

HM the Sultan meets sheikhs of S Sharqiyah

Manah - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik held a meeting on Sunday at Hisn A'Shumookh castle in Manah with sheikhs of South Sharqiyah.

The Diwan of Royal Court issued a statement to this effect reading as follows:

In pursuance of the renewed Royal tradition of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to confer with citizens in all parts of the dear homeland and, following His Majesty's conviction in the significance of listening in person to views and proposals serving the interests of the country, His Majesty the Sultan held a meeting with sheikhs of South Sharqiyah at Hisn A'Shumookh castle.

At the outset, His Majesty the Sultan thanked and praised the Almighty Allah for the great bounties He has bestowed on Oman and its people, praying that these riches be preserved and eternalised.

Then, His Majesty the Sultan reviewed a set of topics of concern on the domestic front. He said, "Oman is pressing ahead with its development plans and programmes in all fields, despite the challenges, with the prime objectives of realising sustainable growth and furnishing a prosperous present and future for all people, wherever they might be on this benign land."

In his Royal conversation, His Majesty the Sultan observed that the governorates and municipal councils should perform their national roles as precisely as they

are expected to do. He instructed the institutions to double their efforts to elevate the status of the local community.

As part of his attention to boost the potential of entrepreneurs and SME owners, to provide employment opportunities in all governorates, and to encourage entrepreneurship, His Majesty the Sultan issued his Royal directives to the departments concerned (Ministry of Finance, Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development and Oman Development Bank) to fund the respective programmes. He noted that the government will offer the incentives necessary to ensure the success of these initiatives.

His Majesty the Sultan then engaged in an open dialogue with the sheikhs, who presented requests for projects and development services needed in their respective wilayats. His Majesty gave directives endorsing the principle of partnership between the government and citizens when implementing projects that serve the public interest. He stressed the need to address difficulties that might come in the way of the domestic development march.

May the Almighty Allah protect His Majesty the Sultan and assist him with power to pursue the path of bounties. May He eternalise Oman's riches and endow the country and its people with further peace and security.

ONA



MoCIIP hands over Investor Residence Cards of 10 years to 26

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A total of 26 investors received Investor Residence Cards on Sunday, according to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP).

A statement said, 'H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, granted 26 investors of different nationalities cards of the ten-year Investor Residence Programme, under which foreign investors and retirees are granted the right of long-stay in the sultanate.'

On the occasion, H E Yousef informed said that the Investor Residence Programme aims to facilitate granting residency to investors wishing to invest in the sultanate through the ministry's Investment Services Centre electronically for periods ranging from five to ten years, subject to extension, according to clear controls and procedures. Investors are given incentives provided that the controls are adhered to throughout the specified period of stay.

"The programme aims to attract and promote qualitative investments that contribute to the growth of the domestic product and create job opportunities to supplement the national economy in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040. It also aims to localise industries, transfer technologies, and enhance economic diversification according



to a well-studied plan that enhances the investment environment and takes into account security, legal, social and economic aspects," the minister said. According to MoCIIP, there are several factors that prompt investors to choose the sultanate as an investment destination, including its strategic location close to emerging markets in the Middle East, East Africa and India and the presence of an efficient logistics network.

20% of CSR budgets must be allocated to OCO: CMA

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Finance has issued a decision to deduct 20 per cent of budgets of public shareholding companies allocated to corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes for the benefit of Omani Charitable Organisation's (OCO) activities.

H E Sultan Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance and chairman of the Board of Directors of the Capital Market Authority (CMA) has issued Ministerial Decision No 172 /2021 to this effect.

The decision states: Article 1 states that public shareholding companies must deduct no less than 20 per cent of their budget allocated to CSR programmes for the benefit of OCO's activities.

The decision came into effect on December 31, 2021.

Last month, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion also issued a decision directing deduction of 20 per cent of budgets by institutions and companies allocated to social responsibility programmes for the benefit of the activities of OCO.



Concern grows for Palestinian teen held by Israel

N Sharqiyah hotels, tourist camps record 80% occupancy

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Occupancy rate in hotels and tourist camps in North Sharqiyah in the current tourist season has averaged 80 per cent during holidays, according to Khamis bin Salim al Maskari, Director of Heritage and Tourism Department in the governorate.

Between October and April, when the temperature is between 17°C and 35°C, is billed as the best time to visit the sultanate.

"The winter season starts in October and ends in April. North Sharqiyah receives a large number of visitors from inside and outside the sultanate to enjoy its

North Sharqiyah has nine hotels and resorts, four tourist rest houses, five hotel apartments, five guest houses, 12 tourist camps and seven green hotels - eco-friendly facilities

tourist attractions," Maskari informed.

According to Maskari, the governorate has nine hotels and resorts, four tourist rest houses, five hotel apartments, five guest



houses, 12 tourist camps and seven green hotels (eco-friendly facilities), in addition to specialised agencies for travel and tourism that organise trips and adventure activities.

The governorate's tourist attractions include Sharqiyah Sands, considered one of the most beautiful places for camping in the sultanate. Many tourist activities are held in Sharqiyah

Sands, including dune bashing, horse racing, paragliding, sand biking and sand boarding.

"The governorate also has an oasis in Wadi Bani Khalid and wadis of the wilayat of Dima Wa

al Taien which flow all year. The governorate has popular markets, including the Sinaw Market and a popular Market for Women in the wilayat of Ibra," Maskari said.

Ali bin Salim al Hajri, owner of Safari Desert Camp in the wilayat of Bidiyah, estimates that the tourist camps in the governorate attract more than 1mn tourists annually.

He described winter tourism in North Sharqiyah as based on "a unique model" featuring recreational activities in camps.

Hajri indicated that the remainder of this season is expected to witness more promotions and tourist attractions.



OMAN ENVIRONMENT DAY

Beach cleanup, seedlings distribution held

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To mark Oman Environment Day, observed on January 8, over 170 volunteers came together to clean Al Hail beach in Seeb in an event organised by Muscat Hiking Team.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Mohammed al Alawi, head of Muscat Hiking Team, informed that volunteers from several government and private institutions, including Omran Group, Mohsin Haider Darwish, Gulf College, Majan College and other volunteer teams, participated in the beach cleanup held from 7:30am to 11:30am.



More than a hundred bags of waste were collected. The waste collected included discarded fishermen's nets, plastic bags and wood. Participants recited poems urging all to preserve the Omani environment and keep beaches clean

MOHAMMED AL ALAWI

"More than a hundred bags of waste were collected. The waste collected from the beach included discarded fishermen's nets, plastic bags and wood. Participants recited poems urging all to preserve the Omani environment and keep beaches clean," said Alawi.

"The campaign aimed to celebrate Oman Environment Day, spread awareness of the importance of preserving Omani beaches, and urge members of society to engage in sports."

Talking about the hiking and clean-up events the team organises, Alawi informed that these help participants explore varied terrain, including mountainous,

while promoting the culture of fitness among people.

The team organises eight hiking and clean-up drives in Muscat every month.

"The participants hike through plains, wadis and atop mountains. We often chose an unexplored site in Muscat. The team also organises cycling, swimming and mountain climbing events," Alawi informed.

Urging all to be mindful of the environment, he reiterated that it is necessary to keep it clean. "We call on all - the youth and families - to join us in our forthcoming events to preserve the Omani environment."

REGIONAL WEATHER

ABU DHABI

Max 24°C Min 13°C

DUBAI

Max 24°C Min 11°C

MANAMA

Max 20°C Min 13°C

DOHA

Max 21°C Min 13°C

KUWAIT CITY

Max 18°C Min 15°C

RIYADH

Max 24°C Min 12°C

MAFWR currently building 8 dams

Our Correspondent
Muscat

With the objective of achieving self-sufficiency in meeting water requirements, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) is currently constructing eight dams in various parts of the sultanate.

Dr Khalid bin Salim al Mashikhi, Assistant Director-General for Dams in MAFWR, informed that these include underground recharge and embankment dams.

Of the four embankment dams, one is in the wilayat of Seeb, one in Amerat and two in Salalah.

Of the underground recharge dams, one is being built in the wilayat of Yanqul, one Dhank and two in Ibra. The two dams Ibra, North Sharqiyah, are being built at a cost of RO7,185,850 and will be completed in April 2023.

"The ministry has built 174 dams, 56 of which are for



The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has built 174 dams, 56 of which are for groundwater recharge, 115 surface storage and three for flood protection

DR KHALID AL MASHIKHI

groundwater recharge, 115 surface storage and three for flood protection in various gover-

norates," Mashikhi informed. MAFWR has also allocated RO2.535mn for the renovation of

two dams and 25 aflaj that were affected by Cyclone Shaheen in North Batinah in October 2021.

EA distributes wild seedlings, eco-friendly bags

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To mark Oman Environment Day, Environment Authority (EA) organised events in several parts of the sultanate on Sunday.

A statement issued by the authority said, 'The Environment Department in North Sharqiyah governorate launched an awareness campaign at the Information and Services Centre in the wilayat of Bidiyah. The campaign aimed to spread awareness on the importance of preserving the



environment and reducing the use of plastic bags. Environment Authority's specialists also distributed environmentally friendly bags and seedlings of wild trees to visitors to encourage them to plant indigenous species of vegetation.'

Elsewhere, the Environment Department in Dakhiliyah Governorate conducted a campaign to plant and distribute 2,000 seedlings of indigenous trees in the wilayat of Nizwa, which was held within the ongoing national initiative to plant 10mn wild trees.

Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Labour

ANNOUNCEMENT

Internal Tender Committee, Ministry of Labour, invites the following Tenders:

Bidding No.	Bidding Description	Last date for electronic purchasing	Documents fee (RO)
01/2022	Management and operation of a site to provide Sanad services at the Ministry's general office at Airport Heights		R.O 25/=
02/2022	Management and operation of the internal coffee shop in the Ministry's general office airport heights	Sunday 20/02/2022 at 10:00 am	R.O 25/=
03/2022	Management and operation of a site to provide Sanad services in the General Directorate of Labour in the Governorate of Dhofar		R.O 25/=

- Specialized establishments can obtain documents of bidding number (1/2022-2/2022) from the Department of Treasury, third floor, the Ministry's Building at Airport Heights for the bid number (3/2022) document can be collected from department of Treasury and administration affairs department at Dhofar Governorate, against a non refundable amount specified above, starting from Monday 10/01/2022.
- Each bid is to be attached with a bank guarantee or a certified cheque from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate of (1%) of the value of the tender for the Ministry of Manpower, valid for a period of (90) days from the date of submission of the tender.
- Bids are to be submitted in closed envelopes sealed with red wax and addressed to His Excellency Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee, and the name and number of the tender must be written on the envelope with no reference to the bidder.
- Bids No. (1/2022-2/2022) Bids shall be placed in the box designated for tenders at the Secretariat of the Internal Tender Committee on the third floor of the Ministry building at Airport Heights, up to a maximum date set before the auction, provided that the bids are opened at eleven o'clock on the same day.
- With regard to Bid No. (3/2022), offers shall be placed in the box designated for tenders in the office of the Director General in the General Directorate of Labor in the Governorate of Dhofar, with a maximum date set against the auction, provided that the offers are opened at eleven o'clock on the same day.

(The Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest price of or any tender)

labour_OMAN

MoHT to develop Bahla tourist site



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) has initiated a plan to develop the Bahla Fort and Oasis site in its efforts to stimulate tourism.

A Steering Committee for the management plan of the Bahla Fort and Oasis site held a meeting last week to discuss the development.

A ministry official said, "The meeting aimed to discuss the development of Bahla oasis, the proposed activities of the Bahla Heritage Market and preservation of the World Heritage Site."

Bahla Fort includes the oasis with traditional souqs, old alleys, ancient mosques and a wall that extends over a distance of close to 13km constructed in the pre-

MoHT resumes tourist guide services



In July 2021, H E Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, issued a Ministerial Decision to form the Steering Committee for the management plan of the Bahla Fort and Oasis site

Muscat - The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) has announced resumption of tourist guide services.

A statement said, 'Tourist guide services have been resumed via the ministry's new website <https://mht.gov.om>. For further enquiries during working hours, call 22088114 or 22088575.'

Islamic era.

According to the MoHT official, the Steering Committee aims to preserve the significance of the site, which was inscribed as a Unesco World Heritage site in 1987.

It will devise ways of tackling

the challenges that may arise, especially overpopulation, migration of the local community from the site, emergence of modern architecture, as well as reduction in green spaces as a result of building on farmlands and changing lifestyles. Draughts impacting the oasis pose another challenge, according to the official.

In July 2021, H E Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, issued a Ministerial Decision to form the Steering Committee for the management plan of the Bahla Fort and Oasis site.

In May 2019, MoHT issued a decision (No 81/2019) to manage the site of Bahla Fort, encouraging development projects to promote the World Heritage Site.

Conditions set for treatment abroad: MoH

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Department of Treatment Abroad of the Ministry of Health (MoH) involved with sending eligible patients abroad for treatment and facilitating relevant procedures through its internal sections has issued a press release about new regulations for treatment abroad.

Dr Sultan al Harthy, director of Treatment Abroad, highlighted that treatment abroad services at the expense of the government is one of the main pillars of the healthcare system for citizens and it serves as a last resort for some critical cases. The main role of the department is to provide treatment abroad services on MoH expenses for eligible patients if the treatment is not available in government and private health institutions in Oman.

Harthy stressed that the ministry is striving to provide healthcare for all citizens at all levels.

He noted that a list has been prepared to define criteria for sending patients abroad for treatment. MoH has additionally outlined conditions and procedures for the service. As for those travelling at their own expense, Harthy stressed the necessity of selecting reliable and certified health institutions and physicians in addition to consulting the ministry in advance in this regard to avoid any health issues or serious medical complications.

Harthy confirmed that travelling abroad for treatment is provided for specified cases if the treatment cannot be done totally in the country and if travelling is advisable and does not adversely affected the patient's health.

People who seek treatment abroad must take into account several considerations. The decision to seek treatment abroad must be taken upon the recom-



Treatment abroad services at the expense of the government is one of the main pillars of the healthcare system for citizens and it serves as a last resort for some critical cases

DR SULTAN AL HARTHY

mendations of the treating physician in Oman based on the patient's health condition. Patients should scrutinise the availability of the appropriate treatment and treatment plan in the intended destination with prior coordination.

Travelling to unreliable health institutions that do not provide the patient with the adequate information (treatment, quality, and cost) exposes patient to the risk of relapse or prolonged stay in ICU or hospital thus creating unexpected financial costs. Harthy noted that some countries are not safe in terms of disease and pandemic prevalence or have unstable security situations.

On the challenges facing the department, the director pointed out to the difficulty of providing required equipment for returning patients who experience deterioration in health during travel. He emphasised MoH's constant strive to improve medical services in the country so that treatment is not sought abroad.

Over 3mn passengers travelled via Oman's airports in 2021 till Oct



Our Correspondent
Muscat

A total of 3,349,503 passengers have travelled via Oman's airports this year till the end of October, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The data shows that the total number of passengers travelling through the airports of Oman at the end of October 2021 decrease by 18.4 per cent com-

pared to the same period in 2020, when it was 4,107,142 mn passengers.

NCSI data indicated that the number of flights through the airports of the sultanate reached 30,375, including 21,466 international flights and 8,909 domestic flights, compared to 34,873 flights - including 29,999 international flights at Muscat International Airport, Salalah Airport and Sohar Airport, and 4,874 domestic flights at Muscat Interna-

tional Airport, Salalah Airport, Sohar Airport and Duqm Airport - by the end of October 2020.

The data indicated that Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani nationalities accounted for the maximum number of passengers in 2021 till October at Muscat International Airport. The data reveals that there were 98,556 Indian nationals, 36,849 Bangladeshi and 29,523 Pakistani passengers.

402 new job opportunities in North Batinah: MoL

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) on Sunday announced the creation of 402 job opportunities in private sector institutions in North Batinah governorate.

The ministry, represented by the General Directorate of Labour in North Batinah Governorate, announced the sixth



package of vacancies for 402 job opportunities in private sector institutions operating in the governorate for various specialties and qualifications through the job opportunities service on the ministry's website - www.mol.gov.om/job

The ministry confirmed that priority for appointment will be for individuals who were laid off from work in North Batinah.

ROP NEWS

Two expats arrested for fraud

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Two African nationals were arrested for duping an Omani citizen by claiming to have the ability to double money, Royal Oman Police (ROP) has announced.

The accused allegedly claimed to have the ability to increase and double money. In a statement, ROP said, 'Muscat Governorate Command arrested two people of African nationality on charges of defrauding a citizen into believing they had the ability to double any amount of money.'

ROP has called on citizens and residents to be careful of falling victim to fraud, and not to deal with suspicious entities who come up with unusual ideas to earn and increase money without effort.

COVID-19 UPDATE

Hospitalisation numbers increase

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Sunday reported 967 new cases of COVID-19 and one death registered in the last three days.

On Thursday, there were 343 cases, 251 on Friday and 373 on Saturday.

'The total number of cases registered in the sultanate has now reached 307,722, including 4,118 deaths,' an MoH statement said.

The total number of recoveries is 300,964 while the recovery rate is 97.8 per cent.

In the last 24 hours, 11 patients were admitted to hospi-



tals across the country, and the total number of inpatients is 40, including seven in intensive care units (ICU).

Recently, H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, said the Supreme Committee is continuous following up on the latest developments arising from COVID-19.

"Cases are slowly rising in ICUs. This rise is not due to Omicron but failure to follow safety measures. We call on citizens and residents to adhere to the precautionary measures and get vaccinated."

H E Dr Sa'eedi informed that the third dose of vaccine will give more protection from the virus.

MARKET WATCH

MSX30 4,216.8

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs	192.93
Pakistani Rs	456.44
Bangladeshi Taka	222.11
Philippine Peso	133.33
Sri Lankan Rs	524.35

*Rates as on January 09
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

German industrial output stalls even as exports rise

German industrial production fell slightly in November as persistent supply bottlenecks weighed on companies, official figures showed, despite exports climbing again.

The country's manufacturing sector produced 0.2 per cent less in November than in the previous month, the federal statistics agency Destatis said, after a revised rise of 2.4 per cent in October.

While output lagged, exports from Europe's top economy rose by 1.7 per cent in November on the previous month, according to further data from Destatis, the second consecutive increase in the indicator.

The value of exports totalled €125.7bn.

ExxonMobil makes two oil discoveries offshore Guyana

ExxonMobil made two oil discoveries in the prolific Stabroek block offshore Guyana, increasing the already existing 10bn oil-equivalent barrels of resources in the region, the company announced.

The discovery at the Fangtooth-1 well, drilled at a water depth of 6,030 feet, consists of high-quality, oil-bearing sandstone reservoirs while the Lau Lau-1 well was drilled at a depth of 4,793 feet in high-quality hydrocarbon-bearing sandstone reservoirs.

The company said the new projects would drive investment in the country.

OQ to inaugurate RO318mn Salalah LPG plant on Sunday



Muscat - OQ, the global integrated energy group of the Sultanate of Oman, announced that it will formally inaugurate its state-of-the-art liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) plant worth RO318mn in Salalah on Sunday.

The plant processes natural gas liquids (NGLs) extracted from gas networks into LPG.

The LPG plant is designed and built to the highest technical and safety standards. It consists of a number of components, notably a facility for the extraction of rich

gas elements such as propane, butane and condensates from natural gas, as well as a fractionation plant, storage tanks, shipping facilities, and an interconnection pipeline system.

The launch of the project will further reinforce Oman's position as a leading producer and exporter of LPG, among a host of other refined petroleum products and petrochemicals.

OQ LPG has a capacity to process around 8mn standard cubic metres per day of lean gas

to produce about 304 kilotonnes per year of LPG comprising 155 kilotonnes per year of propane (C3), 111 kilotonnes of butane (C4) and 38 kilotonnes of condensates (C5+).

The project is already in the commercial operation phase, producing and exporting propane, butane and condensate based on specified specs. The first shipment of products from OQ LPG, comprising about 5,000 metric tonnes of propane and a similar volume of butane,

was loaded onto *MT Searambler*, for distribution in international markets. Ten per cent of the Propane and Butane products will be used as LPG for domestic use in Dhofar governorate.

During the construction phase, the project made an important contribution to the local economy. In line with its In-Country Value (ICV) development strategy, OQ awarded contracts totaling around RO100mn to local vendors and service providers. More than 150 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) benefited from OQ's ICV programme during the implementation of the project, helping in creating business opportunities and providing jobs for national cadres.

OQ LPG will also meet the energy requirements of local industrial and retail consumers. Surplus output will be exported to world markets through OQ Trading, the marketing arm of the OQ Group. Furthermore, the group is studying the feasibility of using LPG products to develop petrochemical industries to help optimise value creation.

ONA



ODB finances over 1,000 projects in Dhahirah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman Development Bank (ODB) has financed 1,294 projects at a cost of more than RO9mn in Dhahirah governorate from 2017 to July 2021.

Ahmed Khalfan al Badi, chairman of the Oman Development Bank in Dhahirah governorate in a statement to Oman News Agency, said, "The funding amounts were distributed to a number of

projects, including 76 projects in the education field, two in the field of fisheries and 40 projects in the field of tourism services, which varied between establishing green hostels (eco hotels) and tourism services, and 364 projects in the field of professional and public services."

"ODB also funded 403 projects in the field of agriculture and livestock, 396 projects in the field of industry, 6 projects in mining and 7 projects in health field," he added.

Mazoon Dairy celebrates Oman Environment Day

Muscat - Mazoon Dairy Company celebrated on Saturday the Oman Environment Day, which is observed on January 8 annually. Mazoon Dairy is one of the leading companies in adopting initiatives concerned with environmental sustainability since its inception in 2015.

Yousef bin Khamis al Fazari, corporate affairs director at Mazoon Dairy, in a press release stressed that the company's celebration of this occasion is part of its strategic priorities towards creating a sustainable environmental pattern, as it adopted the best modern practices in all its

operations and commercial activities to reduce any impacts on the environment.

"The company has established the Mazoon Circular Economy Team, which is concerned with improving the efficiency of the consumption of natural resources and clean energy initiatives to reduce environmental impacts," Fazari said stressing that this initiative is the first-of-its-kind in the sultanate.

He added that the number of trees on the company's site in the wilayat of Sunaina has reached more than 10,000. Additionally, Mazoon Dairy has



supported several scientific researches related to waste diversion, while the firm seeks to develop scientific solutions to reduce emissions from its operations.

Fazari stated that Mazoon Dairy has also adopted a project to recycle wood inside the company's site in Sunaina and turns it into furniture and seating that serve its employees and visitors.

"Mazoon Dairy also owns a biogas plant that relies on cow waste in the biogas production processes and converts it into electrical energy to be a sustainable source of renewable energy.

The sewage treatment plant is the company's most prominent facility in terms of maintaining environmental and water sustainability," he said

Mazen bin Hilal al Saadi, HSE manager, said that one of the environmental initiatives adopted by Mazoon Dairy is the signing of an agreement with Nafath Renewable Energy Company to implement and install solar panels on truck roofs to operate refrigerators, as the energy produced by solar panels contributes to reducing of emissions from the use of diesel engines for cooling.

HITACHI

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Shell expects significant boost from high gas prices

London, UK - Royal Dutch Shell said that it will win a boost from soaring gas prices in the fourth quarter despite supply problems, but cautioned that Omicron weighs on oil demand.

Shell expects 'significantly higher' gas revenues in the three months to December thanks to the 'high liquid natural gas spot price environment' as it overcomes 'ongoing supply issues'.

Oil product sales, however, will be hit by 'seasonal trends, the demand impact due to the Omicron virus and foreign exchange impacts in Turkey following a plunge in the Turkish lira'.

The energy major's trading update was published ahead of its fourth-quarter results on February 3.

Shell, like its rivals, slumped into a huge loss in 2020 as the long-running coronavirus pandemic slashed energy demand and crude prices.

However, European gas prices have blazed a record-breaking trail over the past year on strong winter demand and simmering geopolitical tensions between key supplier Russia and consumer nations.

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

AFP

FREE CLASSIFIED LISTING

Muscat Daily now offers free classified listings for individuals in the following categories:
Situations Wanted/ Accommodation Wanted or Available/ Sale of Household Items/ Car for Sale or Wanted/ Matrimonial Alliances (Word limit is 35)
Please email your listing to dailyclassifieds@apexmedia.co.om or call 99104346

MSX rises 0.68%; volumes down

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) rose 0.68 per cent to close at 4,216.8 points on Sunday.

Trading activity deteriorated from the previous session as turnover declined 61.30 per cent to RO1.7mn and volumes fell 23.62 per cent to 11.07mn shares.

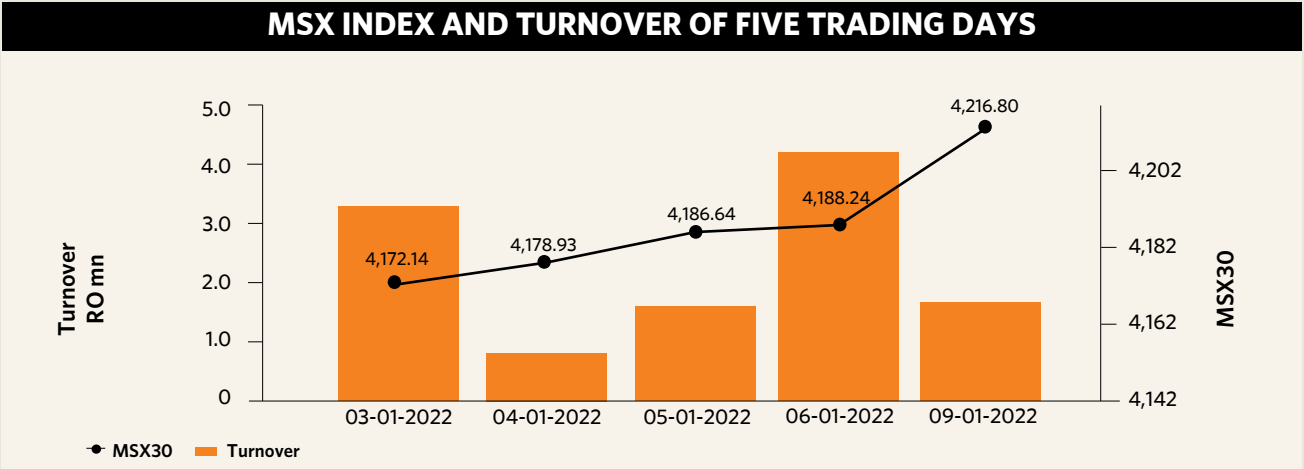
The gains in the main index were supported by all the subindices. Financial index rose 0.58 per cent, Industrial index climbed 0.38 per cent



and Services index rose 0.43 per cent. The MSX Shariah index closed up by 0.33 per cent to close at 526.2 points. Market breadth remained positive as 17 companies closed up, while five companies closed down. The rest 113 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Top gainers were Gulf International Chemicals (3.23 per cent), National Gas (3.13 per cent), Renaissance Services (2.83 per cent), Al Maha Ceramics (2.77 per cent) and Al Sharqia investment (2.22 per cent).

Top losers were Muscat Desalinate (-3.33 per cent), Raysut Cement (-2.95 per cent), Al Suwadi Power (-2.04 per cent), Takaful Oman (-1.41 per cent) and Al Madina Takaful (-1.04 per cent).



US ends 2021 with disappointing job growth ahead of Omicron surge

Washington, US - The US economy ended 2021 on a sour note with a worse-than-expected employment report underscoring the challenges awaiting President Joe Biden in the new year, as the Omicron variant runs rampant and his legislative agenda stalls.

The world's largest economy gained only 199,000 jobs in the final month of the year, the Labour Department said, defying expectations for an increase of hundreds of thousands of positions fueled by the recovery from COVID-19.

However, the unemployment rate dropped to 3.9 per cent, not far from where it was before the pandemic struck, and Biden hailed the report as marking 'a historic day for our economic recovery'.

Analysts warn the days ahead may nonetheless grow darker as COVID-19 cases caused by the new variant surge and again complicate daily life.

"All of this is before Omicron, which is making lots of people sick and disrupting lots of businesses," Mark Zandi of Moody's Analytics tweeted, noting that the survey was based on data collected before the recent spike in infections.

"Businesses are getting better at managing through the waves, but the pandemic is still calling the shots for the economy," Zandi added.

The data was the latest setback for Biden after his marquee spending plan called Build Back Better was put on hold in Congress due to the resistance



A file photo of a man walking by a sign advertising employment at a restaurant in New York City (AFP)

Businesses are getting better at managing through COVID-19 waves, but the pandemic is still calling the shots for the economy

MARK ZANDI

of a key lawmaker in his Democratic Party.

The Republican opposition in the Senate meanwhile tweeted that the report marks 'another huge miss for the Biden economy'.

The recent surge in inflation has sapped public support for Biden, however the most potent actor against it is not the White House but the Federal Reserve.

Analysts say there was enough good news in this report for the independent central bank

to move closer to increasing interest rates as soon as March, but the expected damage from Omicron could complicate the situation.

"In the context of a rapidly deteriorating health situation, the [first quarter] lull in economic activity will force Fed chair [Jerome] Powell to walk a tightrope at the upcoming policy meetings," Gregory Daco of Oxford Economics said.

The US added an average of 537,000 jobs per-month

for a total of 6.4mn last year, while the fall in the unemployment rate also brought it near to the 3.5 per cent level of February 2020, before the economy collapsed.

A separate Labour Department household survey showed the number of employed people rose by 651,000 in December, a sign the report may have been stronger than the headline indicates.

"Last year ended with fewer new positions being created than expected, but the headline payroll number really should not be the focus of attention," economist Joel Naroff said.

"Available labour is the problem facing businesses and that continues to disappear."

AFP

DAFZ launches 'Talent Pass' licence to attract innovators to Dubai

Dubai, UAE - Under the directives of Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai and chairman of Dubai Executive Council, the Dubai Airport Freezone (DAFZ) on Sunday launched the 'Talent Pass' licence for freelance work.



The new licence that will be available for people with special skills and expertise from around the world, aims to attract global talent and professionals in the fields of media, education, technology, art, marketing and consultancy.

The initiative is expected to further vitalise the business environment in the free zone and strengthen Dubai's position as a global destination for innovators and talent.

The Dubai Airport Freezone, part of the Dubai Integrated Economic Zones Authority (DIEZ), signed an MoU with Dubai Culture and the General Directorate of Residency and Foreigners Affairs (GDRFA) at a ceremony held at DAFZ to facilitate the new initiative.

The event was attended by Dr Mohammed al Zarooni, executive chairman of DIEZ, Major General Mohamed Ahmed al Marri, general director of GDRFA, and Hala Badri, director general of the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority.

The MoU creates the framework for cooperation and coordination to process licenses, visas and other services that support innovators in establishing, operating and growing their business in the emirate.

The MoU is aligned with Dubai's strategy for the creative economy launched by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Vice President, Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai.

The strategy seeks to double the contribution of the creative sector to Dubai's GDP and increase the emirate's ability to attract creative individuals, investors, and entrepreneurs, as well as local, regional, and international investments, all of which will help bolster Dubai's position as a global capital for the creative economy and a hub for talent.

As per the MoU, all parties will support efforts to attract global talent to Dubai and promote it as a centre for creativity and innovation. DAFZ will be committed to evaluate and process applications for the 'Talent Pass' and issue licenses that authorise holders to practice commercial activities within the free zone.

Dubai Culture will be committed to supporting the 'Cultural Visa' for holders of the applicable licence and working to encourage talent to join the free zone and tap regional and global markets through awareness and communication programmes.

The GDRFA will also promote DAFZ as a preferred destination for global businesses and the emirate of Dubai as a business-friendly environment that provides talented individuals opportunities to expand their reach to a large consumer market.

The 'Talent Pass' qualifies its holder to obtain a residence visa for three years, in addition to renting office space through a wide range of modern office solutions provided by DAFZ. The office solutions feature efficient support and flexible operation costs, in addition to the option of obtaining services remotely.

WAM

'Europe nuke plants need €500bn investment'

Paris, France - The European Union will need to invest €500bn in new generation nuclear power stations from now until 2050, the bloc's internal market commissioner said in an interview.

"Existing nuclear plants alone will need €50bn of investment from now until 2030. And new generation ones will need €500bn!" Thierry Breton told the *Journal du Dimanche* newspaper.

Breton also argued that an EU plan to label energy from nuclear power and natural gas as 'green' sources for investment was a vital step towards attracting that capital.

The EU is consulting its member states on that proposal, with internal disagreement on whether the power sources truly qualify as sustainable options.

France has led the charge for nuclear power to be included, despite robust opposition from Austria and Germany.

AFP



Malabar Gold & Diamonds regional head in Oman receives 10-year investor visa

As part of the Investment Residency Program announced by the government of Oman, Najeeb K, regional head of Malabar Gold & Diamonds, Oman received 10-year investor visa from H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, in the presence of H E Asila bint Salim al Samsami, Undersecretary for Investment Promotion in the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) and top officials from ROP, in an event held at MoCIIP on Sunday.

Investment Residency Program offers long-term five and ten-year renewable residence permits to investors in Oman.

"I am extremely humbled to be granted with this coveted visa. It is definitely a significant day for me, and I am grateful to the authorities of this great country for considering me and the leadership of Malabar Gold



& Diamonds, for giving me the opportunity to lead the growth of the brand in Oman," said Najeeb, on the achievement.

Najeeb heads the Malabar Gold & Diamonds operations in Oman, where he has been employed for the last 13+ years and is also a shareholder in the organisation. He has been residing in Oman for more than 11 years.

Malabar Gold & Diamonds is the flagship company of Malabar Group, a leading diversified Indian business conglomerate. Established in 1993 in the Indian state of Kerala, Malabar Gold & Diamonds today has a strong retail network of over 260 outlets spread across ten countries, 14 wholesale units in addition to offices, design centres, and factories spread across India, the Middle East, Far East & USA. With an annual turnover of US\$4.51bn, the firm currently ranks 'one' among the largest jewellery retailers globally.

Alizz Islamic Bank joins first Waqf Forum

Waqf sector is considered one of the main drivers of funds growth in the sultanate, said Asaad bin Hilal al Kharusi, acting chief operating officer of Alizz Islamic Bank. He added that though the sector is still new in the sultanate, it is just a matter of time before people realise how Waqf foundations will take charge of asset management using a different approach.

Kharusi was speaking at the first Waqf Forum organised by Imam Jabir Bin Zaid Waqf Foundation (JBZF) in partnership with the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs under the auspices of Sheikh Al Fadhli Mohammed al Harthi, Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers. Alizz Islamic Bank was among the key sponsors of first Waqf Forum organised at the Sheraton Hotel.

He added that cooperation and investment with Waqf foundations will deliver several impressive results through endowment, experience, efforts and money which constitutes the main pillar of real investments. In



Asaad bin Hilal al Kharusi

the same context, he stressed the importance of calling upon all Waqf foundations and funds to raise awareness about their definition, roles and activities.

Elaborating on sukuk, Kharusi said, "We had previous experience with sukuk. Though it is easier to issue sukuk to institutions and major investors, small investors have the right to join the investment sector and benefit from potential opportunities. Therefore, we made an excellent

decision to offer such an opportunity to small investors. But before that, we launched a major marketing campaign that covered main cities across different governorates to educate people about sukuk, given that it was the first issue directed to individuals. We received a positive response as about one-third of the subscription was from individuals."

The forum aimed to provide a platform for Waqf foundations, experts and advocates to meet and discuss the promotion of this sector.

The forum witnessed three panel discussions on the topics of 'Waqf Partnership - Cooperation and Integration', 'Mechanism of Management of Waqf Foundations' and 'Investment in Waqf Foundations' with 17 speakers.

The panels highlighted cooperation and integration in the Waqf sector, its management mechanisms and investment in Waqf establishments.

In addition, the forum organised three workshops covering

topics related to the endowment sector, including governance of endowment foundations, feasibility studies for endowment investment projects, and promotion of endowment foundations.

The forum also witnessed the signing of a number of MoUs and cooperation notes with various establishments in the sultanate. It is noteworthy that the first endowment forum aims to promote cooperation between Waqf foundations and actors in this sector on the one hand, and its sponsors, on the other hand, through the exchange of experiences and knowledge, and the developing of various aspects related to endowments administration at Waqf foundations.

The forum also acted as a catalyst to highlight the significance of Waqf foundations and their role in societal development and promoting partnerships between Waqf foundations on the one hand, and public-private sector institutions on the other hand.

MHD ACERE ties up with Scorpion Automotive UK

MHD ACERE, an integral vertical of the MHD Group, has tied up with Scorpion Automotive Limited, UK's leading manufacturer and supplier of GPS vehicle tracking, security and telematics systems.

Under an MoU recently signed by Amin Tahon, general manager - CECV, MHD ACERE and Mark Downing, MD - Scorpion Automotive Limited, MHD ACERE will be an exclusive distributor of Scorpion Automotive Fleet management solutions, vehicle security and telematics systems in Oman.

MHD ACERE has always tied up with the best global brands to bring exceptional products and services to its customers in the country.

Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE said, "At MHD, our constant endeavour is to offer best global solutions to people of Oman. We are confident that our partnership with Scorpion Automotive Limited UK will provide our customers with



an outstanding quality and customer service. We will offer Scorpion's Fleet Management solutions with innovative GPS vehicle tracking, security and telematics system to provide our customers with the peace of mind that comes from knowing their fleet's security is in the very best hands".

From its inception in 1973, Scorpion remains at the forefront of vehicle electronics and security technologies. Their large range of insurance approved security and GPS tracking systems

provide businesses and members of the public with the ultimate vehicle protection and peace of mind.

Scorpion also offers vehicle manufacturers an end-to-end bespoke design and manufacturing service. Through this service, they have a growing reputation for global excellence in OE line fit security and telematics systems, electronic devices and vehicle LED and Bulb Failure Monitoring technologies in applications where LED light clusters are used.

Ooredoo Social+: Stay connected

Ooredoo Social+ means subscribers never miss a moment of the latest trends and news on social media, while also staying 'social' with family and friends around the clock. New and existing prepaid users can enjoy 3GB of social data to chat, tweet, snap and post videos and photos on the latest platforms for only RO3.150. Valid for 30 days, users can now enjoy the Internet to the max without running low on data. Simply head to the award-winning Ooredoo App down subscribe.

Ooredoo is always looking for ways to enrich consumers digital lives and make sharing and communicating easier, more affordable, and oh so convenient. To find out more about Ooredoo's latest products and services, head to www.ooredoo.om, or download the Ooredoo app from the Apple Store or Google Play.

Ooredoo provides individuals and businesses with cutting edge digital products and services, so that customers can enjoy the Internet.

A world of comfort: Mercedes-Benz Oman announces its latest range of certified pre-owned vehicles

Setting benchmarks for luxury and performance, Mercedes-Benz Oman has announced its latest line-up of certified pre-owned cars. Customers can drive away in their favourite Mercedes-Benz and enter a world of comfort, innovation and advanced technology at exclusive prices that are valid until March 31, 2022.

Offering a variety of sought-after vehicles, the all-star range includes the family-friendly A 200 Sedan (year 2021), starting at RO17,319 including VAT, the dynamic and elegant E 200 (year 2020) starting at RO20,994 including VAT, the eye-catching and intelligent plug-in hybrid C 300 e (year 2020) starting at RO20,994 including VAT, and the unmatched GLC 300 4MATIC (year 2021) starting at RO24,669 including VAT.

"Mercedes-Benz aspires to offer the ultimate in vehicle comfort, safety and luxury, and this holds true with our certified pre-owned vehicles. Offering drivers



the opportunity to purchase their dream car no matter their budget, our certified pre-owned vehicles have been tested and approved by highly trained technicians. Whatever car our customers choose, they can be rest-assured that they are getting the very best for their money," said Shaun Michael,

chief executive officer at Mercedes-Benz Oman.

Customers are invited to explore the A 200 Sedan (18,596km) in Polar White with leather in Bahia Brown/Black, the E 200 (15,812km) in Designo Hyacinth Red with ARTICO man-made leather in Macchiato Beige, or the C 300 e (8,928km)

in Graphite Gray Metallic with ARTICO man-made leather in Saddle Brown. Or, they can go all out with the GLC 300 4MATIC (7,379km) in Obsidian Black with ARTICO Man-Made Leather in Cranberry Red.

With safety being a top priority at Mercedes-Benz, all mechanical and electrical

components of the certified pre-owned vehicles go through a stringent 150-point inspection, including engine checks, fluids and on-road evaluation. Furthermore, customers will benefit from unlimited-mileage warranty for one year that can be extended for up to two additional years, as well as 24 hours road-

side assistance (selected vehicles only) and a full services history.

With the customer's convenience in mind, service packages and finance options are available upon request and purchased cars can either be delivered or collected at the nearest Mercedes-Benz showroom.

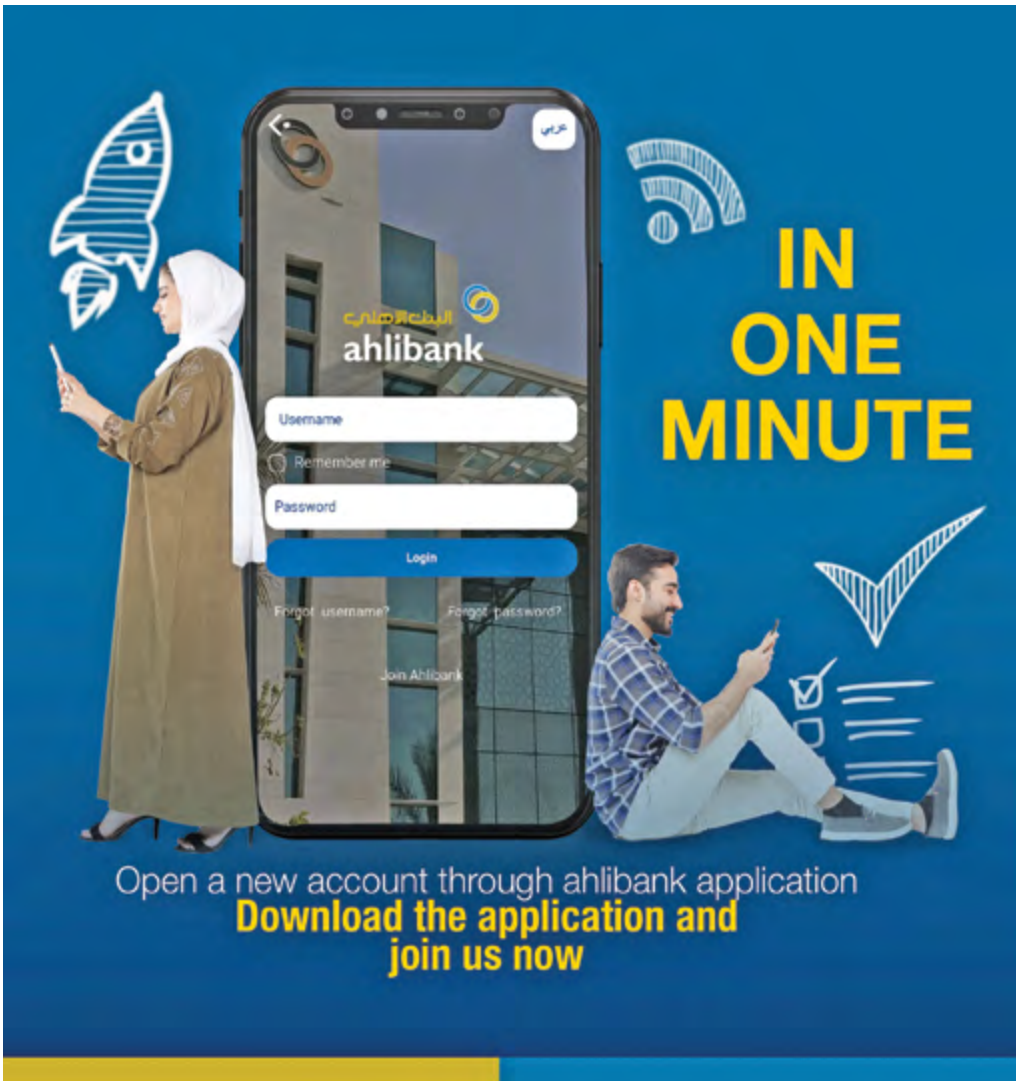
ahlibank launches app-based account opening service

Complementing the ongoing global digitisation process and meet the growing demand for ‘instant’ banking practices, ahlbank has introduced a new mobile app-based account opening service where all new-to-bank customers can open an account just within one minute.

Having demonstrated its intent to forge ahead as a vibrant and innovative bank of choice for people who desire personal banking experience, ahlbank has structured the instant account opening app to project its ideals of digitisation and enhance avenues for customers who are looking to conduct their banking transactions from the comfort of their individual space. The new facility also upholds the value it places on providing round-the-clock service to its customers.

Commenting on the merits of the new mobile app, Muneer Ahmed al Balushi, AGM – Head of Retail Distribution, ahlbank, said, “Digitalisation is the need of the hour and, at ahlbank, we have well realised the importance of constantly upgrading our services to stay abreast with the global banking industry. The new service will enhance the level of service we provide, and will also help in exceeding the expectations of our customers.”

“Through this service we intend to reach out to all our potential customers, assuring them of our ongoing endeavors to create and implement innovative



solutions for their ever-changing requirements.”

“Over the years, we have demonstrated our single-minded commitment to customer service, and continue to pursue the same with innovative solutions and exclusive services. We rely on customer feedback for posi-

tive growth and have a team of professionals who constantly assess market requirements and propose developmental plans that put us in the driving seat. Today, we are proud of our credentials as the fastest growing bank in Oman and are confident that our offers of dis-

tinctive and timely banking services and products will propel us to greater heights,” added Balushi.

The instant account opening mobile app is all about introducing a much-needed sense of ease and comfort. Customers can now open their savings account

by simply registering their personal details; this is further simplified by scanning the ID card from the front and backside, and by taking a selfie with one’s mobile phone to document the identity of the account holder. For residents and expatriates, the app would also ask for verification of the ID card (both sides), along with their passports. Following the registration process, the savings account will be created and activated instantly.

Hassan al Zaabi, head – Digital Channels, ahlbank, said, “The new app will help us consolidate our vision of becoming an unrivaled institution of proactive customer service. The add-on of ‘instant’ to the account opening service is an expression of our ongoing venture to add ease into everyday banking procedures. And yes, we are on track to realize our digitization dream and are resilient to the market needs and demands.”

New to bank customers need only to download the ahlbank mobile app from respective stores to instantly open their savings account and access all the services and facilities embedded in the app.

Through the app, customers will be able to manage their accounts and cards more easily. Besides, the app also allows customers to access their account statement, make local transfers, conduct banking transactions and pay utility bills.



beIN Sports brings exclusive coverage of TotalEnergies AFCON Cameroon

beIN Media Group (beIN), the global sports, media, and entertainment group, and its flagship sports channel beIN Sports, will bring the TotalEnergies Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) Cameroon 2021, live and exclusively to audiences’ screens across all 24 countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) from January 9 to February 6, 2022. The African tournament will be broadcast on beIN SPORTS Max 1 and beIN SPORTS Max 2, showcasing every kick from all 52 matches, and including over 15 hours of original and unique documentary content.

This year’s AFCON will be held at six stadiums in five major cities across the Central African country of Cameroon. Seven Arab teams are set to participate - Morocco, Comoros, Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Tunisia, and Mauritania - with eight beIN correspondents accompanying the teams across the various host cities, and providing the latest news, reviews, and previews throughout the tournament.

Commenting on beIN’s exclusive coverage of AFCON, Mohammed al Bader, managing director of beIN Channels, MENA, said: “AFCON is the very best possible start to what is set to be an exceptional year in the world of sports - both industry-wide and, particularly, for football leading up to the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022TM. We are ready to provide our subscribers with exceptional coverage and over 15 hours of original content that celebrates the extraordinary Arab participation in AFCON, which reflects our commitment to our millions of viewers and subscribers in MENA to always deliver the best and curate unfor-

Sohar International concludes 9th edition of Viewpoints

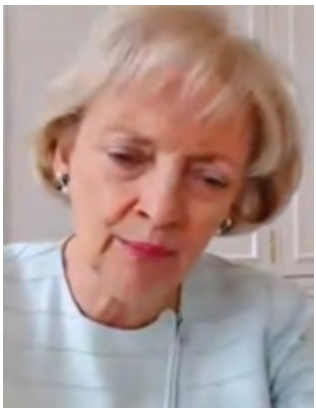
Hosted by the chairman of Sohar International, Mohammed Mahfoudh al Ardhi, Sohar International recently concluded its 9th virtual edition of Viewpoints.

The latest session featured as its distinguished guest speaker Mary Louise Gorno who is the managing director of Ingenuity International LLC and specialises in organisational governance, succession planning, and managing leadership issues.

In line with the subject, ‘Step by Step: A Journey to Now’, Gorno covered the different aspects of assuming a courageous leadership style in the corporate world and highlighted how it was instrumental in driving progress. She also enlightened the women participants on maintaining a balance between work and personal life, and managing both diligently.



Mohammed Mahfoudh al Ardhi



Mary Louise Gorno

The virtual edition, which was live-streamed via Sohar International’s YouTube channel and Zoom platform, saw the active participation of university students, industry leaders, C-suite executives and professionals from different sectors of society. As with previous editions, the 9th virtual edition of Viewpoints

also proved to be a dynamic session where participants got the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogues with the speaker, and further develop their individual skill sets picking on global best practices.

Commenting on the session, Ardhi said, “As a bank that has played a pioneering role in con-

tributing to the financial sector, we truly understand the importance of leading with courage. Through our endeavours, we constantly seek to encourage individuals to not just assume leadership roles but spearhead innovative projects that have the capacity to positively impact society at large. The insights provided by Gorno were indeed enlightening, and we are certain that through inspiring sessions like these we will be able to create an empowered workforce that is self-motivated, reserves a progressive outlook and has the zeal to play an instrumental part in shaping the future of any organisation.”

Passionate about empowering individuals, Gorno highlighted the various aspects of the journey towards becoming a leader. After a brief speech on

her personal experiences and learnings, she answered a plethora of questions around career development, choices one needs to make as a leader, as well as the options available for young professionals to pursue leadership-oriented programmes. A high level of interest from the audience set the pace for the rest of the discussion, where the guest speaker pointed out that there is no right or wrong time to being a leader - preparation starts from day 1 of one’s professional journey.

In line with the same, Viewpoints - Sohar International’s Chairman Forum has set a benchmark as a noble thought leadership initiative in the Sultanate, and has been honored with the coveted ‘OER Business Excellence Award’ for creating a world-class knowledge platform.

Sensational, yet affordable, all-new 2022 Chevrolet Groove

Chevrolet Groove, the sporty and youthful new offering from General Motors, made its debut in the Omani market after garnering spectacular reviews following its launch in key markets across the world.

The all-new 2022-edition of the compact SUV, bristling with innovative technologies and infotainment features, has been designed keeping in mind the tech-savvy millennial generation of the Middle East. And with prices starting at RO6,889 (inclusive of VAT), the superbly sculpted and engineered Groove is also one of the most affordable SUVs in its class and segment.

Every facet of the Chevrolet Groove is inspired by Chevrolet’s design ethos. Stunning in style, the trendy SUV exudes a combination of lean, muscular and athletic sportiness whether parked



or in motion. This striking personality is also reflected in its signature horizontal three-line grille emblazoned with the Chevrolet

bowtie and flanked by ultra-thin headlamps.

Neat and nimble, the Chevrolet Groove is powered by a 1.5ltr

engine mated with a continuously variable transmission (CVT) to ensure a smooth and immaculate performance on the

road. With excellent fuel efficiency and fun-to-drive characteristics, the sporty crossover delivers on looks, performance

and reliability - the enduring hallmarks of GM’s Chevrolet SUV range.

Safety features like 4 airbags and Technology features come standard across all variants in the Groove line-up from the base trim upwards.

For ease of driving and maneuverability, there is a reverse camera and sensors, while a multifunctional steering wheel ensures all controls are easily accessible from Cruise Control. Stability and Traction Control also ensures the driver remains in control, no matter the road conditions.

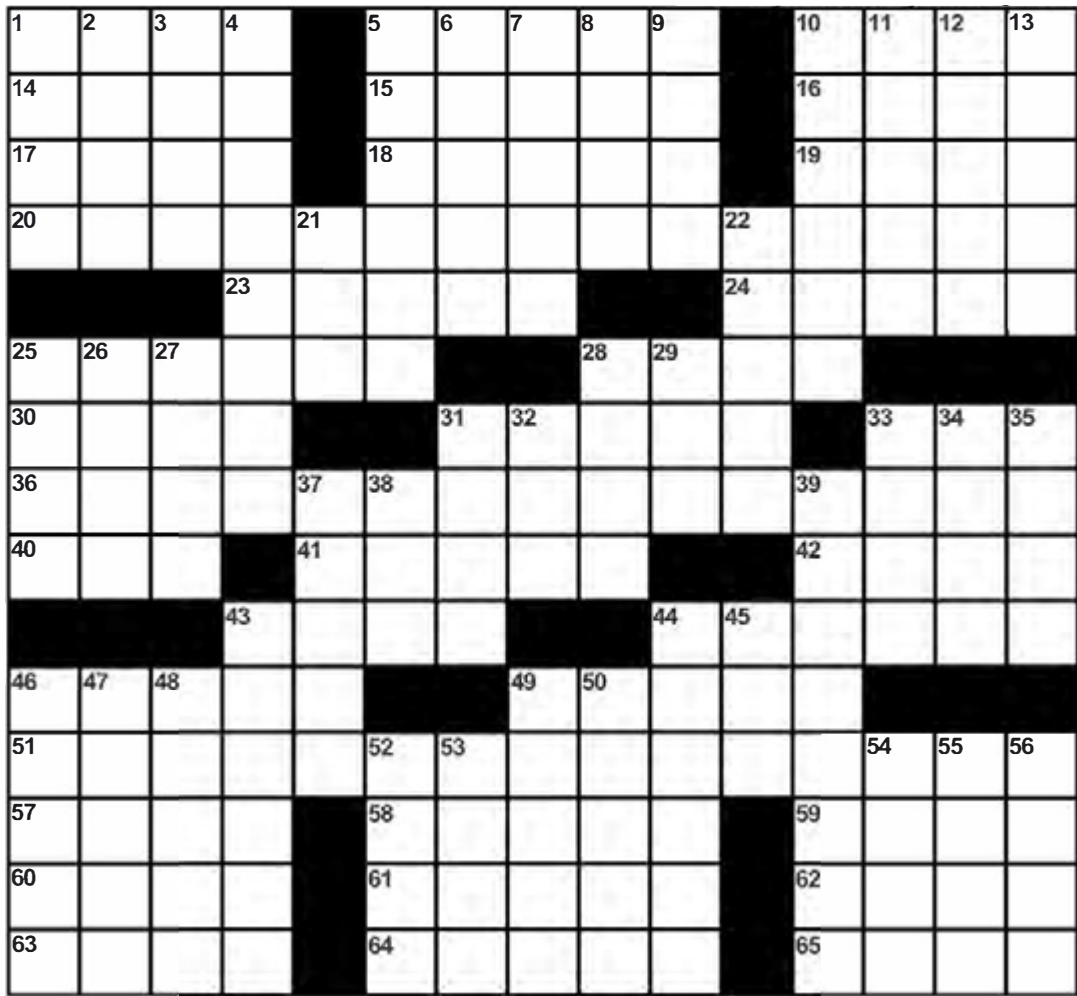
A spacious and delightfully designed cabin can seat up to five people. Taking centre-stage in the cabin is an 8-inch screen packed with the latest Chevrolet infotainment capabilities with Apple Carplay and Android auto, including phone projection, USB

ports, and up to six speakers. A panoramic sunroof in the Premier trim helps bring a bit of the outside world into the comfortable cabin.

“We are excited about the introduction of the all-new Chevrolet Groove here in the Sultanate of Oman, given the huge buzz it has generated elsewhere in the Middle East and the wider world. Its youthful appeal and trendy features, not to mention its immensely affordable price tag, positions it well to be a best-seller in its segment in the Omani market,” said Sudhir M, CEO - OTE Group, exclusive distributors of Chevrolet in Oman.

Available in four distinct colour options - Metal Red, Candy White, Aurora Silver and European Blue - the Chevrolet Groove is on display at OTE showrooms across the country.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) It's drawn with a rifle?
5) "Snow White" fruit
10) Batman has one
14) "To Sir With Love" singer
15) Like a crossword
16) Brainy product
17) Eye part or flower
18) Give birth to a cow
19) Sardine cans
20) Three types of wheels
23) Damsons and green-gages
24) Misplaces
25) Engulfed in fire
28) Part of the leg
30) Extended family
31) Printer's purchase
33) Type of high school rally
36) Three types of wheels
40) _ out a living (scrape by)
41) Mine exits
42) "Not to mention ..."
43) Full of anticipation
44) Type of gun
46) Dictation taker, briefly

49) It's down in the mouth
51) Three types of wheels
57) Under the covers
58) Guy in the family
59) Gin flavour
60) America's national flower
61) Drawn-out fight
62) Duke's counterpart
63) Braille markings
64) Expensive violin, for short
65) Goblet part

DOWN

1) Radar screen image
2) It replaced the lira
3) Finished hang-gliding
4) Sweepers' utensils
5) Pile up, as interest
6) Liquid part of blood (var.)
7) Fleshy fruit parts
8) Jeans purveyor Strauss
9) Adam's address
10) Large, lemonlike fruit
11) "See ya!"
12) Pasta choice
13) Some bridge seats
21) "A Nightmare on_

Street"
22) Make playful romantic overtures
25) Persistent pain
26) Verbal abuse
27) Unsatisfactory, as excuses
28) Hydrotherapeutic hangouts
29) "... and sat down beside..."
31) Goody-two-shoes
32) Make a move
33) Alternative to a caplet
34) "What_ could go wrong?"
35) A good one will thicken
37) Append
38) Shogun's capital
39) Ill feelings?
43) Battery terminals
44) Put through a blender
45) North Pole peon
46) Grassy area
47) Strictly verboten
48) Give off, as perspiration
49) Worrier's malady
50) Europe's longest river

52) Proclaim profanely
53) "Get_!" (boss's order)
54) Like useless tires

55) Ripped
56) Ship's steering mechanism

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Not everyone knows that we make our own luck, but it's a fact that you count on every day. If some recent setback has brought you down, don't think of it as failure. Instead, see it as a lesson to help your future success. What will you know to do next time? Once you've figured it all out, you can go back and tweak your original formula. You're sure to like your results next time.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Character is much on your mind right now as you ask yourself what you're really made of. At some level, you might be trying to decide between right and wrong. Of course, things aren't always as black and white as that, but the essential principle often applies. As you walk through life today, try to do as much good as you can, though you might have to figure out a few things first.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Your ability to spin tales comes in handy in many ways on days like today. If someone needs help with a difficult or complex concept you know cold, step up and offer a bit of your knowledge. With your charm and light touch, you should be able to explain it and make it look easy. Don't be shy. This stuff is too important to keep to yourself. Sharing your talent with others will make you an important person within your circle.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Someone close is more than willing to teach you a thing or two if you can just make some time for them. This goes double for any family elders or other mentors in your life. Listen with extra care to what they've got to say to you. They know a lot more about the human experience than you think, and their wisdom can cut across generations with ease. Keep an open mind and an open heart.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Your brain might be stuck in a loop just now, so it's high time to take a look at your options. It's way too easy to repeat negative or nagging messages and just play them over and over without considering any alternatives. When you catch yourself, you can reprogramme that station to something more useful and positive. Reply to every downer with something you can really believe in!

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You need to put your money where your mouth is today. Even better, you should endeavor to put your money where your bank is. It's definitely time to finesse your finances and start thinking clearly about the future. Your energy helps you get serious about long-term plans, and that has a definite effect on you right now. Start thinking about where you want to be in a few years. With the right planning, it will happen.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

There is a risk that someone will overreact to something you say or that you will overreact to something you hear. But don't try to censor yourself to prevent a blowup. You will just end up confusing yourself and diluting your message. Carry on as you normally would, and deal with any emotional outbursts as they come. Roll with the punches and you might even have fun coming up with a solution.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You've got so many different and interesting people in your immediate environment, and they're all looking for you today! Everyone you meet has an absolutely fascinating if completely unexpected story to tell, and you should be enthralled by each and every one. It helps that you're pretty fascinating yourself and can spin tales with the very best of them.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You rightly see yourself as a nonconformist, and you love the reactions you get. Go your own way and make up your own mind today, and your independence is sure to be widely admired. It becomes especially noticeable now that you're surrounded by various friends and loved ones who just can't get enough of your company. How did you end up with so many fantastic people in your life?

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

If someone is trying to avoid your questions, you need to start raising a ruckus until they can't ignore you any more. Stay polite, of course. Good manners really do count in this situation. But don't let them move past you until they've given up the answers you need. It's important for you to move on with the rest of your life, and that should mean something to them.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Even if you've got a problem with someone close, it's more important for you to deal with other issues right now, such as reclaiming your sense of humour! Do whatever it takes to get it back: Watch a funny movie, call a friend who's a reliable jokester, or just dance around in your living room until the existential silliness overwhelms you! You will feel energised and happy.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

It's way too easy for you to get caught up in the daily minutiae of life. Try to regain your perspective by helping someone else today. It could mean volunteering for a big community organisation, mentoring a child, or writing a check. Whatever form it takes, today is definitely the day to think about service to humanity as a whole. Helping anyone in need will make your heart fill-up with happiness and gratitude.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The National Emblem was adopted by Government of India on

 - a. January 26, 1950
 - b. August 15, 1947
 - c. August 2, 1950
 - d. July 12, 1947
2. The scientist who first discovered that the earth revolves round the sun was

 - a. Newton
 - b. Dalton
 - c. Copernicus
 - d. Einstein
3. The sacred place for Buddhists is

 - a. Lumbini (Nepal) where Buddha was born
 - b. Bodh Gaya (Bihar) where Buddha received enlightenment
 - c. Kusinagara (UP) where Buddha attained Nirvana
 - d. All of the above

Answers: 1. a 2. c 3. d

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

Y	U	L	S
S	S	T	O
S	W	H	A
U	B	P	N

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

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

WORD BUILDER

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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



A Yemeni pro-government fighter mans a position to fight Huthi rebels in the south of governorate of Marib, last week (AFP)

Iran allegedly smuggling weapons to Yemen: Report

Washington, US - The United Nations found thousands of weapons recently seized in the Arabian Sea likely came from a single port in Iran, evidence Tehran is exporting arms to Yemen and elsewhere, *The Wall Street Journal* reported on Saturday.

Yemen has been wracked by civil war since 2014, pitting Iran-backed Huthi rebels against the internationally recognised government.

The UN imposed an arms embargo on the Huthis in 2015.

The United States as well as ally Saudi Arabia - which leads the military coalition backing the Yemeni government - have long accused Iran of supplying the Huthis with weapons, a charge Tehran denies.

Citing a confidential report by a UN Security Council panel of experts on Yemen, the Journal wrote that boats and land transport were used to smuggle weapons made in Russia, China and Iran into Yemen.

The arms included rocket launchers, machine guns and sniper rifles, which had been

seized by the US Navy in recent months.

Boats used to transport the weapons had left from the southeastern Iranian port of Jask, the UN report found, based on interviews with the boat crew and data from the onboard navigational instruments, the Journal said.

The rebel group's deputy information minister denied Iran was smuggling weapons into Yemen, according to the Journal, and Tehran said the weapons were not sold or transported to the country.

In recent months, fighting in Yemen has seen Saudi-led coalition forces carry out airstrikes on the rebel-held capital Sanaa.

Riyadh has said its 2015 intervention in Yemen was aimed at preventing an Iranian ally taking power on its doorstep.

The UN estimates Yemen's war will have directly or indirectly killed 377,000 people by the end of the year.

More than 80 per cent of the population of around 30mn require humanitarian assistance.

AFP

Unrest in Kazakhstan: At least 164 people killed, 103 in Almaty

Almaty, Kazakhstan - More than a hundred people have died in Kazakhstan in the wake of violent riots that have shaken Central Asia's largest country this week, media reported on Sunday citing the health ministry.

The energy-rich nation of 19mn people has been rocked by a week of upheaval with nearly 6,000 - including a number of foreigners - detained over the unrest.

At least 164 people were killed in the riots, including 103 in the largest city Almaty, which saw some of the fiercest clashes between protesters and police.

The new figures mark a drastic increase in the death toll with officials previously saying 26 'armed criminals' had been killed and 16 security officers had died. In total, 5,800 people have been detained for questioning, the presidency said in a statement on Sunday.

The figures included 'a substantial number of foreign nationals', it said without elaborating.

'The situation has stabilised in all regions of the country', even if security forces were continuing 'cleanup' operations, the statement added after President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev held a crisis meeting.

Fuel price rises sparked the unrest that broke out a week ago in western provincial areas but quickly spread to large cities, including the economic hub Almaty, where riots erupted and police opened fire using live rounds.

The interior ministry, quoted Sunday by local media, put property damage at around €175mn.

More than 100 businesses and banks were attacked and looted and more than 400 vehicles destroyed, the ministry reportedly said.

A relative calm appeared to have returned to Almaty, with police sometimes firing shots into the air to stop people ap-



People rally in front of a huge placard reading 'Say No To Putin' during an action dubbed #SayNOToPutin in Kyiv on Sunday (AFP)



A Russian military vehicle loading in to a cargo plane to depart to Kazakhstan at Chkalovsky airport outside Moscow on Sunday (AFP)

proaching the city's central square, an AFP correspondent said.

Supermarkets were reopening on Sunday, media reported, amid fears of food shortages.

Kazakhstan said on Saturday its former security chief had been arrested for suspected treason, as Russia hit back at US criticism of its deployment of troops to the crisis-hit country.

News of the detention of Karim Masimov, a former prime minister and longtime ally of Kazakhstan's ex-leader Nursultan Nazarbayev, came amid speculation of a power struggle in the ex-Soviet nation.

The domestic intelligence agency, the National Security Committee (KNB), announced Masimov had been detained on Thursday on suspicion of high

treason.

President Tokayev sacked Masimov after protests turned into widespread violence, with government buildings in Almaty stormed and set ablaze.

Masimov (56) was fired at the height of the unrest on Wednesday, when Tokayev also took over from Nazarbayev as head of the powerful security council.

Nazarbayev's spokesman Aidos Ukibay on Sunday again denied rumours the ex-president had left the country and said he supported the president.

Ukibay added that Nazarbayev voluntarily ceded control of the security council.

In a hardline address to the nation on Friday, Tokayev said 20,000 'armed bandits' had attacked Almaty and authorised his forces to shoot to kill without warning.

Much of the public anger appeared directed at Nazarbayev, who is 81 and had ruled Kaza-

khanst since 1989 before handing over power.

Many protesters shouted 'old man out!' in reference to Nazarbayev, and a statue of him was torn down in the southern city of Taldykorgan.

Critics accuse him and his family of staying in control behind the scenes and accumulating vast wealth at the expense of ordinary citizens.

The full picture of the chaos has often been unclear, with widespread disruptions to communications including days-long internet shutdowns.

Flights into the country have been repeatedly cancelled and Almaty's airport will remain closed 'until the situation is stabilised', authorities said on Sunday.

Tokayev has thanked the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) for sending troops to help deal with the unrest.

AFP

Sudanese forces fire tear gas at protests

Khartoum, Sudan - Security forces fired tear gas on Sunday as thousands rallied in Sudan's capital Khartoum and a neighbouring city, witnesses said, keeping up pressure on the military following a coup 11 weeks ago.

The coup, led by army chief General Abdel Fattah al Burhan on October 25, derailed a power-sharing transition between the military and civilians that had been painstakingly established in the wake of longtime autocrat Omar al Bashir's ouster in 2019.

Security forces fired tear gas as pro-democracy protesters headed towards the presidential palace, witnesses said, amid roadblocks seeking to prevent people converging there and at army headquarters. Protesters also rallied in Omdurman, Khartoum's twin city.

The resumption of protests since the coup has been met with a crackdown that has killed at least 60 people, according to medics. Authorities have repeatedly denied using live ammunition in confronting protests and said scores of security forces have been wounded during demonstrations that have often 'deviated from peacefulness'.

Last week, Sudan's civilian prime minister Abdalla Hamdok resigned saying the country was at a 'dangerous crossroads threatening its very survival'.

He had only taken his position back up on November 21, having originally been ousted along with his government in the October



Sudanese people protest against the October 2021 military coup, in Khartoum on Sunday (AFP)

The way to resolve the crisis begins with the complete overthrow of the putschist military council

SPA STATEMENT

coup.

On Saturday, the United Nations said it would facilitate talks between key Sudanese stakeholders in a bid to resolve

the crisis.

But the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), the civilian alliance which spearheaded the protests against Bashir and became integral to the transition government, said it had not received 'any details' about the UN initiative.

On Sunday, the Sudanese Professionals Association - similarly instrumental in the anti-Bashir protests - said it completely 'rejected' the UN-facilitated talks.

'The way to resolve the Sudanese crisis begins with the

complete overthrow of the putschist military council and the handover of its members to face justice over the killings committed against the defenceless (and) peaceful Sudanese people,' the SPA said in a statement.

Burhan has insisted that the October military takeover 'was not a coup' but only meant to 'rectify the course of the Sudanese transition'.

The UN Security Council is to meet on Wednesday to discuss the latest developments in Sudan.

AFP

Russia rules out concessions at talks with US on Ukraine

Geneva, Switzerland - Russia ruled out on Sunday any concession at talks with the United States on soaring tensions over Ukraine as Moscow seeks a wide-ranging new security arrangement with the West but faces strong pressure to pull back troops.

Russia's deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov told Russian news agencies ahead of his talks in Geneva the Kremlin was also 'disappointed' with signals coming from both Washington and Brussels, where NATO and the European Union are based.

The high-level discussions start a week of diplomacy in which Russia will meet with NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), with the US trying to assure European allies they will not be sidelined.

Russia since late last year has amassed tens of thousands of troops at the Ukrainian border and demanded guarantees that NATO will not expand further eastward.

The Kremlin is insisting NATO must never grant membership to ex-Soviet Ukraine, which is pushing to join.

The United States, to be represented by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, agreed to talks even though it made plain that many of Moscow's proposals are non-starters.

Originally scheduled to start



Sergei Ryabkov

on Monday, Sherman is now due to have a working dinner with Ryabkov on Sunday evening, said a State Department spokesperson.

"We will not agree to any concession. That is completely excluded," Ryabkov said.

"We are disappointed with the signals coming in the last few days from Washington but also from Brussels."

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, dismissing Moscow's demands as 'gaslighting', has insisted that talks will yield no progress so long as Russia has a 'gun to Ukraine's head'.

"We're prepared to respond forcefully to further Russian aggression. But a diplomatic solution is still possible and preferable if Russia chooses it,"

Blinken said on Friday.

Russian President Vladimir Putin met his US counterpart Joe Biden in Geneva in June and agreed on regular 'stability' talks between Sherman and Ryabkov, who will again lead the Russian delegation.

In two phone calls to Putin, Biden has warned of severe consequences if Russia invades Ukraine.

Measures under consideration include sanctions on Putin's inner circle, cancelling Russia's controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline to Germany or, in the most drastic scenario, severing Russia's links to the world's banking system.

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, warned that Washington would also send more troops to eastern NATO members such as Poland and the Baltics if Russia invaded.

Europeans have showed solidarity, with EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell visiting the frontline in Ukraine, although some nations are expected to hesitate at the strongest measures.

"Whatever the solution, Europe has to be involved," EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said.

Russia insists it was deceived after the Cold War and understood that NATO would not expand.

AFP

Army clears roads around snow-bound Pakistan town after deadly blizzard

Kuldana, Pakistan - Army rescuers on Sunday cleared routes around a Pakistan hill town sheltering thousands of tourists after 22 people died in vehicles trapped by heavy snow.

The resort town of Murree, around 70km northeast of Islamabad, was inundated with tourists and daytrippers last week after unusually heavy snow turned it into a winter wonderland.

But a blizzard from Friday onwards felled trees and blocked narrow roads leading in and out of the town, which clings to steep hills and valleys at an altitude of 2,300m.

"It was not snow, and not even heavy snow, it was unprecedented... with four to five feet in few hours," Tariq Ullah, an administrative official in nearby Nathia Gali, told AFP on Sunday.

"(I) never saw such a huge snowstorm in my life. There were strong winds, uprooted trees, avalanches. People around were terrified, each having his or her own account of suffering."

Officials said nearly 100,000 visitors in thousands of vehicles had thronged the town by Friday, causing an enormous traffic jam even before the blizzard.

They said 22 people died in vehicles trapped in the snow overnight on Friday - either from



Local tourists walk along a road after a heavy snowfall in Murree, around 70km northeast of the capital Islamabad on Saturday (AFP)

cold, or carbon monoxide poisoning from exhaust fumes generated by drivers running engines to keep warm.

‘Going to sleep’

They included ten children - six who died alongside their mother and father, said a senior

police officer.

"We are switching on the heater and going to sleep," Dawn newspaper quoted assistant inspector Naveed Iqbal as saying in a final call to his son in the capital. He was buried late on Saturday alongside his family at a ceremony attended by hundreds

of fellow officers.

On Sunday, a steady stream of vehicles and people on foot were making their way out of hard-hit Kuldana, close to Murree. Many vehicles were stuck by the side of the road, bonnets open, waiting for a jump-start after draining their batteries to

run heaters during their ordeal.

Piles of rubbish marked spots where cars had spent the cold night.

Prime Minister Imran Khan said he was shocked and upset by the tragedy, but that the unprecedented snowfall and rush of people 'caught district admin

unprepared'. Several Pakistan newspapers, however, excoriated administrators on Sunday, noting the country's weather bureau warned as early as January 6 of the approaching blizzard.

"All concerned authorities are particularly advised to remain 'ALERT' during the forecast period," the National Weather Forecasting Centre said on Thursday, adding 'heavy snow-fall' could cause road closures in Murree and elsewhere.

Investigation promised

Authorities have promised an investigation.

"Our first priority was rescue, which is ongoing, then relief," Hasaan Khawar, spokesman for the Punjab provincial government, said in a video on his Twitter page on Sunday.

"Then a high-level inquiry will be launched and if there is any kind of negligence, then action will be taken against all those involved."

The Pakistan military's public relations department said they had pulled all survivors from cars trapped along the route to Murree and taken them to shelters set up in the town.

More than 1,000 abandoned vehicles along the route were hampering efforts by bulldozers

to clear snow from roads, it said, and in some areas troops were using shovels.

Leading up to the weekend, Pakistan social media had been full of pictures and videos of people playing in the snow around Murree, a picturesque resort town built by the British in the 19th century as a sanatorium for its colonial troops.

Authorities warned as early as last weekend that too many vehicles were trying to enter the town, but even that failed to discourage hordes of daytrippers from the capital.

Many Pakistanis complained on social media on Sunday that Murree hoteliers and guest-house owners had compounded the problem by price gouging, prompting stranded people to spend the night in their cars rather than pay for a room.

"Things would have been different if local people and hotels were cooperative, but the reputation and conduct of the local people of Murree are very bad in this respect," a senior government official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

There were also reports, however, of locals throwing open their homes to stranded tourists and offering food and blankets to those caught in the open.

AFP



A person reads news on the arrest of Afghan university professor Faizullah Jalal, on mobile phone on Sunday (AFP)

Afghan professor held for criticising Taliban regime

Kabul, Afghanistan - A prominent Afghan university professor who openly criticised the Taliban's hardline regime has been arrested in Kabul, a spokesman for the government said.

Professor Faizullah Jalal has made several appearances on television talk shows since the previous US-backed government was ousted in August, blaming the Taliban for the worsening financial crisis and criticising them for ruling by force.

Since returning to power, the Taliban have cracked down on dissent, forcefully dispersing women's rights protests and briefly detaining several Afghan journalists.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid tweeted that Jalal had been detained on Saturday over statements he made on social media in which he was 'trying to instigate people against the system and was playing with the dignity of the people'.

"He has been arrested so that others don't make similar senseless comments in the name of being a professor or scholar that harm the dignity of others," he added.

Mujahid shared screenshots of tweets he claimed had been posted by Jalal, which said the Taliban intelligence chief was a stooge of Pakistan, and that the new government considers Afghans as 'donkeys'.

In one television appearance,

Jalal called Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem - who was also participating - a 'calf', a grave insult in Afghanistan.

Clips of his passionate criticism went viral on social media, sparking concern he risked Taliban retribution.

Jalal's wife Massouda, who once stood as Afghanistan's first woman candidate for the presidency, posted on Facebook that her husband had been arrested by Taliban forces and detained in an unknown location.

'Dr Jalal has fought and spoken out for justice and the national interest in all his activities pertaining to human rights,' she said.

A long-time professor of law and political science at Kabul University, Jalal has long had a reputation as a critic of Afghanistan's leaders.

On Twitter, rights group Amnesty International condemned the arrest of the lecturer 'for exercising his freedom of expression and criticising the Taliban', calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

The Taliban have formed an all-male Cabinet made up entirely of members of the group, and almost exclusively of ethnic Pashtuns.

They have further restricted women's rights to work and study, triggering widespread international condemnation.

AFP

Cliff collapse in Brazil leaves at least 7 dead

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - At least seven people were killed and three were missing after a cliff collapsed onto boats carrying tourists on a lake in Brazil, authorities said on Saturday.

Rescue teams including a dive squad and members of the Brazilian Navy rushed to Furnas Lake in Minas Gerais state, where panicked tourists had watched helplessly as a large rock fragment broke off a ravine and plunged atop three boats.

The latest official toll is 'seven dead and three missing', Minas Gerais firefighters' spokesman Pedro Aihara said on Saturday night.

Another 32 were wounded, including nine who had to be hospitalised, authorities said.



Rescue workers carry out an operation at the accident site in Furnas Lake, in Capitolio on Saturday (AFP)

Firefighters had initially reported 20 missing, but 'that number was substantially reduced because a good part of the victims who were unaccounted for were people who moved by their own means to hospitals',

Aihara said in a voice message sent to reporters.

Tourists flock to see the rock walls, caverns and waterfalls that surround the green waters of Lake Furnas, formed by the hydroelectric dam of the same

name.

Dramatic videos shared on social networks caught the exact moment when the cliff fell on the three boats.

Another video posted on social media shows the minute be-

fore the fall, in which several people warn that 'lots of stones are falling' and yell at the occupants of the other boats to move away from the wall.

President Jair Bolsonaro retweeted some of these videos on his account, and reported that 'as soon as the unfortunate disaster occurred, the Brazilian Navy moved to the site to rescue victims and transport the injured'.

The divers' search will be interrupted overnight for safety reasons and resumed in the morning, but other rescuers continue to work at the site.

Very heavy rain has fallen in recent days in southeastern Brazil, making the collapse more likely, according to firefighters.

AFP

Former quarry turns haven for endangered UK birds

Earith, UK - Nature is reclaiming her territory at a quarry in the east of England that is being transformed into a vast reserve offering vital sanctuary to endangered birds.

With its reedbed wetlands, the marshy plain of the Fens outside Cambridge has become an attractive habitat for the secretive bittern, which was until 2015 on the UK's Red list of most-threatened species.

Today the thickset heron, with its perfectly camouflaged streaked brown plumage and a booming springtime call that sounds like someone blowing over the top of a bottle, is on the less critical but still threatened Amber list.

"It's really a demonstration of how working with partners - big decisive action at large scale - we can bring species off that Red list," said Chris Hudson, senior site manager at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' (RSPB) Ouse Fen Nature Reserve, some 120km north of London.

Although the elusive bird did not put in an appearance when AFP visited on a brisk and rainy January winter morning, five per



A grey heron at the sanctuary (Fens Biosphere)

cent of the UK's bitterns now nest at Ouse Fen.

The reserve's bittern population is today larger than the nationwide total in the mid-1990s, when the RSPB's list of threatened species was first published, said Hudson, binoculars always at the ready.

Insect decline

The latest edition of Birds of Conservation Concern was published in December 2021 and now includes 70 species on the Red list - more than double the figure when the first report was

published in 1996.

Around 30 per cent of the British Isles' 245 bird species are now in danger.

Among the new species on the list are the house martin and the swift, migratory birds that fly thousands of kilometres from central and southern Africa each spring to breed in Europe.

Richard Gregory, head of monitoring at the RSPB Centre for Conservation Science, blames population decrease mainly on changing land use in the UK, Europe and beyond, which deprives birds of food and habitat.

"The decline of these birds might tell us something about a huge decline in the biomass of insects, which has been a real concern for conservationists across Europe recently, and it's probably a much wider phenomenon," he said.

"So we need more research, but that's a real warning sign about how the environment is changing around us.

"But we also know that when you manage the habitats, when you protect the birds, they can bounce right back," said Gregory, pointing to the example of the 'magnificent' white-tailed eagle, which was extinct in the British Isles in the early 20th century.

Thanks to a programme of protection and reintroduction, this imposing bird of prey is no longer on the Red list and today there are at least 123 pairs of these large sea eagles in the UK.

Recreating habitat

At the Ouse Fen reserve in early January were once-rare great white egrets of the heron family and marsh harriers, a threatened bird of prey whose numbers have

bounced back thanks to decades of conservation efforts.

The mix of reedbeds, open water and grassland, opened in 2010 and visited by 20,000 people a year, is being restored from land that has served as Europe's largest sand and gravel quarry.

Over the lifetime of the ongoing project, around 28mn tonnes of aggregate are being dug from the ground, leaving holes that are now filled with water and reeds, to the birds' delight.

"Our job here was to recreate the right habitat conditions that would bring the bittern back," said Hudson. These include 'lots of feeding opportunities to get their prey sources like fish, and particularly eels'.

"Once we've put those conditions in place, that effectively brings the birds back. 'If you build it they will come' is the phrase that we quite often use."

Humans change the landscape, creating bodies of water and planting reeds, "and then nature will look after the rest and come back quite naturally if given that opportunity, and that's the really key thing," he said.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Under flood of Omicron cases, Texans scramble to find tests

Houston, US - Texans seeking COVID tests are finding long lines and sold-out pharmacies, as the Lone Star State grapples with a new, Omicron-induced wave of the virus - the largest since the pandemic began.

When asked about their supply of at-home COVID-19 tests, a Walgreens clerk in the area around Houston, the economic capital of Texas, replied, "We're sold out since this morning."

"You can come back in six days," said the pharmacy chain employee. At the competitor chain CVS, and elsewhere, the situation is the same.

The need for testing is so high that people sometimes have to wait for hours at large, dedicated facilities.

In the far-west Texas city of El Paso, the local ABC television channel reported that the wait to get tested on Thursday at one of the city's 'mega-sites' was between three and five hours.

The Omicron wave is hitting Texas hard: The state registered nearly 54,000 positive cases on Friday, much higher than the daily peaks of around 20,000 cases in January and September last year.

The lack of tests has been one of the biggest critiques of President Joe Biden's handling of the pandemic, which his administration has recently doubled down on addressing.

At the end of December, Biden announced the government would send 500mn at-home tests to Americans, and on Friday, the White House said



Health workers prepare as people arrive at a COVID-19 testing station in Houston, in the US state of Texas, on Friday (AFP)

it had taken a major step toward achieving that goal by signing its first contract - worth US\$51.6mn - with the company Goldbelt Security.

New testing 'mega-sites'

Faced with growing case numbers and demand for testing, local Texas authorities have decided to open more testing sites, such as in San Antonio, where the positivity rate climbed from two to 27 per cent in two weeks, according to the mayor.

In Houston, a city of 2.3mn, officials say they are able to test 30,000 people a day with the

help of two additional drive-through 'mega-sites'. Newly-arrived to Texas, Aaron McKenzie manages one of the sites.

"I am from the sunny state of Florida," he explained, "and with a team of 75 nurses, doctors, medical technologists, (we are) here performing these nasal swabs on Houstonians."

McKenzie and his team swabbed more than 600 people on Thursday, and 1,000 more every day since.

The added tests will hopefully meet the high demand in Houston, where the positivity rate is currently at 30 per cent, according to McKenzie.

Slow results

Under a gloomy sky on Friday morning in Houston, dozens of cars crawled from one registration stand to the next, waiting their turn to get a PCR test without leaving their car.

One driver, Alvaro Ayalla, is showing symptoms of COVID-19. He is worried he will have to miss work replacing home water filtration systems, which requires him to visit a handful of houses each day.

Many people have come with their children, with one father worried because he lacks health insurance.

Another parent, Eunice

Chang, tells AFP that her son's school wants all students and staff to get tested, 'to be safe.'

"And they do not want home tests, they want PCR test," she adds. Chang has been promised results within 48 hours, but many provider miss that deadline, forcing residents to seek out rapid antigen tests, which can cost more than US\$120.

In Dallas, the long lines for testing and lengthy delays in getting back results have prompted GenelQ, one of the large labs in charge of testing on university campuses, to say they will hire new employees.

AFP



Residents queue up to get tested in China's Tianjin on Sunday (AFP)

Tests ordered for 14mn in China's Tianjin

Shanghai, China - The northern Chinese city of Tianjin on Sunday advised its nearly 14mn people to stay home while it conducted mass COVID-19 testing after a spate of recent cases, including two caused by the Omicron variant, state-controlled media reported.

Tianjin emerged as a new area of concern after more than 20 COVID-19 cases were reported there in the last few days, most of them imported from abroad, according to the National Health Commission.

They include at least two cases of the Omicron variant, as well as 15 infections among elementary and middle school students, according to various state media reports.

The city near the capital Beijing launched its mass testing early on Sunday, advising residents to stay at or near home to be available for the community-level nucleic-acid screening. So far, however, no larger lockdown order was seen.

Chinese authorities have already been struggling with a larger outbreak centred on the northwestern city of Xi'an that has sparked questioning of the country's zero-tolerance policy of strict lockdowns and immediate mass testing to curb outbreaks.

China, where the coronavirus was first detected in 2019, has thus far reported only a handful of Omicron cases.

Tianjin residents have been told that until they obtain a negative test result, they will not receive a 'green' code on smartphone COVID-tracing apps that nearly all people in China are now required to present when using public transport and in other situations.

Tianjin is a major port city

about 150km southeast of Beijing.

Xi'an, historic home to China's famed Terracotta Warriors, was locked down last month, forcing its 13 million residents indoors. New case numbers there have slowed in recent days.

Officials have faced complaints from Xi'an residents over chaotic handling of the lockdown, including poor access to food and daily essentials, and viral cases such as a miscarriage suffered by an eight-month pregnant woman who was refused entry to a hospital without a COVID test.

China's government has touted its initial strict response to COVID-19, which has largely brought the pandemic under control within its borders, as preferable to sometimes lax and chaotic measures overseas.

International flights are a fraction of pre-pandemic levels with arrivals undergoing strict weeks-long quarantine, and the mandatory track-and-trace apps mean close contacts are usually detected and quarantined quickly.

China is hewing strictly to the zero-tolerance approach as outbreaks continue to emerge in the run-up to next month's Beijing Winter Olympics.

China's official tally since the start of the pandemic - just over 100,000 COVID-19 cases - is a fraction of the record one million cases logged by the US in a single day earlier this month. Cases from China's chaotic initial outbreak in Wuhan in early 2020, however, are widely believed to have been under-reported.

China's official death toll has stayed under 5,000.

AFP

Indians arrested for rule-breaking puppy party

Ahmedabad, India - Every dog must have its day, but one young pup in India landed her human companions in hot water after police raided a COVID rule-breaking party staged for the coddled canine.

The lavish second birthday celebration cost ₹700,000 (US\$10,000 approx), according to police, with an elaborate birthday cake and giant photo cutouts of Abby, an Indian Spitz and the soiree's guest of honour.

Social media footage showed a crowd of people dancing in



Health workers wear their PPE suits ahead of their duties at the Civil Hospital in Ahmedabad, the main city in India's Gujarat state (AFP)

front of an ornate stage at Friday's party, held in the western city of Ahmedabad, with their defiance of local social distancing rules eventually attracting the law's attention.

"We got information about a big party going on, so we raided the venue," police inspector V D Zala told AFP.

"As per COVID protocol, it is necessary to take permission before organising a party. The organisers are responsible for ensuring social distancing among guests."

Three men were arrested for

their role in staging the event. The trio were later released on bail.

India recorded nearly 160,000 COVID-19 cases overnight, up nearly six-fold from a week earlier, in an infection surge driven by the fast-spreading Omicron variant of the virus.

Local officials have watched the sharply rising case numbers with alarm and some of India's biggest urban centres have moved to reimpose movement restrictions.

AFP

'Amazing milestone' as NASA fully deploys Webb telescope in space

Washington, US - The most powerful space telescope ever built completed a tricky two-week-long deployment phase on Saturday, unfolding its final golden mirror panel, as it readies to study every phase of cosmic history.

Engineering teams in the James Webb Space Telescope's control room cheered as confirmation came back that its final wing was deployed and latched into place.

"I'm emotional about it - what an amazing milestone," Thomas Zurbuchen, a senior NASA engineer, said during the live video feed as stargazers worldwide celebrated.

Because the telescope was too large to fit into a rocket's nose cone in its operational configuration, it was transported folded up.

Unfurling has been a complex and risky task - "arguably the most challenging deployment programme ever done by NASA," said NASA engineer Mike Menzel.

On Saturday morning, engineers sent a command from the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, Maryland for the final section of golden mirror to unfold.

According to NASA, after the mirror was latched into place at 1.17pm (1817 GMT), 'the team declared all major deployments successfully completed'.

"I want to tell you just how excited and emotional I am right now," said Zurbuchen on the live video feed. "We have a deployed telescope on orbit."

Webb, the successor to Hubble, blasted off in an Ariane 5 rocket from French Guiana on December 25, and is heading to its orbital point, 1.6mn kilometres from Earth.

Though Webb will reach its space destination, known as the second Lagrange point, in a matter of weeks, it still has around another five and a half months of setup to go.

"While the journey is not complete, I join the Webb team in breathing a little easier and



James Webb Space Telescope Project Manager Bill Ochs (left) and Commissioning Manager John Durning hand bump after confirming that the observatory's final primary mirror wing successfully extended and locked into place, at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, Maryland on Saturday (AFP)

imagining the future breakthroughs bound to inspire the world," said NASA Administrator Bill Nelson.

Next step will include aligning the telescope's optics, besides calibrating its scientific instruments.

Far reaches of the Universe

Its infrared technology will allow it to see the first stars and galax-

ies that formed 13.5bn years ago, giving new insight into the earliest epoch of the Universe.

Earlier this week, the telescope deployed its five-layered sunshield - a 21-metre long, kite-shaped apparatus that acts like a parasol, ensuring Webb's instruments are kept in the shade so they can detect faint infrared signals from the far reaches of the Universe.

The sunshield will be permanently positioned between the telescope and the Sun, Earth and Moon, with the Sun-facing side built to withstand 230 degrees Fahrenheit (110°C).

Visible and ultraviolet light emitted by the very first luminous objects has been stretched by the Universe's expansion, and arrives today in the form of infrared, which Webb is equipped to detect with unprecedented clarity.

Its mission also includes the study of distant planets to determine their origin, evolution, and habitability.

The NASA telescope blog said

Saturday's procedure was 'the last of the major deployments on the observatory'.

According to the telescope's deputy project manager at NASA, John Durning, the deployments have been '100 per cent successful'. "That was probably the highest risk part of the mission," said Bill Ochs, NASA's lead project manager for Webb, at a post-deployment press briefing.

"That doesn't mean all our risk goes away."

Over the next five and half months, the telescope will finish its 'commissioning', which, according to the NASA blog, 'consist of settling into stable operating temperature, aligning the mirrors, and calibrating the science instruments'. At the end of the commissioning period, NASA is planning to release a series of 'wow images' says Jane Rigby, a NASA project scientist.

Though she won't say what the images will be of, they are sure to 'really knock everybody's socks off'.

AFP

Concern grows for Palestinian teen held by Israel

Al-Jalazun refugee camp, Palestinian Territories - Palestinian teenager Amal Nakhleh's first name means 'hope' in Arabic, but his parents are in despair because he is chronically ill and one of the few minors held without charge by Israel.

"Since his arrest last year I have only seen him twice, including last week when he told me he wanted to go on hunger strike," journalist Moammad Nakhleh said of his 17-year-old son.

"This scares me because he is already very weak," from myasthenia, a rare neuromuscular disease, and underwent surgery in 2020 to have a tumour removed from his rib cage, Nakhleh said.

Israeli authorities accuse Amal of throwing stones at soldiers and have held him for a year in administrative detention. The practice allows for suspects to be detained without charge for renewable six-month terms while investigations are ongoing.

Amal faces a new hearing on Monday, and his father is worried that his detention could be renewed.

Administrative detention has been criticised by the Palestinians, human rights groups and foreign governments, who charge that Israel abuses it.

Israel defends the practice, saying that 'due to the complex and volatile security situation in the West Bank, detention orders are issued against those who plan terrorist attacks, or those who orchestrate, facilitate or otherwise actively assist in the commission of such acts'.

"The use of administrative detentions, which allow for the deprivation of a person's liberty



Moammad Nakhleh, the father of Amal, in Jalazun refugee camp, near the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah, on Saturday (AFP)

Since his arrest last year I have only seen him twice, including last week when he told me he wanted to go on hunger strike. This scares me because he is already very weak

MOAMMAR NAKHLEH

for a limited time only, is an effective and lawful security measure against such continuous terrorist attacks," Israel argues in a Foreign Ministry statement.

Leading Israeli newspaper Haaretz joined the fray days ago with an editorial entitled 'Enough with administrative detentions'.

'It's time for Israel to learn to forgo this undemocratic, corrupt

practice of unlimited administrative detention, without evidence or charges that can be refuted,' Haaretz said.

'Where is the evidence?'

The editorial highlighted the case of Hisham Abu Hawash, one of more than 450 Palestinians held for more than a year in adminis-

trative detention by Israel.

Six teenagers are among these prisoners, according to the Israeli human rights group Hamoked.

Tuesday's editorial came as Abu Hawash, a 40-year-old, ended a 141-day hunger strike after Israel agreed to his eventual release.

The deal proposed to Abu Hawash, a father of five, stipulates that his detention will not be extended beyond February 26, in return for his ending his fast. "If the state had evidence against Abu Hawash, it should have charged him. If not, it had to release him immediately," Haaretz said.

According to the paper, military prosecutors 'had no unclassified evidence on which to draft an indictment to present to a military court' in the Abu Hawash case.

But for the Shin Bet domestic security agency, 'confidential material' is enough for a military commander to sign an order for six months of administrative detention, and an additional one six months later, repeat ad infinitum. So why was Amal arrested?

The Shin Bet declined to comment when asked by AFP but the agency has previously been quoted as saying that he was 'suspected of having taken part in terrorist activity'.



Nakhleh shows a photograph of his son Amal on his telephone (AFP)

'Bracing for the worst'

Amal's predicament dates back to November 2020 when he was arrested by Israeli authorities in the occupied West Bank.

A football fan, he was out with friends after recovering from his cancer surgery, his family said.

Accused of throwing stones at soldiers, Amal was held for 40 days but then set free by an Israeli judge.

"At the hearing, a representative of the security forces said they had a 'file' against him and would seek administrative detention," Amal's father recalled. 'The judge asked them to provide him with the incriminating file', which they failed to, prompting the judge to free Amal.

But in January last year, he was re-arrested and placed in administrative detention, which

has since been twice renewed.

The UN refugee agency UNRWA has taken up Amal's case with the Israeli authorities.

"We are demanding his immediate release from administrative detention for two reasons: His medical condition which is incredibly serious... and he is a minor," UNRWA's West Bank chief, Gwyn Lewis, told AFP.

"We have written several times and followed up but there has never been any information on why he was arrested."

Moammad Nakhleh fears that Amal's detention will be renewed again on Monday.

"I am scared that if his detention is renewed, I will not see him for a long time," he said at the family home in Al-Jalazun refugee camp.

"I'm bracing for the worst."

AFP

Nigeria attacks toll climbs to 200 people dead, thousands displaced

Abuja, Nigeria - Nigeria said on Sunday that gunmen killed at least 200 people and displaced thousands more in multiple raids in the northwest over the last week, dealing a heavy blow to authorities struggling to restore order.

Herders and farmers in Africa's most populous country have clashed over access to land in northwest and central Nigeria for years, but some groups have evolved into criminal gangs known as 'bandits' who kill, loot and kidnap.

The minister of humanitarian affairs Sadiya Umar Farouq called the past week's attacks in Zamfara state 'horrific and tragic', giving the first official toll after details began filtering out early on Saturday.

'Over 200 persons were buried... due to the invasion by bandits,' she said in a statement confirmed by her spokeswoman Nneka Ikem Anibeze on Sunday.

'We also worried about the displaced persons who are flee-



Gunmen have preyed on residents in the northwestern Nigerian state of Zamfara over the past week (AFP)

ing in their hundreds from their communities,' the minister added, saying that relief material was sent to Zamfara.

The minister said more

10,000 people were displaced when 'their homes were razed by the bandits while scores are still missing'.

On Saturday, four residents

had told AFP that gunmen rampaged through Anka and Bukkuyum districts over two days, killing at least 140 people.

Babandi Hamidu, a resident of

Kurfa Danya village said the militants were shooting 'anyone on sight'.

Bello Matawalle, the governor of Zamfara state that borders Niger, downplayed the violence and said only 58 people were killed.

'The Emir of Anka gave a list of 22 deaths while the Emir of Bukkuyum gave a list of 36 victims,' said a spokesman for the governor, Zailani Bappa, in a statement late on Saturday.

Matawalle imposed highly restrictive measures for almost three months last year, shutting down telecoms, capping fuel sales and closing cattle markets, in an attempt to weaken the bandits but attacks have continued.

Revenge attacks?

Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari on Saturday condemned the attacks as 'an act of desperation by mass murderers'.

"We are fiercely determined to smoke out and destroy these outlaws," said the 79-year-old

former army general, who is also battling a more than decade long insurgency in the northeast and separatist agitation in the southeast.

On Wednesday, the government officially labelled bandits as terrorists, saying it would help bring tougher sanctions, but analysts say the move is to enable the military to deploy more resources to the northwest.

Bandits made international headlines last year after kidnapping hundreds of students in a series of mass abductions from schools and colleges.

Students are often quickly released after ransom payments to the bandits but 200 were still missing in September, according to the UN.

On Saturday, 30 students and a teacher were released after seven months of captivity in Kebbi state, a local official said. It was not clear if any ransom had been paid.

Military and police operations are ongoing in the northwest.

Nigeria's armed forces said they had killed 537 'armed bandits and other criminal elements' in the region and arrested 374 others since May last year, while 452 'kidnapped civilians were rescued'.

Security analyst Kabir Adamu, with Abuja-based Beacon Consulting Nigeria, told AFP that this week's raids could be in response to recent military operations.

Last month, bandits loyal to notorious gang leader Bello Turji suffered heavy losses in ground and air raids on their forest camps.

"Angered by this, and perhaps by the fact that that they were facing certain death, (they) decided to move to other locations and in the course of this they seem to be conducting these attacks," Adamu told AFP.

Locals said the raids were in response to an attack by vigilantes on a convoy of bandits who were trying to relocate elsewhere in the state.

AFP

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إعلان

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تاريخ تقديم الطلب : 21/02/2021

THE FINAL FRONTIER

The snub-nosed craft resembles a shuttle-airplane mashup, and is the latest entrant in a profit-seeking push with staggering potential - and risks - for humans to visit, work or even live in space.

The display of technology like the life-size model *Dream Chaser* ship at the CES tech show in Las Vegas is a sharp signal that the commercial space era is upon us.

Experts see a path for companies to power an unprecedented era of rapid advances, but with the near certain peril that space disasters will occur and lives will be lost.

Sierra Space, a subsidiary of private aerospace contractor Sierra Nevada Corp, plans to have the nine-metre *Dream Chaser* flying missions this year, making the reusable spacecraft key to its off-Earth ambitions.

"Before governments were the only ones that could do it. Now, it's getting down to regular human beings who can get a ride to space," Neeraj Gupta, the company's general manager of space destinations, told AFP.

The craft is meant to carry people and equipment to and from commercial space installations the company envisions building in the next decade, including a system of inflatable structures to house humans in orbit.

Sierra has a deal with NASA for unmanned flights to the International Space Station that are to start this year, and is working with Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin to develop a commercial outpost off-Earth.

"We really see a market opening to take more and more people to space," Gupta added.

Commercial space efforts have been growing rapidly and captured lots of attention, especially launches of Elon Musk's SpaceX rockets that have been carrying astronauts for NASA.



Janet Kavandi (second from right), the president of Sierra Space Corporation, with her team

Bezos' own spaceflight last year alternately fascinated fans and outraged critics of the so-called 'billionaire space race'.

Space risks

Yet companies like Sierra are proposing something in addition to tourism - a com-

This has never been the way that people articulated the benefits of space. It's always been something a little bit broader, like the benefit to mankind or humanity or the sake of science

MASON PECK

mercial hub in space that could be used to make products, and a ship that can provide transportation.

A video of their 'space plane' shows the unmanned version of the craft cruising back to Earth and landing on a runway like any other commercial aircraft.

Companies have proposed a series of ideas which until recently sounded like long shots, such as asteroid mining - but they have also suggested less far-fetched biomedical applications or production of some types of technology.

Mason Peck, an astronautics professor at Cornell University, said that until the last five years making things in space and bringing them back to Earth just didn't make sense.

"Now there are companies... who are actually focused on this question: How can I make a buck in space?" he told AFP.

"This has never been the way that people articulated the benefits of space. It's always been something a little bit broader, like the benefit to mankind or humanity or the sake of science," he added.

But the power of profit has the potential to vastly accelerate efficiency, technological advances and capacity in ways that is not in the slow and purposely deliberate approach of NASA or the European Space Agency.

"It's pumping more money into the space industry. Technology improves, cost goes down so everybody benefits," said Mike Gruntman, a professor of astronautics at the University of Southern California.

This would come as NASA has agreements that are part of the agency's efforts to enable an American-led commercial economy in low-Earth orbit.

Yet the prospect of increasing activity in space which could be done by profit-seeking companies carries very real risks.

"There is certainly going to come a time when there will be tragedy and death and destruction as a result of this as there is with everything. There's car crashes, bridges fail, trains derail," Peck added.

"The next William Shatner we send to space might not make it back... and that will be terrible. But these are not reasons not to do it," he said referring to the *Star Trek* star's trip on a Blue Origin launch.

AFP



FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Hernandez double fires Milan top of Serie A



AC Milan's defender Theo Hernandez celebrates after scoring his second goal against Venezia, on Sunday (AFP)

Venice, Italy - Theo Hernandez struck twice in AC Milan's 3-0 Sunday stroll at Venezia to help push his team top of Serie A and put pressure on champions Inter Milan.

France full-back Hernandez rammed home Milan's second shortly after the break when slid through by the impressive Rafael Leao before making absolutely sure of the points from the penalty spot just before the hour mark.

I'm extremely sorry to have caused her such stress. So unintended. So wrong

MATTHEW WOLFF



Zlatan Ibrahimovic had opened the scoring in the third minute with a simple tap-in from a low cross from Leao, who had been sent bursting past the Venezia backline by Hernandez.

Stefano Pioli's Milan are two points ahead of local rivals Inter, who host Lazio at the San Siro in one of two late matches hoping to avenge their only league defeat so far this season, in Rome back in mid-October.

Inter have played two games fewer than Milan after their

match at Bologna on Thursday was not played due to COVID-19 infections among the opposition squad.

Venezia, who finished with 10 men after Michael Svoboda handled to concede the decisive spot-kick, sit four points above the relegation zone following their 11th defeat since being promoted last season.

It was a third win in a row for Milan, who have a host of players either at the Africa Cup of Nations or out with COVID-19 infections and were again without three of their starting back four.

Also on Sunday, Roma host Juventus in a match featuring two teams who have struggled to get going under new coaches Jose Mourinho and Massimiliano Allegri and sit outside the Champions league places.

This round of matches, which finishes with Bologna's visit to struggling Cagliari on Tuesday night, will be the league's last before stadium capacities are cut to 5,000 until after the next international break as COVID-19 infections surge in Italy.

Five games were not played over the last two rounds of fixtures after dozens of players contracted the virus, for which more than 1.8mn Italians are currently positive and which has killed over 138,000 in the country since early 2020.

AFP



Harry Maguire

Maguire says Man Utd deserve criticism after sub-par displays

London, UK - Harry Maguire admits Manchester United deserve criticism for their sub-standard performances this season but has played down rumours of disharmony in the dressing room.

Ralf Rangnick suffered his first defeat as interim manager against Wolves last week, which was followed by reports of unrest among the players.

Maguire said United - seventh in the Premier League - must do better as they prepare for a third-round FA Cup tie against Aston Villa on Monday.

'I've obviously seen a lot of criticism and a lot of is absolutely justified, but for me, with this team, it shouldn't need criticism to motivate players,' Maguire said in an interview published on the club's website.

'We all have to take massive responsibility, myself as captain as much as anyone, if not more,' he said.

'We've got to start playing well and winning... This team finished second last year and we have a better and bigger squad this year, so we have to show the

right attitude.'

Maguire played down suggestions of disharmony among the players but admitted it was tough to keep all the members of a big squad happy.

'We are all angry and want to do our best, which has probably come across on the pitch at times, but the team spirit is good, despite what people say,' the England defender said.

'Being a professional footballer, you have to take criticism on the chin and react well to it. At the same time, you have to ignore the outside noise sometimes and just get your head down (in training).'

The former Leicester defender added: 'I came here to win titles. I could have signed elsewhere, but I wanted to be at United and help get them back to the winning ways that the club had in the Sir Alex (Ferguson) era.

'It will come if we all stay together. I grew up idolising the likes of Wayne Rooney, Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic - and I want to repeat what they achieved.'

AFP

Osimhen recovers from COVID-19; returning to Italy, say Napoli

Milan, Italy - Victor Osimhen has recovered from COVID-19 and is on his way back to Italy from Nigeria, Napoli said on Sunday.

In a message on Twitter, Napoli said that Super Eagles striker Osimhen 'will return to Italy in the next few hours' where he will continue his recovery

from facial fractures suffered with his club in November.

He had looked certain to miss the Africa Cup of Nations, which kicks off in Cameroon on Sunday, following surgery on his injuries but was called up to the national squad before being ruled out after contracting

COVID-19 while in Nigeria.

Before Serie A's winter break the 23-year-old had been training for Napoli while wearing a protective facemask and awaiting the go-ahead to return to action earlier than expected, after initially being ruled out for three months.

AFP



Victor Osimhen

Loeb takes Dakar 7th stage, Attiyah retains runaway lead

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Sebastien Loeb annexed the Dakar Rally seventh stage to move to the top of the chasing group behind runaway leader Nasser al Attiyah on Sunday.

Loeb, France's nine-time world rally champion, was landing his second win of 2022 as the gruelling roadtrip across the Saudi Arabian desert resumed after Saturday's rest day.

He crossed the finish line at the end of the 402 kilometre drive from Riyadh to al-Dawadimi almost five and a half

minutes clear of Attiyah.

But it was not all plain sailing for the 47-year-old whose best result from five Dakar attempts was second in 2017.

"We had pressure problems over the last 50km, the car wasn't accelerating, we thought it might pack up three kilometres from the finish," he reported.

Qatari Attiyah steers his Toyota into the second and final week with a huge 44min 59sec lead from Loeb, his fourth Dakar title seemingly his to lose.

France's Adrien Van Beveren

is the new leader of the bike standings after a stage won by Chile's Jose Cornejo Florimo and which proved costly to Sam Sunderland.

The Briton lined up at the start leading the two-wheeled hunt for the 2022 title but ended it down in fourth after losing 20 minutes.

Beveren, who arrived at the finish in 11th, is for once enjoying some luck after failing to finish the last four editions.

And after all the blood, sweat and tears for little or no reward,

he was understandably moved at his change of fortune.

"After all that's gone before this is such a pleasurable feeling," said the Yamaha rider, fighting back tears.

But while Beveren rides on, for Australian Daniel Sanders, who was lying third overall, this Dakar is over.

The KTM rider crashed on the way to the start. He was taken to hospital but his injuries were reported not to be serious by the medical services.

AFP



Audi's electric Spanish driver Carlos Sainz of Spain and co-driver Lucas Cruz of Spain compete during Stage 7 of the Dakar Rally 2022 between the Saudi capital Riyadh and al-Dawadimi town, on Sunday (AFP)



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Canada sweep past Spain to win maiden ATP Cup title



Felix Auger-Aliassime of Canada celebrates his match point against Roberto Bautista Agut of Spain during their men's singles final match of the ATP Cup, in Sydney on Sunday (AFP)

Sydney, Australia - Canadian Felix Auger-Aliassime stormed through a gripping clash with Spanish star Roberto Bautista Agut for a massive victory that earned his country a maiden ATP Cup title on Sunday.

Their Sydney showdown followed Denis Shapovalov ending Pablo Carreno Busta's winning start to the season 6-4, 6-3 to set the scene for a crunch second singles rubber.

World number 11 Auger-Aliassime beat third-ranked Alexander Zverev during the tournament and again showed his class to down 19th-ranked Bautista Agut 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 and

seal the tournament for Canada.

The Novak Djokovic-led Serbia won the inaugural edition of the teams event in 2020, when the Rafael Nadal-led Spain also had to settle for second, with Daniil Medvedev's Russia earning the title last year.

"The emotions are unbelievable, there is no better feeling than winning, we left everything out there," said Auger-Aliassime.

"We lost our first four matches in this competition, but never stopped believing.

"We trust each other, Denis and I and everyone on the team, and I think that is very important. I'm super thrilled for everyone on

the team, and of course myself.

Canada earned their place in the final after stunning defending champions Russia on Saturday. They also beat Zverev's Germany and Britain in group matches, bouncing back after crashing to the United States in their opening tie of the tournament.

It was a phenomenal effort from Auger-Aliassime who was heavily beaten by world number two Medvedev on Saturday, losing the last nine games in a row.

Both he and Bautista Agut started nervously at Ken Rosewall Arena and Auger-Aliassime was broken on his opening service game, but struck straight

back to even it up.

They went with serve in an intense set of long rallies and the Spaniard came through a vitally important ninth game, saving three break points to stay alive.

It went to a tie-break with the Canadian playing an electric passing shot then a textbook forehand to storm 4-1 in front and held on to take the set in an enthralling 85 minutes.

Full faith

Auger-Aliassime, just 21, was serving beautifully and giving a tiring Bautista Agut few chances.

In contrast, he was putting pressure on the Spaniard's serve,

creating opportunities with his pounding forehands and it finally paid off with a break to go 5-3 clear.

With victory in sight, he served out for a deserved win that sparked joyous scenes as the team high-fived and hugged.

Both Spanish players had been in red-hot form, each winning all four of their singles encounters so far.

And Carreno Busta held a 4-1 advantage against Shapovalov going into their clash, winning their past three matches, including a five-set thriller in the 2020 US Open quarter-finals.

AFP



Australia's Ashleigh Barty serves to Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan in the final of the Adelaide International, in Adelaide on Sunday (AFP)

Barty demolishes Rybakina in Adelaide International

Adelaide, Australia - World number one Ashleigh Barty showed why she is the Australian Open favourite when she demolished Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina in the final of the Adelaide International on Sunday.

Barty took just 64 minutes to see off the seventh seeded Rybakina 6-3, 6-2 and claim the 14th singles title of her career.

The 25-year-old Australian has been in superb form this week and has had to beat a host of top players in a stacked top half of the draw.

She received a first round bye, but then faced Coco Gauff (world number 22), Sofia Kenin (12) and Iga Swiatek (9) on her way to the decider.

"We've obviously had a brilliant week, been able to work progressively through each match," Barty said.

"I got better and better."

Against the big-serving Rybakina, the world number 14, Barty dominated every aspect of play and took control of the match midway through the first set.

Both players started well, dropping only two points each on serve in their first three games, so it came as a surprise when at 3-3, Barty stumbled slightly and found herself at 15-40.

But Rybakina was unable to convert either break point and Barty made her play.

She held her serve then pounced immediately as Rybakina seemed to lose focus, breaking and then holding to love to take the first set in 29 minutes.

Barty was in complete control by this stage as she went on a run of seven straight games.

She broke Rybakina's first two service games of the second set to take a stranglehold on the match as she raced away to a 4-0 lead.

As against Swiatek in the semi-finals, Barty's range of stroke-making confounded Rybakina, who struggled to cope with the sliced backhand in particular. She was forced to go for big winners rather than try to out-rally the Australian, and made 26 unforced errors as a result.

AFP

Nadal's Open preparations on track with Melbourne title

MELBOURNE SUMMER SET

Melbourne, Australia - Spanish superstar Rafael Nadal's Australian Open preparations remain on track after he beat American Maxime Cressy 7-6 (8/6), 6-3 in the final of the Melbourne Summer Set on Sunday.

Nadal decided to play the lower level tournament to get some match practice after missing much of 2021 with injury and COVID-19.

He has not been totally fluent

this week and was pushed hard by the American qualifier, but Nadal had too much experience for the 24-year-old serve-volleyer. It was Nadal's 89th title on the ATP tour and the win ensures he has won at least one singles crown every year for the past 19 years.

Nadal said that, while he was not in perfect shape, he was happy with his form so far.

"Exactly where I would like to be is being 100 per cent healthy from last year, playing until the



Rafael Nadal with the Melbourne Summer Set trophy on Sunday (AFP)

end of the season, and with not having come back after five, six months away from competition," he said.

"So of course I am not exactly the place that I want to be.

"But I am very happy. If we put everything together and analyse all the things that I went through the last five months, including the COVID, of course I am happy.

"I think my practices have been much better than my level of tennis in the competition, but

in some way that's very positive.

"The only thing that I need is to stay healthy and spend time on court, in official matches."

Cressy, who had to win through two rounds of qualifying just to make the main draw, started nervously but became more confident as the match wore on.

The American had a set point in the tiebreak but could not convert and, once Nadal claimed the first set, the final result was almost inevitable.

Nadal will be aiming to break the record for most Grand Slam singles titles at this month's Australian Open.

He is currently tied on 20 titles with Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic, but with Federer injured and Djokovic's presence in doubt because of visa issues, Nadal has a chance to go one ahead of his great rivals.

Nadal was playing his first tournament since August after injury and COVID.

AFP

Halep sends Australian Open warning with first title in 16 months

MELBOURNE SUMMER SET

Melbourne, Australia - A fit-again Simona Halep stormed to her first title in 16 months when she downed Russian Veronika Kudermetova to clinch the Melbourne Summer Set crown Sunday in a timely return to form, saying she was confident and feeling good.

The two-time Grand Slam champion used all of her big-match experience to pull through 6-2, 6-3 at the Rod Laver Arena in the ideal preparation for the Australian Open, which starts

January 17. There were two simultaneous WTA events as part of the Melbourne Summer Set, with Amanda Anisimova battling past Belarusian Aliaksandra Sasnovich 7-5, 1-6, 6-4 to win the other.

It was the 20-year-old American's second WTA Tour crown, as she too heads into the opening Grand Slam of the year full of confidence.

Former world number one Halep had not landed any silverware since Rome in September 2020, due largely to a calf tear

that scuttled her mid-season in 2021 and saw her briefly fall outside the top 20 for the first time since 2013.

But she is back to full fitness and proved too good for the 32st-ranked Kudermetova to claim her 23rd career title.

"Let's keep winning because I like this feeling," said 20th-ranked Halep, who made the final at the 2018 Australian Open, losing to Caroline Wozniacki.

"The body is great. I feel good. I had a tough five matches, and my body is good. I don't feel that

tired. Physically I'm in the right place. Confidence is growing. I feel that I have the game to win matches."

She had a shaky start and was broken on her second service game, but quickly settled down to draw errors from the Russian in the next game and break straight back.

Halep took complete charge to win the next four games and seal the set in 34 minutes.

But, as in the first set, she was again broken early by Kudermetova, who got a semi-final

walkover after top seed Naomi Osaka withdrew with an abdominal injury.

Once more, the Romanian kept her cool to break back for 2-2, then broke again for 5-3, pumping her fists in delight before serving out for a comfortable victory.

Earlier, unseeded world number 78 Anisimova overcame a mid-match slump and treatment to her left leg to down Sasnovich for her second-ever WTA Tour crown.

AFP



Simona Halep of Romania celebrates during her match against Veronika Kudermetova of Russia at the Melbourne Summer Set on Sunday (AFP)

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