents in two cars arrested Nouredine Bhiri when he was leaving home with his wife,” Samir Dilou, a lawyer and former legislator, told AFP.

No official was available to explain the reason for Bhiri’s arrest.

But in a statement issued late on Friday, the Interior Ministry said it had ordered two people, whom it did not identify, to be placed under house arrest.

This ‘preventive measure was dictated by the need to safeguard national security’, it said, without elaborating.

Saied on July 25 sacked the Ennahdha-supported government and suspended parliament, presenting himself as the ultimate interpreter of the constitution.

He later took steps to rule by decree, and in early December vowed to press on with reforms



The exterior of Ennahdha Party, whose deputy president Nouredine Bhiri (inset), a former justice minister, was arrested in the capital Tunis on Friday(AFP)

to the political system.

The former law professor announced an 11-week ‘popular consultation’ to produce ‘draft constitutional and other reforms’ ahead of a referendum set for July 25.

His opponents have denounced a ‘coup’ and warned against what they see as Saied’s wish to settle scores with those

he has called ‘enemies’ but never names.

A Tunisian court last week sentenced in absentia exiled former president Moncef Marzouki, a fierce critic of Saied, to four years in prison.

Bhiri was ‘arrested brutally and taken to an unknown destination’, Dilou said.

Agents also seized the mobile

phone of Bhiri’s wife Saida Akremi, who is a lawyer, he added.

In a statement, Ennahdha said that Bhiri was being questioned by authorities and denounced ‘a kidnapping and dangerous precedent marking the country’s entry into a tunnel to dictatorship’.

Party official Mohamed

Goumani told a press conference that Saied and the interior minister ‘bear responsibility’ and decried the ‘intimidation’ of those opposed to the president’s moves.

Ennahdha was the largest party in the parliament suspended by Saied.

But political rivalries had blocked ministerial appoint-

ments and diverted resources from tackling Tunisia’s mounting economic and social problems, leading many in the country to initially welcome the president’s power grab.

Without commenting on Bhiri’s arrest, the presidency on Friday announced a New Year’s amnesty for 1,300 prisoners.

AFP

‘Rockets fall into sea off Tel Aviv’

Jerusalem - Two rockets fired from Gaza early on Saturday fell into the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Tel Aviv, the Israeli army said, with no injuries reported.

‘Earlier this morning, two rocket launches were identified from the Gaza Strip toward the Mediterranean,’ the army said in a statement.

‘The rockets fell off the coast of the Tel Aviv Metropolitan Area,’ it added.

No sirens were sounded and Israel’s Iron Dome rocket interception system did not deploy, the army added.

It was unclear who fired the projectiles. Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group that controls Gaza, did not claim responsibility.

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

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

A fragile ceasefire came into force in late May, and since then, only five rockets or mortar rounds were fired from Gaza towards Israeli territory, the military had said in an annual report released at the end of December, before the latest launches.

AFP



This file photo shows Marib governor Sultan al Arrada (right) with UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen David Gressly (third from right)

UN calls for import of new equipment for Sanaa airport

Dubai, UAE - The United Nations has called on Yemen’s internationally recognised government to allow the entry of communications equipment to the airport in the rebel-held capital Sanaa.

Yemen has been wracked by civil war since 2014, pitting the government, which is supported by a Saudi-led coalition, against the Iran-backed Huthis, who control much of the north.

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

But Sanaa airport was closed for several days in December after the coalition pounded it with air strikes, accusing the Huthis of using it to launch missiles and drones at Saudi Arabia.

The Huthis reopened it on December 27.

“Closure of the airport to humanitarian flights severely undermines aid operations,” the

UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, David Gressly, said in a statement on Friday.

“I remain deeply concerned about any further disruptions.”

Gressly welcomed the airport’s reopening, but said communications equipment there had been found to be faulty.

“The Civil Aviation and Meteorology Authority (CAMA) in Sanaa deems the equipment obsolete,” he said.

According to Gressly, “UN humanitarian flight crews have reported at least 10 instances in which they were unable to contact the air control tower... or had unclear communications”.

In order to rectify ‘a potentially dangerous situation’, he urged Yemen’s government to allow the import of new equipment.

He said the Saudi-led coalition ‘has not authorised the transfer, despite several requests from the UN, citing the need for Government of Yemen approval’.

AFP

Iraqi minister sacks local police chief after deadly operation

Baghdad, Iraq - Iraq’s interior minister dismissed Babylon province’s police chief on Friday and several officers were called for questioning following an operation that reportedly led to the deaths of 20 members of the same family.

The operation, details of which remain unclear, took place on Thursday when rapid intervention units and intelligence forces sought to storm a house in the village of Al-Rashayed in the central Iraqi province.

In a brief initial statement, security forces said they had



Iraqi Interior Minister Othman al Ghanimi (right) visits the site where rapid intervention units stormed a house in Al-Rashayed village (AFP)

‘pursued two individuals accused of terrorism’ who ‘opened fire indiscriminately’ once surrounded.

An investigation was opened ‘after the discovery of a number of dead bodies of citizens in a house’, the statement added.

On Friday, Interior Minister Othman al Ghanemi travelled to Al-Rashayed where he sacked the police chief and announced the formation of a commission to investigate ‘the unit that carried out the operation’.

The official Iraqi News Agency gave a death toll of 20

civilians from the same family, and said that the owner of the property had opened fire and ‘refused to surrender’.

A separate statement from the security forces said a ‘number of officers and individuals’ had been called in for questioning in connection with the incident, without providing details on their identities.

Interior ministry official Saad Maan posted a video of the premises on Twitter, showing a house with a blackened facade and gutted doors and windows.

AFP

Sudanese block streets after day of protest violence

Khartoum, Sudan - Sudanese pro-democracy demonstrators blocked streets in Khartoum on Friday, protesting against violence a day earlier that left five people dead and sparked condemnation.

Protesters barricaded roads in the east Khartoum district of Burri as well as in nearby Khartoum North using rocks, tree branches and tyres, an AFP journalist reported.

Sudan has been gripped by turmoil since military leader General Abdel Fattah al Burhan launched a coup on October 25 and detained Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.

Hamdok was reinstated on November 21, but mass protests have continued as demonstrators distrust Burhan’s promises of seeking to guide the country toward full democracy.

As the authorities on Thursday cut off communications across the country, security forces clamped down on demonstrations, firing live rounds and



Demonstrators take to the streets to protest against the army’s October 25 coup, in Khartoum on Thursday (AFP)

tear gas as tens of thousands gathered in Khartoum and its neighbouring cities.

Four protesters were fatally shot in the head or chest in Omdurman, according to the pro-democracy Doctors’ Committee, while a fifth succumbed to his wounds Friday after he was shot

in central Khartoum.

Protesters charge that the deal to reinstate Hamdok simply aims to give the cloak of legitimacy to the generals, whom they accuse of trying to continue the regime built by former autocratic president Omar al Bashir, who was toppled in 2019 following

mass protests.

Resignations

A civilian member recently appointed to the ruling Sovereign Council, Abdel Baqi Abdel Qader, announced that he intends to resign. He said he had sent a message to Burhan’s office requesting

a meeting ‘to present to him my resignation... over the violence against demonstrators’.

Interim health minister Haitham Mohammed also announced his resignation in a letter made public.

Two journalists from Saudi Arabia’s Asharq television channel, Maha al Talb and Sally Othman, were released after they and their crews were held for several hours, the channel said.

Police had also stormed the bureau of the Al-Arabiya television network funded by Saudi Arabia - seen as a traditional ally of Sudan’s military leaders.

The violence and attacks on the media drew widespread condemnation.

‘Deeply troubled by reports that Sudanese security forces used lethal force against protesters, blacked out the Internet, and attempted to shut down media outlets,’ US Secretary of State Antony Blinken tweeted after Thursday’s events.

AFP

Macron takes EU reins as election looms

Paris, France - France takes over the rotating presidency of the European Union on Saturday, affording President Emmanuel Macron the chance to pose as the EU's de facto leader in the run-up to national elections in April.

The 44-year-old has never made any secret of his ambitions to be the motor for further European integration, serving over the last four years as a dynamic sidekick to the more steady German chancellor Angela Merkel in Europe's power couple.

With Merkel now retired and the timely gift of the rotating presidency of the EU Council from January 1, Macron has announced an ambitious agenda for the 27-member bloc that could also serve his domestic campaign for re-election.

"The year 2022 must be a turning point for Europe," he said in a New Year's Eve national address that hailed the EU's role during the COVID-19 crisis.

Referring to the French presidency, he vowed that 'you can count on my complete commitment to ensure that this period, which comes around every 13 years, is a time of progress for you'.

The centrist, who made his Europhile views a key part of his political campaign when winning the presidency in 2017, is hoping



Television channels show President Emmanuel Macron delivering his New Year's address to the nation from the Elysee Palace, in Paris on Friday (AFP)

it will again serve him in elections scheduled for April 10 and 24.

"The EU presidency gives him a welcome platform to put his European record to the forefront and differentiate himself from his rivals and bring new proposals,

new ideas to the table," said Claire Demesmay, an expert at the Marc-Bloch think-tank in Berlin.

Strutting on the international stage has also long been a popular move for any French presi-

dent. "The French like nothing more than the image or impression of France being 'at the controls'," said Pierre Sellal, a former French diplomat at the French mission to the European Union.

To mark the start of the six-month presidency, France illuminated historic buildings across the country including the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe in the blue of the EU flag on New Year's Eve.

Other observers have noted that the French logo for the presidency includes the letters U and E for 'Union Européenne' with a grey arrow in the middle that appears to create another letter - a sideways M for Macron.

German support?

Each European country gets a chance at holding the rotating presidency of the Council, which

pro-EU think-tank based in Paris, says Macron will also face pressure to deliver after having ramped up expectations.

"He can't get to the first round (of the presidential election) on April 10 without having obtained some results from the European presidency," Maillard said. "That's the challenge for him, but it can also be a real opportunity."

European leaders are set to

The year 2022 must be a turning point for Europe. You can count on my complete commitment to ensure that this period is a time of progress for you

EMMANUEL MACRON

gives the member state an opportunity to set the official agenda for fellow leaders in the bloc - within limits - and organise meetings of ministers.

But although the first French presidency since 2008 offers opportunities for Macron, it is also seen by observers as holding risks.

His agenda to make Europe 'powerful' - in defence, technology or its own border security - risks being overshadowed in the short term by the accelerating COVID-19 health crisis.

Sebastien Maillard, director of the Jacques Delors Institute, a

meet in Paris on March 10-11, which could be a chance for them to agree on a major reform of the bloc's budget rules.

Much will depend on Germany's new chancellor Olaf Scholz, whose coalition government is seen as sceptical on budget reforms, but supportive of Macron's agenda.

France's presidency is "an important opportunity we want to seize together to strengthen Europe and make it fit to rise up to tomorrow's challenges," German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock told AFP on Friday.

AFP

New Year stampede at India shrine kills 12

Katra, India - Twelve people were crushed to death in a stampede at an Indian religious shrine in the early hours of Saturday as tens of thousands of pilgrims massed to offer prayers, officials said.

The disaster unfolded in darkness at around 3.00am local time on the packed route to the Vaishno Devi shrine in Indian-administered Kashmir, visited by millions every year as one of Hinduism's most revered sites.

"People fell over each other... It was difficult to figure out whose leg or arms were tangled with whose," survivor Ravinder told AFP by phone.

"I helped pick up eight bodies by the time ambulances arrived after about half an hour. I feel lucky to be alive but am still shaking with memory of what I saw," he said.

Video footage showed terrified pilgrims clinging onto metal rafters to escape the rush and the blue lights of small minivan ambulances flashing in the darkness as they tried to rush to hospitals through huge crowds.

Officials sought to blame an alleged altercation between two groups of youths and a rush of people for New Year's Day.

"Police and officials... were quick to respond (after the altercation), and the order within the crowd was immediately restored," local police chief Dilbag Singh told the Press Trust of India news agency.



Devotees stand in a queue to visit Vaishno Devi shrine, hours after the stampede on Saturday (AFP)

"But by that time, the damage had been done," he said.

But witnesses said that the authorities were badly organised, something denied by the shrine's management.

Around a dozen people were also injured.

Holy sites

Millions of shrines dot Hindu-majority India's cities, towns and villages as well as remote sites in the Himalayas and jungles in the south.

Some are hugely important pilgrimage sites, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nationalist

People fell over each other...I helped pick up eight bodies by the time ambulances arrived after about half an hour. I feel lucky to be alive but am still shaking with memory of what I saw.

A SURVIVOR

government has invested heavily in improving infrastructure to ease access.

Before the pandemic, every day about 100,000 devotees would trek up a steep winding track to the narrow cave containing the shrine to Vaishno Devi.

Authorities had capped the daily number to 25,000 but witnesses and press reports said that this may have been exceeded several times over.

"There were at least 100,000 people there. No one was checking registration slips of the devotees," said Ravinder, who only gave one name.

"I have been there many times but (I have) never seen such a rush of people," he said. "It was only when some of us managed to lift a dead body up with our hands that people could see (what was happening) and made space for moving the bodies out."

Another witness who came from Ghaziabad outside New Delhi with a group of around ten people said there was clearly 'mismanagement'.

"If (they had known) that so much crowding was happening, they should have stopped the people," the man said without giving his name.

Horse or helicopter

In 2008, two stampedes in as many months in India left more than 370 Hindus dead. Others in Kerala in 2011 and in Madhya Pradesh two years later each killed more than 100.

The shrine to Vaishno Devi, a manifestation of Hindu goddess Vaishnavi, is in the hills some 60 kilometres from the city of Jammu. It saw 8.5mn visitors in 2018.

People travel to the nearby busy town of Katra and then trek upwards for around 15 kilometres on foot or by pony - there is also a helicopter service - along a winding track lined with stalls as well as monkeys.

Once they have reached the cave entrance they often have to wait for hours.

AFP



This file photo shows Tunisia's President Kais Saied taking the oath of office after his election victory in Tunis on October 23, 2019 (AFP)

Tunisia launches consultation for new constitution

Tunis, Tunisia - Tunisia on Saturday launched a wide-ranging national consultation that will feed into drafting a new constitution, the North African country's technology ministry said.

Part of a reform package pushed by President Kais Saied, who is seeking to bolster his authority, the exercise calls on citizens to send in suggestions and will last until March 20.

Eligible topics include electoral, economic, financial, social, developmental, health, education and cultural affairs.

The constitutional referendum is planned for July 25, 2022 - exactly a year after Saied sacked the government, suspended parliament and seized wide-ranging powers.

His power grab was initially supported by many Tunisians, amid frustration surrounding repeated deadlocks within the fractious legislature in recent years. The President later took

steps to rule by decree, and in early December vowed to press on with reforms to the political system.

The consultation - dubbed 'Your opinion, our decision' - is initially targeting youth centres through an electronic platform across the country's 24 regions, the technology ministry said.

"The platform will be open to everyone from January 15," it added.

Citizens will alternatively be able to give their views in local committees, since only 45 per cent of Tunisian homes are connected to the internet.

Critics have said the move underlines the 'populist' approach of the president, who won elections in 2019 with a landslide 73 per cent of votes.

Saied's one-man crusade to rebuild Tunisia's political structures has sparked accusations that he is establishing a new autocracy.

AFP

Rare leopard captured in Iraq, hind leg amputated

Dohuk, Iraq - An endangered leopard captured in Iraq's mountainous north had its hind leg amputated on Friday following a trap-inflicted wound, an AFP photographer said.

The Persian leopard, taken in a day earlier in Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region near the border with Turkey, had injured two people, said Colonel Jamal Saado, head of the environmental protection police in Dohuk province.

Residents of a village near the town of Zakho lost around 20 sheep before realising a leopard was attacking their flocks, he



Veterinarian Soleiman Tamr (left) conducts a hind leg amputation surgery on a leopard at the Duhok Zoo in Iraq's Kurdish region on Friday (AFP)

said.

The big cat sustained a wound to its back leg when it was caught in a shepherd's trap, but managed to escape before villagers helped police track it down.

Saado said the leopard was given anaesthetic before it was captured.

"We had two or three similar cases in Arbil province" several years ago, he said, adding that an animal of the same subspecies had previously been found dead near a village in Dohuk province.

Persian leopards are a panther sub-species native to Turkey,

Iran, Afghanistan and the Caucasus. They are extremely rare and have been listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Fewer than 1,000 are believed to exist in the wild, with another 200 in captivity.

Veterinarian Soleiman Tamr, who conducted the amputation at Dohuk zoo on Friday, said the animal weighed around 90-100 kilograms.

"We will monitor it for a long time," said the vet, who also heads an animal protection society in Iraqi Kurdistan.

AFP

Climate change: Solid advances in 2021, but 'still on the road to hell'



Firefighters walk near a home destroyed by the Marshall Fire in Boulder County, Colorado on Friday. Climate factors provided the fuel for the devastating fires, while an extreme weather event, in the form of powerful downslope winds coming off the Rocky Mountains (AFP)

Paris, France - Across a quarter century of UN climate conferences tasked with saving humanity from itself, one was deemed a chaotic failure (Copenhagen/2009), another a stunning success (Paris/2015), and the rest landed somewhere in between.

This year's COP26 inspired all these reactions at once.

Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, leading a 100,000-strong march through the streets of Glasgow, dismissed the two-week meet as a 'greenwashing festival'.

But dedicated experts in the negotiating arena hailed solid - even historic - advances in beating back the existential threat of global warming.

More often than not, observers vacillated between approval and criticism, hope and despair.

"The Glasgow Climate Pact is more than we expected, but less than we hoped for," Dann Mitchell, head of climate hazards at Britain's Met Office, said with haiku-like economy.

Gauging the efficacy of measures announced at the COP26 summit largely depends on the yardstick used to measure them.

Compared to what came before, the first-ever call by 196 countries to draw down coal-fired power, or a promise to double financial aid each year - to roughly US\$40bn - so poor nations can brace for climate impacts, are giant steps forward.

Likewise a provision obliging countries to consider setting more ambitious targets for reducing carbon pollution every year rather than once every five years.



More than 100,000 hectares have been burnt by wildfires raging in Greece in August 2021, the most destructive fires in the country since 2007, data from the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) showed (AFP)

But all these hard-won gains at COP26 shrivel in significance when stacked up against hard science.

Glasgow exit lane

An unbroken cascade in 2021 of deadly floods, heatwaves and wildfires across four continents, combined with ever more detailed projections, left no doubt that going beyond the 1.5°C heating limit envisioned in the Paris Agreement would push

Earth into the red zone.

"As a lifelong optimist, I see the Glasgow outcome as half-full rather than half-empty," said Alden Meyer, a senior analyst at climate and energy think tank E3G.

"But the atmosphere responds to emissions - not COP decisions - and much work remains ahead to translate the strong rhetoric here into reality."

The past year also saw Part 1 of the UN Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) first comprehensive synthesis of climate science in seven years.

It found that global heating is virtually certain to pass 1.5°C, probably within a decade. Meanwhile, ocean levels are rising faster than anticipated, and will do so for centuries.

And forests, soil and oceans - which absorb more than half of humanity's carbon pollution - show signs of saturation.

I see the Glasgow outcome as half-full rather than half-empty. But the atmosphere responds to emissions - not COP decisions. Much work remains ahead to translate the strong rhetoric here into reality

ALDEN MEYER

Then there is the threat of 'tipping points' that could see permafrost release massive amounts of CO₂ and methane, the Amazon basin transformed into savannah, and ice sheets shedding enough mass to submerge cities and deltas home to hundreds of millions.

"Make no mistake, we are still on the road to hell," said Dave Reay, head of the University of Edinburgh's Climate Change Institute.

"But Glasgow has at least created an exit lane."

Permanent breaking story

Part 2 of the IPCC report on climate impacts, seen exclusively by AFP ahead of its February 2022 publication, reveals another yawning gap between the baby steps of COP26 and what is needed in the long term.

Helping vulnerable nations cope with the multiplier effect of global heating on extreme weather could soon require tril-

lions of dollars per year, not the tens of billions put on the table at COP26, a draft version of the report makes clear.

"Adaptation costs are significantly higher than previously estimated, resulting in a growing 'adaptation finance gap'," said an executive summary of the 4,000-page report.

The failure of rich nations to deliver US\$100bn a year by 2020 to help developing countries makes it hard to imagine where these trillions will come from.

Glasgow marked the transition from fleshing out the rules for the 2015 Paris treaty to implementing its provisions.

But unlike the aftermath of other major COPs, the climate crisis will remain a permanent breaking story that is not going to recede into the background anytime soon.

How that saga unfolds will depend a lot on the world's four major emitters, collectively responsible for 60 per cent of global carbon pollution.

The United States and the European Union have pledged carbon neutrality by 2050 and recently set more ambitious emission-reduction targets for 2030.

But they refused to set up a fund demanded by more than 130 developing countries to help pay for climate damage already incurred.

All sectors, all countries

China and India - accounting for 38 per cent of global emissions in 2021, and rising - have resisted pressure to give up fossil fuels.

Beijing has steadfastly refused

to do what scientists say is doable and necessary to stay under 2°C: peak their emissions far earlier than 2030.

If climate politics remains stymied, however, global capital is already flowing into what some have called the most massive economic transformation in human history.

In Glasgow, former Bank of England governor Mark Carney boasted that nearly 500 banks, insurers and asset managers worth US\$130tn were ready to finance climate action.

"If we only had to transform one sector, or move one country off fossil fuels, we would have done so long ago," commented Christiana Figueres, who headed the UN climate convention when the Paris deal was struck.

"But all sectors of the global economy have to be decarbonised, and all countries must switch to clean technologies."

Where some of that money might flow - and who might get left out - has also come into focus, with major investment deals announced for South Africa, and others in the pipeline for emerging economies such as Indonesia and Vietnam.

But there is little incentive for private capital to help the poorest and most vulnerable countries to cope with climate ravages and shore up their defences.

"We cannot just wait for open market incentives to have their way, we need to set prices on carbon globally, we need to set science-based targets that become climate laws," said Johan Rockstrom, director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research.

AFP

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A visitor explores art works at an exhibition titled 'Vienna Falls in Line. The Politics of Art under National Socialism' showing Nazi artifacts at the 'Vienna Museum' (AFP)

PEEPING THROUGH ART

Vienna Nazi art show seeks to address WWII legacy - one of the latest ways in which it is seeking to address its complicated war-era past



In a Vienna museum, Nazi-era art crams two small rooms, some still in storage boxes. A painting of Vienna's opera features Nazi flags, a swastika is woven into a tapestry. The pieces are part of an exhibit in the Austrian capital aiming to shed light on the politics of art under the Third Reich - one of the latest ways in which Vienna is seeking to address its complicated war-era past. Austria, the birth place of Adolf Hitler, long cast itself as a victim after being annexed by Nazi Germany. Only in the past

three decades has the country begun to examine seriously its role in the Holocaust. The exhibit's curators are hoping their research will help in that process - but they have been careful not to give the artworks too much of an 'aura'. Austria had a Jewish population of 200,000 before Nazi Germany annexed the country in 1938. More than 65,000 of them were killed in the Holocaust, which exterminated six million Jews. Instead of being displayed on the museum's large walls, the works are packed

into just two rooms, as if in a warehouse. "This can't be like other exhibitions in the classical sense... it had to be broken up," curator Ingrid Holzschuh told AFP.

'Racist vision'
The show came about after four years of research by Holzschuh and fellow curator Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber, who combed through the membership files of 3,000 artists who officially belonged to the Reich's artistic association after the Nazi annexation. The artists were all carefully vetted and closely watched. "Aspiring members needed to meet the Nazi regime's artistic, political and racial criteria," says material for the show. "Political dissidents and Jewish artists were barred." Under the regime, Viennese artists who did not comply with the new rules were forced to flee or murdered in concentration camps, according to the show's catalogue. "The Nazi regime secured control of the art world and steered it in accordance with its ideological and racist vision," it says. Together with the biographical details of some of the artists, the exhibition displays their paintings, sculptures, textiles and pottery - most of them kept in storage by the city of Vienna for decades. The show, called 'Vienna Falls in Line. The Politics of Art under National Socialism', is part of a broader trend of reconciling with an ugly chapter of Austrian history. "Since the late '80s a big change of mood has taken hold... a big process of reflection has taken place," said historian Gerhard Baumgartner, head of the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance. Unearthing art from the period is part of that movement, and a way to learn more about the artists behind the pro-Nazi works - of which often little has been known. "There is a great need to come to terms with history. There are still many gaps, and these gaps have to be closed," curator Holzschuh said.

'Culture of remembrance'
It's not the only way the city is confronting its complicated past. Vienna recently said it would launch an art competition to contextualise a statue of the anti-Semitic former mayor Karl Lueger who inspired Hitler, which has been defaced several times. The city has also re-assessed street names honouring anti-Semitic or otherwise tainted historical figures - most recently galvanised by the Black Lives Matter movement and protests around historical monuments.

Already in 2012, after much controversy, a portion of the Ringstrasse - a circular boulevard in the city - previously named after Lueger was renamed. Holzschuh and Plakolm-Forsthuber also wanted to reveal how some of the artists remained influential long after World War II, such as the sculptor Wilhelm Frass. Frass, who professed his loyalty to the Nazis, continued to work after the war and even had his works commissioned by the city of Vienna.

Holzschuh's and Plakolm-Forsthuber's research culminated in a 300-page catalogue - along with the exhibition itself. The show, which opened in October and runs to April, drew some 4,000 visitors in its first month - 'a very big interest', according to museum spokeswoman Konstanze Schaefer. So far it has stayed clear of controversy except for one biting commentary in Austrian daily Kurier, which criticised money being spent to preserve Nazi art. But city councillor Veronica Kaup-Hasler says shedding light on the past is 'a good basis for decisions about the future'. "A culture of remembrance and dealing with one's own history play an important role in the city's cultural policy," she told AFP.

There is a great need to come to terms with history. There are still many gaps, and these gaps have to be closed

INGRID HOLZSCHUH

Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber and Ingrid Holzschuh (right) curators of the exhibition in front of art works at the city's 'Vienna Museum' in the Austrian capital Vienna (AFP)



FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Southgate chases England's World Cup glory in Qatar

London, UK - England manager Gareth Southgate has set his sights on the nation's 'missing piece' as he targets World Cup glory in 2022.

England were denied a first major trophy since 1966 when they lost the Euro 2020 final on penalties to Italy in July.

That heartbreaking defeat at Wembley came three years after England lost to Croatia in the 2018 World Cup semi-finals.

But Southgate's men are back in the hunt for silverware after qualifying for the 2022 World Cup with ease.

England will head to Qatar as one of the favourites and Southgate knows winning a trophy would cap his impressive reign.

"We went to Russia in 2018 having not won a knockout game for ten years, and that was our first objective," Southgate told Sky News.

"Now we're in a position where we've been to a final, we've turned over a lot of historic records and created moments of our own history, so the missing piece for us is a trophy and that's incredibly difficult but we've got that belief that we can do that."

"We know there are other teams, there are two teams



We know other teams have got good players as well... but we feel we're in that group of teams

GARETH SOUTHGATE

(Italy and Portugal) that have got to a play-off that could win that trophy, frankly, so the level is really high and is quite even among the top teams.

"Although we feel that we've got good players, we know other teams have got good players as well... we know the level is high but we feel we're in that group of teams."

Although Southgate was criticised for his cautious tactics

and substitutions during the Euro 2020 final, he is largely admired for transforming England after decades of underachievement.

At the time, he described the final defeat as like having his stomach ripped out, but now he looks back on the Euro run more fondly. "I think it has been a remarkable year," he said. "As part of this year that's always going to be in our head, being in a final and not getting over the line, but if I look logically as a coach at progress as a team the last two qualification campaigns we've been the top-scorers in Europe."

"I think we've got the best defensive record in the world over the past 12 months or so as well. We were behind across those 19 matches in this calendar year for I think 22 minutes, so incredible performance by the players."

"They dealt with the pressure of being at home in a big tournament, they've managed to qualify for a World Cup which as we've seen from other high-profile nations is not a given. A lot of young players have come through much stronger, much more experienced, it's just that missing piece of winning the final."

AFP



Manchester City's Spanish midfielder Rodri (second from left) celebrates with teammates after scoring his team's second goal during the English Premier League football match against Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium in London on Saturday (AFP)

Man City late show at Arsenal gets 11-point lead

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

London, UK - Rodri scored a 93rd minute winner as Manchester City took another huge step towards retaining the Premier League title with a 2-1 win over 10-man Arsenal.

Pep Guardiola's men are now 11 points clear at the top thanks to an 11-game winning run, but were made to toil until deep into stoppage time by the Gunners.

A 5-0 thrashing to City when the sides last met in August saw Arsenal off to their worst start to a league season in 67 years.

But Mikel Arteta's men have rallied to rise to fourth in the table and showed why as they deservedly led at half-time through Bukayo Saka's seventh goal of the season.

Riyad Mahrez levelled from the penalty spot before Gabriel Magalhaes stupidly got himself sent off for two quickfire bookings just before the hour mark.

And the ten men just failed to hold out for a point when Rodri poked home from close range after Aymeric Laporte's shot was blocked.

Plastic bottles rained down on the Spanish international as he celebrated with the Arsenal supporters furious as they voiced their frustration at the officiating after seeing a penalty appeal of their own waived away in the first half.

However, it was Gabriel's indiscipline that cost his side the chance to extend a four-point cushion over the chasing pack for a place in next season's Champions League.

Arteta was forced to watch the game from home after he tested positive for coronavirus for the second time earlier this week.

However, that did not disrupt the Gunners' fine form as with assistant Albert Stuivenberg directing operations they ran the champions and runaway leaders ragged in the first half.

The first big decision to go against the home side came on 12 minutes when Martin Odegaard went down as he tried to round City goalkeeper Ederson.

The Brazilian was given the benefit of the doubt by the referee and VAR, but Ederson ap-

peared to have gone through the Norwegian's foot to get to the ball.

Gabriel Martinelli's missed chances

Gabriel Martinelli's form has played a big part in Arsenal's resurgence in recent weeks, but it was a day of missed opportunities for the Brazilian.

Martinelli fired powerfully into the body of Ederson and saw two more efforts fly just wide of the target before the break.

But Arsenal did get the half-time lead they deserved when Saka swept home Kieran Tierney's pass into the bottom corner. That was just the second Premier League goal City had conceded in the first half all season and Guardiola's men bounced back in a dramatic second period.

Arsenal were furious when Stuart Attwell was sent to review Granit Xhaka's pull on Bernardo Silva seven minutes after the break when he had not been for Odegaard's penalty appeal.

Mahrez made no mistake

from the spot in his final City appearance for a while due to his participation in the African Cup of Nations with Algeria.

The game then turned in the course of an incredible 60 seconds.

Firstly, Arsenal somehow did not retake the lead when Nathan Ake rescued Laporte's wayward header from crossing his own line before Martinelli hit the post with an open goal on the rebound.

From the resulting goal kick, Gabriel Jesus turned onto Ederson's pass and was hauled down by Gabriel, who had already been booked for scuffing up the penalty spot as Mahrez prepared to take his spot-kick.

City went on to dominate possession without creating many big chances and grabbed the winner in uncharacteristic fashion.

Laporte made the most of a hopeful ball into the box and the ricochet fell kindly for Rodri to prod past the helpless Aaron Ramsdale.

AFP

Everton sign Ukrainian left-back Vitaliy Mykolenko at £18mn

Liverpool, UK - Everton have completed the signing of Ukraine international defender Vitaliy Mykolenko from Dynamo Kiev for a reported fee of £18mn (US\$24mn approx).

The 22-year-old left-back, who has won 21 caps for his country, has signed a four-year deal keeping him at Goodison Park until June 2026.

Mykolenko told Everton TV: "I have always dreamed of playing in the Premier League. English football is where the game was born and I think that it will suit my game very well. I am 22 but I don't feel like a youngster. I have



Ukraine's defender Vitaliy Mykolenko

experience of playing at European level and hope I will continue to improve as a player."

Mykolenko was part of the

Ukraine side that reached the quarter-finals of Euro 2020 and has Champions League experience over the past two seasons

with Dynamo.

He is expected to replace Lucas Digne, who has fallen out of favour with manager Rafael Benitez and manager linked with a January move to Chelsea.

The Toffees were badly in need of reinforcements due to an injury crisis that has derailed Benitez's first season in charge after a positive start.

Everton are due to return to action at home to Brighton on Sunday after their previous two matches against Burnley and Newcastle were called off due to coronavirus outbreaks.

AFP

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Tsitsipas struggles with elbow injury at ATP Cup

Sydney, Australia - Stefanos Tsitsipas pulled out of his top-10 showdown with Poland's Hubert Hurkacz at the ATP Cup on Saturday with an elbow issue, but then took to the court for a doubles clash, saying he was taking it 'match-by-match'.

The Greek world number four was due to face the world number nine in his season-opening game after compatriot Michail Pervolarakis lost 6-1, 6-4 to Poland's Kamil Majchrzak in the 16-nation event in Sydney.

But instead Aristotelis Thanos played with Tsitsipas watching from the team bench. The 23-year-old had right elbow surgery in late November after pulling out of the ATP Finals in Turin.

Thanos, ranked 1,076, stood no chance against a polished Hurkacz, who raced past him 6-1, 6-2 to seal the tie for Poland.

But Tsitsipas then appeared for the dead doubles rubber alongside Pervolarakis, showing no obvious signs of the problem as they won 6-4, 5-7, 10-8.

"The recovery from my elbow surgery in November is on track for Melbourne and today was a precautionary step to make sure I make Melbourne," said Tsitsipas, referring to the Australian Open that starts on January 17.

"We will see day-by-day, match-by-match until then."

He added, "I pray I am going to be able to play (singles) on Monday against Argentina."

In the other evening tie, Serbia's Filip Krajcinovic beat Viktor Durasovic 6-2, 7-5 before Norway's world number eight Casper Ruud hit back by ousting Dusan Lajovic 6-3, 7-5. Serbia won the



Stefanos Tsitsipas (right) of Greece watches the game of Kamil Majchrzak of Poland and Michail Pervolarakis of Greece with teammates on day one of the 2022 ATP Cup men's single tennis match, in Sydney on Saturday (AFP)

deciding doubles to take the tie.

Serbia won the inaugural edition of the ATP Cup in 2020, but that was with world number one Novak Djokovic.

He is not in Sydney after withdrawing last week, heightening doubts over whether he will defend his Australian Open title.

Djokovic has refused to confirm if he has been inoculated against COVID-19, a requirement at the opening Grand Slam of the year.

'Solid'

Earlier, Roberto Bautista Agut got Spain off to a perfect start

with a crushing 6-0, 6-3 win over world number 17 Chilean Cristian Garin as he spearheads the team in Rafael Nadal's absence.

The 33-year-old, ranked two places below Garin, barely broke a sweat, ensuring Spain won their tie after teammate Pablo Carreno Busta came through 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) against Chile's Alejandro Tablo.

"I played a very solid game, good rhythm and good speed," said Bautista Agut. "I'm very happy because I won my point for the team."

Bautista Agut was part of the Nadal-led Spain team that made

the final in 2020, when they were beaten by Serbia.

He is the lead singles player this time after 20-time Grand Slam champion Nadal opted to play an Australian Open lead-up event in Melbourne instead.

Whether Nadal would make it to Australia at all was in doubt after he tested positive for the coronavirus after an exhibition tournament in Abu Dhabi last month.

But he tweeted a photo of himself on an empty court at Melbourne Park late Friday with the comment: 'Don't tell anyone... here I am'.

A number of other players in Abu Dhabi also tested positive, including Russia's world number five Andrey Rublev, who is out of the ATP Cup.

Defending champions Russia, who beat Italy in last year's final, start their campaign on Sunday against France.

In other morning action, Argentina cruised past Georgia with world number 13 Diego Schwartzman annihilating 22nd-ranked Nikoloz Basilashvili 6-1, 6-2 and teammate Federico Delbonis thrashing Aleksandre Metreveli by the same score.

AFP



US Open champion Emma Raducanu

Raducanu pulls out of Melbourne tournament

Melbourne, Australia - US Open champion Emma Raducanu on Saturday pulled out of an Australian Open warm-up tournament next week as she continues to recover from coronavirus.

The 19-year-old Briton was due to line up alongside defending Australian Open champion Naomi Osaka and former world number one Simona Halep at the Melbourne Summer Set WTA event from Tuesday. But after practicing at Melbourne Park on Saturday she opted out, having tested positive for COVID-19 before an Abu Dhabi exhibition last month and then spent time in isolation.

"The timing to compete in the first Melbourne event this week is too soon for me, having just returned from isolation," she said in a brief statement. "Look forward to seeing you to compete later this month."

Raducanu became the first British woman to win a Grand Slam since Virginia Wade in 1977 when she triumphed at

The timing to compete in the first Melbourne event this week is too soon for me, having just returned from isolation

EMMA RADUCANU

Flushing Meadows, but has struggled to find the same form since then.

She has been working with new coach Torben Beltz ahead of what will be her first full season on the WTA Tour.

French Open finalist Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova will also miss the Melbourne event after testing positive for COVID-19 earlier this week, casting doubt on whether she will be fit for the Australian Open. Ranked at a career-high 11, the Russian made her first Grand Slam final in June, losing to Barbora Krejickova at Roland Garros.

AFP

Klopp to miss Chelsea game after suspected positive COVID test: Club

London, UK - Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp will miss his side's crucial Premier League clash at Chelsea on Sunday after a suspected positive coronavirus test.

Klopp's assistant Pep Lijnders will take charge for the fixture at Stamford Bridge as third placed Liverpool try to keep pace with leaders Manchester City.

As well as Klopp's test result, three other members of his backroom staff have tested positive, but Liverpool are not expected to ask for the match to be postponed at this stage.

'Jurgen Klopp will miss Liverpool's Premier League meeting with Chelsea on Sunday after returning a suspected positive COVID-19 test result,' Liverpool said on Saturday. 'The Reds manager, who reported mild symptoms ahead of the fixture, is now isolating. Assistant manager Pep Lijnders will therefore lead the team for the 4.30pm GMT kick-off at Stamford Bridge.'

No further Liverpool players have tested positive beyond the unnamed three previously con-



Liverpool's manager Jurgen Klopp applauds the fans at King Power Stadium in Leicester on December 28 (AFP)

firmed by Klopp on Friday.

Despite distancing himself from suggestions the game could be in danger, Klopp this week described each new day as a 'lottery' as he waited to discover if any of his squad had tested pos-

itive. 'Testing of the entire first-team set-up has revealed no further positive cases within the playing squad in addition to the three confirmed by Klopp on Friday,' the statement added.

'Three backroom staff mem-

bers have returned suspected positive results, however.'

Liverpool are one point behind Chelsea with a game in hand after losing their last league match at Leicester on Tuesday.

AFP

Gambia cancel Cup of Nations prep games due to COVID

Paris, France - The Gambia cancelled on Saturday their two prep matches for the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations due to a surfeit of COVID-19 cases in their squad.

The decision came just hours before they were due to play Algeria in Doha - the other match was against Syria on Tuesday.

'Due to the unavailability of 16 of our 28-man squad our friendlies ahead of the Cup of Nations against Algeria and Syria have both been cancelled,' the Gambian Football Federation (GFF) said in a statement.

The team's Belgian coach Tom Saintfiet explained via Facebook that the swathe of absences were due to 'COVID, other illness, injuries and restrictions to travel'.

'The Gambians decided unilaterally to cancel the match hours before kick-off on the pre-text that they were lacking a goalkeeper!' stormed the Algerian Football Federation (FaF).

AFP

Conway ton anchors New Zealand in first Test against Bangladesh

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand - New Zealand batsman Devon Conway continued his phenomenal rise in Test cricket, scoring 122 as New Zealand finished day one of the first Test against Bangladesh in a strong position at Mount Maunganui on Saturday.

In only his fourth Test, and first since recovering from a broken hand, Conway lifted New Zealand from being one for one to close the day at 258 for five with Henry Nicholls on 32 and Tom Blundell out on the last ball for 11.

"It's a very special feeling," Conway said of scoring a century in his first home Test and being in partnership with New Zealand icon Ross Taylor when he reached triple figures.

"It was a great feeling to have Ross Taylor there out in the middle with me when I achieved that milestone," Conway said.

"He was very positive. He told me to soak it in, and congratulated me. It will last in my memory for a very long time."

It is the fourth time in seven Test innings that Conway has passed the 50 mark, and it lifted his average to 71.57, but after setting New Zealand up for a big score he gave his wicket away to an innocuous Mominul Haque delivery.

Mominul only put himself on for three overs before the second new ball and claimed the prized scalp of Conway with a harmless



New Zealand's Devon Conway plays a shot on day one of the first Test against Bangladesh at the Bay Oval, in Mount Maunganui on Saturday (AFP)

delivery that was edged to wicketkeeper Liton Das.

With the wicket drying out Conway sees good batting prospects for New Zealand on day two, but Bangladesh bowling coach Ottis Gibson did not agree.

"It's even-stevens, I feel," said Gibson, the architect of Bangladesh's use of swing bowl-

ing. "We don't see that much grass so the grass is a factor. All the fast bowlers bowled well in difficult conditions, alien conditions to them and Ebidot also bowled well."

Bangladesh started the day well, putting Zealand into bat and then claiming Tom Latham for one in the fourth over.

But their mood changed as Conway mounted partnerships of 138 with Will Young (52), 50 with Ross Taylor (31) and 38 with Nicholls.

Conway weathered a fiery start by accurate quicks Taskin Ahmed and Shoriful Aslam who found swing through the air and off the pitch.

Shoriful had Latham caught behind for one in the fourth over and in his next over believed he had Conway who had yet to score.

The original decision was not out and when Bangladesh appealed the replays were inconclusive and it remained with the umpire's call.

But after Conway and Will Young inched New Zealand to 15 off the first 13 overs, the ball began to wear, the pitch began to flatten under a scorching sun and the runs started to flow.

Conway brought up his 50 with a majestic pull shot that sent the ball high over the boundary fence and he followed

SCOREBOARD		
NEW ZEALAND 1 st INNINGS		
T Latham	c L Das b S Islam	1
W Young	run out	52
D Conway	c L Das b M Haque	122
R Taylor	c S Islam b S Islam	31
H Nicholls	not out	32
T Blundell	b Ebadat Hossain	11
Extras:	(b 1, lb 3, nb 3, w 2)	9
TOTAL:	258 for five in 87.3 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-1, 2-139, 3-189, 4-227, 5-258		
Bowling: T Ahmed 20-5-61-0, S Islam 20-5-53-2, E Hossain 15.3-3-53-1, M Hasan Miraz 27-7-72-0, N Hossain Shanto 2-0-10-0, M Haque 3-0-5-1		

with two fours off the same Mehidy Hasan over.

He posted his century in more restrained fashion with a single as he tapped a short Taskin delivery to fine leg, finely missing the two fielders placed for a leg-side catch.

Young was looking comfortable, and survived a delicate edge on 27 which Bangladesh did not pick up and did not appeal. But when he entered the fifties his composure began to wane and after seeing a mistimed hook shot fall in front of the boundary fielder, he called for a single that was never on and gifted the tourists a run out.

Taylor, who entered Bay Oval to a standing ovation at the start of his penultimate Test, batted confidently to 31 when he drove at a wide Shoriful delivery but would not keep the ball down with Shadman Islam taking a sharp catch at short cover.

AFP



Ross Taylor and Kane Williamson share a moment after making New Zealand World Test Champions, at Hampshire Bowl, Southampton, on June 23, 2021

Ross Taylor announces international retirement

Bangladesh series will be his last Tests before finishing with ODIs later in the season

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand - Ross Taylor has announced he will retire from international cricket at the end of the current home season with the upcoming series against Bangladesh being his last Test cricket before he finishes with the ODIs against Australia and Netherlands.

Taylor (37) currently has 110 Test caps and is New Zealand's leading run-scorer in both that format and ODIs.

He made his international debut in an ODI against West Indies in March 2006 before playing his first Test against South Africa in November 2007. His top score of 290 came against Australia in Perth.

Taylor, who was at the crease alongside Kane Williamson when New Zealand secured the World Test Championship earlier this year, had previously spoken about making the 2023 World Cup but has decided now is the time to call it a day and not be available for the South Africa Tests later in the season.

New Zealand are due to tour Australia for three ODIs from late January then play Netherlands back at home.

"It's been an amazing journey and I feel incredibly fortunate to have represented my country for as long as I have," Taylor said. "It's been such a privilege to play with and against some of the greats of the game and to have created so many memories and friendships along the way."

"But all good things must come to an end and the timing feels right for me. I want to thank my family, friends and all those who have helped me get to this point."

"There'll be plenty of time for more thank-yous and reflections later in the season - but for now I

want all my energy and focus to be on preparing and performing for the Blackcaps this summer."

New Zealand coach Gary Stead said that Taylor would finish his career as one of the country's greats

"Ross has always been a hugely respected member of the side and we're thankful for his contributions to the Blackcaps over an incredible career," he said.

"His skills and temperament as a batsman have been world-class and his ability to perform at such a high level for so long speaks volumes of his longevity and professionalism."

"His experience has held the side together on countless occasions and his catching record speaks for itself. There's no doubt we're going to miss him when he's gone."

"Seeing him hit the winning runs in Southampton to help win our first ICC World title is a moment I will never forget and I'm sure it's the same for many of the fans," Stead said.

Cricinfo

India's Rohit misses out with injury, Rahul takes charge as captain for S Africa ODIs

Johannesburg, South Africa - Rohit Sharma has failed to recover from the hamstring injury that kept him out of the Test series in South Africa. In his absence, K L Rahul will lead India in the three-match ODI series in South Africa. Jasprit Bumrah has been named the vice-captain of the squad.

This was supposed to be India's first ODI assignment since Rohit was named full-time captain for the format, but Rohit's recurring hamstring injury has emerged as a bit of a concern.

Chairman of selectors Chetan Sharma said the decision to not send Rohit to South Africa was taken keeping that frequent injury and important events in



Rohit Sharma

mind, including the T20 World Cup and the ODI World Cup in the coming two years.

"This is the only reason why we have decided to let him work on his rehab, work on his fitness, work on his muscles," Chetan said. "Nobody gets injured on purpose. This is precisely why we didn't send him to South



K L Rahul

Africa because we want him to go back to 100 per cent fitness because there are important events and World Cups coming. That is the reason why he is not going to South Africa, and K L Rahul is the captain."

India's 18-man squad welcomed back R Ashwin, who last played an ODI in 2017 but made

his comeback into the T20I side earlier in 2021. Venkatesh Iyer received a maiden ODI call-up. As with T20Is, Venkatesh might bat in the middle order and bowl a few overs, a vacancy created by Hardik Pandya's inability to bowl because of fitness issues.

The other allrounder in the squad is Washington Sundar, who missed the T20 World Cup with injury but proved his fitness in the recent Vijay Hazare Trophy. Also coming back from injury was Shreyas Iyer, who has since made a successful Test debut too. The other potential all-rounders, Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel, are yet to recover from injuries sustained during the Test series against New Zealand.

Cricinfo

LOCAL CRICKET ROUND-UP

Khushi powers Ruwi, Sachin lifts Darsait in D20 league

Muscat - Oman star Mohammed Naseem Khushi's 13-ball 41 not out and pacer Kaleemullah's superb 3 for 22 powered Ruwi Rangers to a 16-run victory against Amerat Royals 54 for 4 in 7 overs (Vinayak Shukla 15, Kaleemullah 3-22) by 16 runs (D/L).

The highlight of Ruwi's 177 for 7 was Khushi's incredible hitting at number seven, smashing 5 sixes and 2 fours to lift the team's total.

Khalid Kail and Gustav Burger were the other notable scorers, contributing 40 each. Bilal Khan was the pick of Amerat bowlers, taking 3 for 25 whereas Mehran Khan and Rafi Ullah bagged two wickets each.

Amerat's chase was hit by rain and the side was found to be 16 runs short of the required total in 7 overs when the game was stopped at 54 for 4. Kaleemullah's three early blows kept Amerat in check, turning the game in Ruwi's favour before it started pouring.

Brief scores: Ruwi Rangers 177 for 8 in 20 overs (Mohammed Naseem Khushi 41, Khalid Kail 40, Gustav Burger 40, Bilal Khan 3-25, Mehran Khan 2-28, Rafi Ullah 2-41) beat Amerat Royals 54 for 4 in 7 overs

Sachin's Kumar's excellent all-round show and Ravinda K'ratne's brilliant 61 not out off 38 helped Darsait Titans to a comfortable 6-wicket win over Ghubrah Giants.

Mohammed Imran Latif top-scored with an unbeaten 53 off 36 as Ghubrah posted 130 for 5 on the board.

Shehbaz Naser batted well too, scoring 39 off 31. Sachin was quite impressive with the ball, taking 3 for 16.

Darsait surpassed the total comfortably, scoring 133 for 4 in 14.2 overs thanks to top knocks by Ravinda and Sachin (26 off 20).

Brief scores: Ghubra Giants 130 for 5 in 16 overs (Mohammed Imran 53, Shehbaz Naser 39, Sachin Kumar 3-16) lost to Dar-

sait Titans 133 for 4 in 14.2 overs (Ravindra K'ratne 61, Sachin Kumar 26) by 6 wickets.

Results of matches played on Thursday:

Brief scores: Darsait Titans 145 for 6 in 20 overs (Ravindra K'ratne 48, Khurram Khan 47, Ganesh Chandrashekhar 2-31) beat Qurum Thunders 88 all out in 15.1 overs (Shoaib Khan 61. Ahmed Fayyaz Butt 3-14, Amanpreet Singh 3-14) by 57 runs.

Brief scores: Azaiba XI 68 all out in 19.1 overs (Hammad Mirza 34, Adnan Ul Haq 2-18, Hemalkumar Tandel 2-20) lost to Amerat Royals 68 for 1 in 5.2 overs (Prathib Athavale 26, Rafi Ullah 19 not out - 3x6) by 9 wickets (D/L).