

CHARMIG WINS 3RD STAGE OF TOUR OF OMAN



Danish rider Anthon Charmig powered to victory in the 180km-third stage of the Tour of Oman on Saturday. This stage started in Sultan Qaboos University and ended in Quriyat (Supplied photo) See also [Page 16](#)

Oman 5th in Government AI Readiness Index in MENA

Our Correspondent Muscat

Oman is ranked 49th in the world and fifth in the Middle East and North Africa in the Government AI Readiness Index 2021. Produced by Oxford Insights, this is the fourth edition of the index and has the same ‘exam question’ as in previous editions: how ready is a given government to implement AI in the delivery of public services to their citizens? To answer that question, the index draws on 42 indicators across ten dimensions. The index is divided into three broader categories of Government, Technology Sector, and Data and Infrastructure. The USA tops the global ranking, in large part thanks to

the unrivalled size and maturity of its technology sector. Singapore ranks second as a result of its institutional strength and government digital capacity. The other countries in the top five are the UK, Finland and the



Among GCC states, UAE leads with an overall rank of 19th, followed by Qatar (26th), Saudi Arabia (34th) and Oman (49th)

Netherlands. The MENA region is one of the most diverse in the world in its Government AI Readiness scores, states the index report. ‘In fact, it has the largest range of scores, with the lowest being 17.93 out of 100 (Yemen) and the

highest being 71.60 (UAE).’ In the GCC, UAE leads with an overall rank of 19th, followed by Qatar (26th), Saudi Arabia (34th), Oman (49th), Bahrain (55th) and Kuwait (63rd).

The index also puts a spotlight on Oman and praises its government AI readiness. ‘In October 2021, Oman unveiled its Digital Economy Programme. As part of this, the sultanate is also in the process of developing its very own National AI Strategy,’ it stated.

This strategy will revolve around the four main pillars of enhancing productivity and economic diversification of sectors via AI; developing human capabilities in AI; accelerating AI adoption by service sectors such as Defence, Healthcare, and Education; and governance of AI and advanced technologies to ensure fair and ethical use of these technologies. ‘The development of such a strategy will mark a significant positive step for Oman’s capabilities to adopt AI,’ the index report stated. ‘The upcoming AI strategy will complement current strengths and is likely to significantly improve Oman’s ranking in the Vision dimension and the Government pillar overall.’

4,500 university graduates to get teaching jobs in 2022-2023

Our Correspondent Muscat

In implementation of the Royal directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on expediting the execution of employment initiatives, the Ministry of Labour, in cooperation with the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI), will train

more than 4,500 university graduates to work as teachers in the academic year 2022/2023. According to an official in MoHERI, the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC), in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, has announced the opening of the Omani Teachers Preparation and Qualification Programme for holders of

Diploma in Education. He added that registration will start on Sunday and end on March 14, 2022. “The programme aims to qualify university graduates who wish to work as teachers.” The process is spread over several stages, including registration, specialised test, personal interview, and announcement of

results. ‘The programme aims to qualify 4,500 graduates (2,870 male and 1,630 female) in various disciplines this year. Candidates will work as teachers of Arabic, Islamic education, English, Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics, Geography, History, etc,’ an HEAC statement said. According to the MoHERI official, after selection, candidates

will be trained in educational institutions such as Sultan Qaboos University and universities in Sohar, Dhofar, Nizwa and Sharqiyah. “The Ministry of Labour will finance the fees of 1,500 candidates with a monthly allowance of RO150 for a period of nine months during the training programme,” the official informed.

Those wishing to apply can find details at <http://www.heac.gov.om> or via 24255552 and 94776616. According to statistics released by the Ministry of Education, there were 56,569 Omani teachers in 2021 in government schools - 17,881 male and 38,688 female - accounting for an Omanisation rate of 84.8 per

cent. There were 10,878 Omani administrators and technicians - Omanisation rate of 99.8 per cent. There were 57 Omani male and 250 female teachers in special education schools - Omanisation rate of 90.6 per cent. The Ministry of Education appointed 2,954 teachers for the academic year 2021-2022.

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30 shops gutted in Dhofar Building in Ruwi

Muscat - A fire in a commercial-cum-residential building in Ruwi on Friday evening resulted in massive financial losses to more than 30 shop owners in the building.

The fire erupted at around 6pm in Dhofar Building, near KM Trading, when many shopkeepers closed their outlets for evening (Maghrib) prayers.

"I closed my shop for evening prayers and when we came back, I saw smoke rising from one side of the building. I could not enter the building again," said a dress-material shop owner. His shop was completely gutted in the fire.

At midday on Saturday, a shoe-shop owner anxiously awaited permission from the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) to enter the building to see what remained of his business.

Muscat Daily witnessed roads to the building cordoned off and CDAA and Royal Oman Police personnel working at the site on Saturday.

With financial losses imminent, many shop owners of Dhofar Building worried about their future. "I have been working in Oman for over 40 years. I had a small business; my livelihood has gone up in smoke," said another shop owner worriedly looking on at the burnt building.

"I hope the authorities understand my situation and help me with a chance to re-start the business. As of now, considering the huge loss, the only option left for me is to pack my bags and leave the country," he said.

An attendant of a readymade garments shop estimated his



This was the fourth time Dhofar Building caught fire in the last five years. It had no fire alarm. The last fire was triggered by faulty electrical wiring

DHOFAR BUILDING TENANT

losses at RO30,000. "Everything is in ashes now."

According to the owner of Abu Ziad al Zadjali Trading, who had five shops in Dhofar Building, the fire started in a shoe shop in

the ground floor. "We tried extinguishing the fire ourselves, but to our surprise, when we pulled out one of the fire hoses installed in the building, it wasn't working. We found one that worked but by

then, the fire had spread. We could not help but wait for CDAA to arrive."

He put the cost of his losses in stocks at over RO200,000. Additionally, he had recently renovated his shops and installed new air conditioning systems. "All is gone," he bemoaned.

The owner of Abu Adnan al Zadjali Trading, which had three shops in the building, calculated his losses at around RO150,000. Showing photographs of his shops posted on Instagram, he said, "Almost all of our items were branded, that's why our losses are huge."

A tenant of one of the residential flats informed that this was the fourth time Dhofar Building caught fire in the last five years and that it had no fire alarm. The last fire was triggered by faulty electrical wiring.

"Shops in the ground and first floor were completely burnt. Fortunately, the fire did not reach the residential apartments. But due to heat, there are cracks in the walls and the flooring came out, and furniture got damaged. As of now, my flat is not in a livable condition. I was lucky to be able to shift my parents and wife to relative's house."

Late on Friday night, CDAA stated that firefighting efforts were continuing. Ten people sustained light to moderate injuries in the fire and received emergency medical care at the site. "Two people with moderate injuries were transferred to hospital," it stated.

An official at the site said an electrical short is suspected to have sparked the fire.

(Text and photos by Syed Fasiuddin)

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This advertisement should be read in relation to the Prospectus of the IPO. All abbreviations have the same meaning as mentioned therein. Investing in shares involves certain risks as described in Chapter 13 (Risk Factors and Methods of Mitigation) of the Prospectus which is available on the company website www.barkadesalination.com.

No PCR test for fully vaccinated passengers travelling to India

Shaddad al Musalmay
Muscat

India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on Thursday revised its guidelines for international arrivals, including doing away with the COVID-19 RT PCR test requirement for fully vaccinated passengers from Oman and 81 other countries, starting February 14.

The new guidelines exempt fully vaccinated passengers travelling to India from undergoing a PCR test before travel. The only requirement now is uploading their vaccination certificate with the Ministry of Civil Aviation's Air Suvidha Self Declaration Form.

"The announcement by India's Ministry of Health will ease travel to India for our Omani friends as well as Indian nationals. The new guidelines follow administration of over 1.7bn doses of COVID-19 vaccines in India. This easing of travel restrictions will help boost tourism and trade activities between the two countries," H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to Oman, told *Muscat Daily*.

The move was welcomed by all who *Muscat Daily* spoke with. Govind Arjan, a Muscat-based healthcare communications con-



(Muscat Daily)

sultant, said, "I am happy to see Oman on the list of countries exempted from the 72-hour pre-departure mandatory PCR test. For families who travel paying very high fares, this is a small monetary consolation. Additionally, families will be spared the uncertainty and ordeal of having to change travel plans of the whole group should one of them test positive."

Additionally, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare recommended 14 days of self-monitoring post-arrival as against a seven-day home quarantine which was mandated earlier.

The ministry also scrapped a separate set of rules for passengers flying from 'at-risk' countries. Earlier, travellers from

'at-risk' countries were required to submit samples for COVID-19 testing on arrival in India and allowed to leave the airport premises only after receiving a negative test result.

Muscat-based Indian resident Aakash Kumar described the new rules as "big relief".

"For the last couple of years, travel stress had increased manifold owing to numerous rules and regulations, including getting a PCR test. I know people who were denied check-in for not following the test validity of 72 hours. Also, there's no standard rate - hospitals have different rates for the PCR test. I am happy that it's no longer required for travel."

@shaddadm

MoCIIP to launch 28 investment opportunities

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to stimulate the economy and attract foreign investment, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) will launch 28 investment opportunities in the industrial sector soon.

On May 31, 2021, MoCIIP began implementing the 100 Industrial Opportunities initiative,

and initially launched 72 industrial opportunities.

According to a MoCIIP official, the launch of these investment opportunities is in line with the sultanate's industrial strategy and the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 to diversify the economy.

"It is also the fruition of cooperation between the ministry and several partners, including Ma-

dayn, Petroleum Development

Oman and Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "This investment initiative in the industrial sector aims to stimulate the market and create projects that contribute to creating job opportunities and employing Omani cadres," he said.

The ministry official also informed that the contribution of industries was more than RO3bn in 2019, or ten per cent of the GDP.



Souq Juma losing customers and charm amid pandemic

Muscat - Once bustling with shoppers looking for a quick bargain on used furniture and electronic items, Souq Juma - Friday market - in Wadi Kabir, Muscat, wears a desolate look these days. The economic stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with desperate discount offers by hypermarkets and furniture stores to lure in customers, has resulted in a double whammy for the sprawling weekend fair.

‘Every shop in the city offering discounts’
Ahmed, a trader at Souq Juma, said, “We buy in bulk from shops closing down business or clearing old stock and sell these in retail at the souq. But almost every shop in the city is offering discounts and sales every second week. It’s one of the reasons why people are not visiting the souq.” According to Ahmed, owing to few shoppers, traders usually have to wait eight to nine weeks

for returns on investments ‘because Souq Juma opens only one day a week - on Fridays’. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, another trader said, “We come to the souq at around 4am and wait till 8pm. We hardly make any profits. Last week, I did not do business of even a single rial. Before the pandemic, I used to make around RO200-300.”

Families not visiting
The absence of families visiting

the souq is another reason for abysmal business. “Earlier families, with children in the town, came and bought toys and knick-knacks. Now we rarely see families visiting the souq,” Ahmed said. He added that pre-pandemic, many people came to offer Friday prayers in the mosque by the souq and shopped before leaving. “It was like an outing for them. Suspension of Friday prayers added to our woes,”

Ahmed said. Many traders attribute the absence of shoppers in the souq to COVID-19, but despite the challenges they continue to set up shop every Friday to keep the souq running. “If I think only about profits, it’s not worth the effort,” said another trader. “For us, Souq Juma is a place to meet our friends. It is not a place to do business anymore,” Ahmed rued. (Text and photo by Syed Fasiuddin)

356 entries for architectural design award

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As many as 356 entries have been received for the Bilarab bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design. A statement issued by the official twitter account of Bilarab bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design said that the total number of entries submitted for the annual award has reached 356. ‘These are subject to screening and evaluation by the jury,’ the statement said. ‘We extend our heartfelt thanks to all the applicants who enriched the award with their contributions. We would like to inform you that the submitted works are currently being evaluated and the finalists will be announced at a later date,’ it stated.

H H Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham bin Tarik al Said launched the Bilarab bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design in January. The award aims to be an annual local competition with a global vision for design and innovation in architectural projects that combine originality and modernity in different regions of the sultanate. This year, participants have been asked to propose a design for the seafront site of Muttrah. The site is spread over an area of 7,500sqm, comprising Port Sultan Qaboos and boasting a wide captivating view of what has for

This year, participants have been asked to propose a design for the seafront site of Muttrah, which boasts a captivating view of what has for ages been a tourist hotspot

ages been a tourist hotspot, besides being a historically and culturally prominent site of Omani civilisation. The award targets Omani youth specialised in the fields of architecture and design, including scholars and jobseekers who meet the conditions of the competition. Ten contestants will qualify for the final stage of the competition. The prizes will be financial - the first place winner will receive a sum of RO20,000, while the second place will receive RO15,000 and the third place winner will get RO10,000. Seven finalists will win in-kind prizes. The award comes in line with the future vision and aspirations of the sultanate - Oman Vision 2040 - in developing its various regions architecturally according to their geographical environment and civilisational identity.

New integrated project for irrigation in Buraimi: MAFWR

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To support farmers and achieve water sufficiency, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) will implement a modern integrated project to activate aflaj in Buraimi governorate. Nasser bin Ali al Marshoudi, Director General of Directorate of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in Buraimi governorate, said, “The ministry will implement several projects in the field of water resources. It will begin by implementing a modern integrated irrigation system for the two aflaj - Al Saarani and Al Buraimi.” Marshoudi added that the ministry will also plant palm tree seedlings in three wilayats of the governorate. In 2021, the ministry established a new commercial project in the wilayats of Sunaina and Mahdah, which included the cultivation of palm trees in an area estimated to be about nine acres, and two projects for the cultivation of grapes in the wilayat of



Mahdah, which were successfully completed. The Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund will also establish modern livestock pens to support rural women. According to Marshoudi, MAFWR is coordinating with the General Directorate of Housing and Urban Planning in Buraimi to

allocate investment land in the wilayat of Sunaina for the establishment of projects aimed at improving food security. The ministry has immunised 22,818 heads of livestock so far, and cows will be vaccinated against plague in April. About the ministry’s efforts to support bee breeders, he said,

“The ministry issued 191 licences to bee breeders spread over the governorate. The number of beehives rose to 1,824 and these produced 10,848kg of honey in 2020. The ministry also coordinated with the General Directorate of Housing and Urban Planning in the governorate to allot ten sites for raising bees.”

MoH to launch mobile vaccination drive for COVID-19 starting today

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To limit the spread of COVID-19 and increase vaccine coverage, the Ministry of Health (MoH) will launch a mobile vaccination service (bus service) starting Sunday. In a statement, MoH said that it will launch the mobile immunisation service against COVID-19 in five areas in Muscat running from February 13 to 24 in cooperation with Aster Hospital.



The service will be available in the wilayat of Seeb in the parking lot of Mall of Muscat on February 13 and 14 from 4pm to 8pm and in the parking lot of Al Makan

Cafe adjacent to City Centre Muscat, Seeb, on February 15 and 16 from 4pm to 8pm. The service will be available in the wilayat of Bausher in Ministries Street from 9am to 1pm on February 17 to 20 and the parking lot of the Health Centre in the wilayat of Muttrah on February 21 and 22 from 9am to 1pm. The mobile service will be available in the wilayat of Amerat on February 23 and 24 from 4pm to 9pm in the parking lot of Sultan Center.

WEATHER WATCH		
	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	22	15
Doha	21	14
Kuwait City	22	12
Manama	19	14
Muscat	27	19
Riyadh	20	7
PRAYER TIMINGS		
Fajr	5.25am	
Sunrise	6.41am	
Duhr	12.26pm	
Asr	3.41pm	
Maghrib	6.06pm	
Isha	7.17pm	

TENDER NOTICE



The Internal Tender Committee of Emdad Logistics Company SAOC., hereby announces the following Tenders:

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of receiving Specifications	Date of Bid Submission	Suppliers	Tender Fee OMR	Place of Submission
ITC/T/001 /2022	Supply of Mobile Urban Facility "Relocatable Habitat Units" (Purchase of 64 Units)	20th Feb 2022	06th Mar 2022	Only Specialized Companies	1000.00/- OMR Non Refundable	Emdad Logistics Company, 3rd floor
ITC/T/002 /2022	Supply of Modified Shipping Containers Urban Complex -35 units of 20ft Containers -31 units of 40ft Containers (Purchase)	20th Feb 2022	06th Mar 2022	Only Specialized Companies	175.00/- OMR Non Refundable	Emdad Logistics Company, 3rd floor

Taking into consideration the following:

All specialized companies that wish to participate in the tender must deposit the tender amount into the bank account of the Company (details of the bank account is set out hereunder) and submit the original payment receipt of the tender along with a copy of the Commercial Registration Certificate and the contact details of the authorized individual (business card) to the address presented below: From 08:00 - 13:00 and 14:00 - 17:00 (Sunday – Thursday).

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Branch	Al Khoudh Branch
Bank ID Code	BSHROMRXXXX

Complete Tender documents should be submitted in sealed envelope with red wax with tender number and title and addressed to the “Chairman of Internal Tender Committee”. The envelope should not make any reference to the bidder details. All applicants are required to submit the Tender in the Tender box in the main office of Port of Duqm Company at or before 02:00 PM on the assigned date for submission of the Tender. Tenders submitted after the above-mentioned date and time shall not be considered.

- * The company is not obliged to accept the lowest offer or any other offer without any justifiable reasons.
- * The company reserve the right to issue the order either in part or full for the quoted items without any justifiable reasons.
- * The company reserve the right to reject the tenders not complying with the tender documentation requirement. For any clarification, please contact us through tenders@portofduqm.om

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Almashreq Building, 18 November Street, N. Azaiba
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Mazoon Dairy plans to boost production, double herd size

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Mazoon Dairy, the flagship dairy company of the sultanate, is planning to double the size of the herd on its farm and boost production capacity of the factory as part of the development plans for the next five years.

The company commemorated Oman's annual Industry Day on Wednesday by highlighting its various milestones cemented since the start of operations in 2019. On the occasion, Mazoon Dairy Company also shed light on its noteworthy development plans for the next five years.

In a press statement, Ahmed Alghafri, chief support officer at Mazoon Dairy, said, "Mazoon Dairy has had a fruitful past year with exciting new developments moving forward as part of our long and short-term plans. Today we have established a strong position in the local market, as we have also managed to add variety to the unique products on shelves."

"We are engaging in a holistic approach that is innovative and moves our industry standard



more towards sustainability, without compromising on our efforts to ensure the highest level of quality during our operations," he added.

Mazoon Dairy has focused on strengthening the scope of its promotional activities to reach wider segments of consumers in the local market. The company at present produces over 190 products, from fresh milk products of various flavors including laban, fresh juices, cheeses, ice creams and long-life dairy products.

The company showcased its mission to continue raising the local Omani industry standard and supporting the development of high-quality national industry in the field of dairy products.

Speaking about Mazoon Dairy's future plans, Alghafri said, "We plan to significantly increase our production capacity during the next five years, which includes doubling the size of the herd on the farm and increasing the capacity of the factory. In addition, we also look to generate

further job prospects for Omanis and create more opportunities for local industries."

Mazoon Dairy's state-of-the-art dairy farm currently provides for a capacity of 10,000 dairy cows in 15 temperature-controlled high-tech barns, managed at a steady 25 degrees Celsius. The integrated facility in As-Sunainah can produce over one million liters of milk in a day.

The company runs five laboratories with 25 full-time quality assurance employees to ensure the highest standards are ob-

tained in the production and delivery of each product. The company performs over 100 tests daily during the manufacturing process to ensure overall safe conditions and the highest quality in the final results.

Mazoon Dairy Company has international accreditations in the areas of quality, customer and consumer satisfaction such as ISO 9001:2015, ISO 22000:2018, ISO 14001:2015 and ISO 45001:2017 compliance and is aligned with both local and international standards.



A file photo of Omifco plant in Sur (Muscat Daily)

India inks 3-year urea import deal with Omifco: Reports

Our Correspondent
Muscat

India has signed a three-year deal with Sur-based Oman India Fertiliser Company (Omifco) to import 1mn tonnes of urea a year, according to media reports.

The first shipment under the new agreement arrived on Wednesday at Mundra port in western India, sources said as reported by Reuters.

Omifco is an Oman-India joint venture which is owned 50 per cent by OQ Group and 25 per cent each by Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Ltd (Ifco) and Krishak Bharati Cooperative Ltd (Kribhco).

India's previous 15-year urea import deal with Omifco lapsed in 2020. A fertiliser ministry spokesperson confirmed that a three-year deal with Omifco had been signed, the Reuters report said.

Lower retail prices of urea has led a sharp surge in India's fertiliser subsidies.

India imports about a third of its urea requirements. During April 2021-January 2022, the first 10 months of India's current fiscal year, India produced 21mn tonnes of urea and imports were at about 7.2mn tonnes, India's Fertiliser Minister Mansukh Mandaviy told lawmakers on Tuesday.

OPEC+ faces 'chronic' struggle to meet oil production target, says IEA

Paris, France - The International Energy Agency (IEA) on Friday raised its forecast for world oil demand in 2022 but warned of a "chronic" failure by OPEC and its allies to meet their output targets.

The 13 members of the Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and their 10 allies, including Russia, had cut production sharply in 2020 as prices collapsed after the COVID-19 pandemic emerged.

The group, dubbed OPEC+, began to increase output last year, renewing every month a target of 400,000 barrels per day, as demand and prices recovered after countries began to lift COVID-19 restrictions.

OPEC+ agreed on a similar increase again earlier this month despite soaring crude prices and geopolitical tensions rattling the markets.

But analysts have said some members, such as Angola and Nigeria, have been unable to scale up their production and others, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are unwilling to do so.

"Chronic underperformance by OPEC+ in meeting its output targets and rising geopolitical tensions have propelled oil prices higher," the IEA said in its monthly oil market report.

Prices of the benchmark US



IEA raised its 2022 oil demand outlook to 100.6mn barrels per day, an increase of 3.2mn barrels per day, as governments further ease COVID-19 restrictions

and international contracts hit seven-year highs in January and have hovered around US\$90 per barrel.

"If the persistent gap between OPEC+ output and its target levels continues, supply tensions will rise, increasing the likelihood of more volatility and upward pressure on prices," the IEA said.

"But these risks, which have

broad economic implications, could be reduced if producers in the Middle East with spare capacity were to compensate for those running out," said the agency, without naming any country.

The IEA has 30 members - mostly Western countries - and it advises governments on energy policy. Saudi Arabia and Russia are not members.

In its own monthly report on Thursday, OPEC said production from its 13 members had increased by just 64,000 barrels per day between December and January to reach almost 28mn barrels per day.

For its part, the IEA raised its 2022 demand outlook to 100.6mn barrels per day, an increase of 3.2mn barrels per day, as governments further ease COVID-19 restrictions.

The agency had previously forecast demand for this year at 99.7mn barrels per day but the figure was revised up following a "reassessment of historical data" from Saudi Arabia and China. AFP

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MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSX posts weekly drop amid market sell-off

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) posted a weekly decline amid sell-off in global and regional markets due to worries over Russia-Ukraine tensions and US inflation data.

The MSX30 index ended the last week down by 0.85 per cent. Financial index fell by 0.71 per cent while Industry index dropped 0.18 per cent. Services index, however, rose 1.31 per cent and MSX Shariah index also rose 0.71 per cent. Omanis and Arabs absorbed the selling pressure from GCC and foreign investors during the week.

Local news

►Oman Fisheries Company's CEO said that the company plans to double its production to 56,000 metric tonnes in just 12 months. Suleiman al Ghannami told Arab News, "In 2021 we processed around 28,000 metric tonnes and we are targeting double that quantity in 2022. We anticipate exponential growth." The company, one of the oldest fish processing operations in the country, plans to hit this target by expanding its international joint ventures to take advantage of technologies from companies around the world.

►Oman jumped to 6th place in the area of business fundamentals and ranked overall as the 14th most competitive emerging market, according to the 2022 Agility Emerging Markets

Logistics Index.

►Oman was ranked first in the growth rate of total investments in the Arab world, in the 2021 report of the Arab Investment and Export Credit Guarantee Corporation (Dhaman). The final Quarterly Investment Guarantee report for 2021 issued by Dhaman indicated that Oman's total investments grew by 37.3 per cent to RO6.3bn in 2021. The figure is expected to hit RO7bn this year. Oman was ranked second among the Arab countries in the highest increase in GDP per capita in 2021 with a percentage of 23.7 per cent. GDP per capita increased by 23.7 per cent from US\$14,200 in 2020 to US\$17,600 in 2021. Per capita GDP is expected to grow to US \$18,200 in 2022.

►Samail Industrial City witnessed dynamic investment activity in 2021 as 19 projects were localised on a total leased area of 122,549 sqm. Over 300 direct job opportunities will be provided by these projects in the coming period. These localised projects are specialised in mining and natural resources industries including metal products, doors and windows, tubes for ammunition, firefighting tools and equipment, marble and cement, and food industries such as meat products, dairy products, poultry, dates, in addition to medical and carton industries. Madayn is currently



executing the design and implementation of an infrastructure complementary project in Samail Industrial City.

►The Ministry of Finance (MoF) announced that it has signed three memoranda of understanding (MoU) to the tune of RO94mn with the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD) to finance a number of projects. The MoUs were signed by H E Sultan Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, and

Sultan Abdulrahman al Mursheed, CEO of Saudi Fund for Development (SFD). The signing ceremony took place after a session of talks between MoF and SFD on ways of activating cooperation to fund current and future projects.

GCC markets

Dubai's non-oil private sector growth slowed in January amid Omicron rise, IHS Markit data showed. The seasonally adjusted IHS Markit Dubai Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI)

fell for the first time in four months, from 55.3 in December to 52.6 in January, indicating a solid upturn in business conditions across the non-oil private sector. Th latest PMI data indicated a much weaker increase in new business following December's 29-month high.

Saudi Arabia, in the fourth quarter of 2021, witnessed a 400 per cent jump in issuance of investment licenses compared

to the same quarter of the previous year, deputy minister for economic affairs and investment studies at the Ministry of Investment Dr Saad al Shahrani said. According to Al-Arabiya, Shahrani clarified on the sidelines of the Invest Saudi Forum at Expo Dubai 2020 that there are about 40 initiatives that have been launched by the National Investment Strategy (NIS) to support the legislative reforms in the investment environment in Saudi Arabia.

The legislative reforms initiative aims at attracting foreign investments to the kingdom, seeking to exceed US\$100bn (SAR388bn) by 2030, he added. It is noteworthy that the net foreign investment inflows have grown by more than 65 per cent during the first three quarters of 2021.

The National Investment Strategy seeks to make Saudi Arabia one of the 15 largest economies in the world, Shahrani stated. He pointed out that it is also aims to reduce unemployment to less than 7 per cent in Saudi Arabia by 2030 and to raise the contribution of the private sector to 65 per cent of the GDP.

Global news

Gold prices have been steadily rising as inflationary risks and Russia-Ukraine tensions underpinned the safe haven metal, amidst the prospect of an aggressive

rate hike by the US central bank.

The US dollar has been strengthening versus many other currencies, boosted by a climb in US Treasury yields to multi-year peaks as traders wait on US inflation data last week for clues on the pace of Federal Reserve policy tightening.

The euro continues to retreat from near a three-month high to Japan's currency after European Central Bank's president Christine Lagarde earlier this week tapped down expectations of aggressive interest rate hikes.

Recommendation

Global stocks await key inflation numbers. However, some major tech stocks like Apple and Microsoft as well as Amazon have been supported by the outlook of the respective managements. Banking stocks continued to perform well on anticipation of rising interest rates, while airline stocks were also supported on hopes of recovery in travel.

Regional stocks kept rising on the back of higher oil prices, further supported by good financial results for the year 2021.

The local stock market is mainly driven by stocks with attractive dividend yield and business prospects. We advise investors to watch company disclosures for stock picking.

By special arrangement with U Capital

US inflation hits 40-year high in January, pressures Biden

Washington, US - Inflation in the United States was as hot as ever last month, with consumer prices seeing their largest annual jump in nearly four decades as costs rose for a wide range of items.

The Labor Department said Thursday the consumer price index (CPI) climbed 7.5 per cent over the 12 months to January, its largest increase since February 1982, while it rose by 0.6 per cent compared to December, more than analysts expected.

The data defied hopes by President Joe Biden's administration that the wave of price increases sapping his public approval would show signs of decelerating in the first month of 2022, and further bolstered expectations that the Federal Reserve will soon increase interest rates.

In a statement, Biden acknowledged that inflation "is elevated" but "forecasters continue to project inflation easing substantially by the end of 2022."

"And fortunately, we saw positive real wage growth last month, and moderation in auto prices, which have made up about a quarter of headline inflation over the last year," he said.

An array of factors is seen as driving the price increases, from the Fed's easy money policies meant to support the economy during the pandemic to supply chain snarls, shortages of components and labour and robust demand from American consumers.

The White House has attempted to reign in the increases by announcing initiatives to increase semiconductor production and tackle alleged price



US President Joe Biden speaks during an event at Germanna Community College on Thursday in Culpeper, Virginia (AFP)

fixing in the meatpacking industry.

On Thursday, Biden tried to drum up enthusiasm for his stalled Build Back Better spending plan by saying it would lower drug prices.

However, the Fed is the institution best placed to stem the price hikes, said Jason Furman, a former chair of the White House Council of Economic Advisers during Barack Obama's presidency, under whom Biden served as vice president.

"The truth is the president can do very little to lower inflation. He can and should do everything he can on supply (and he is doing most of it already) but (it) won't add up to much," he said in a tweet.

"The Fed needs to hike in March," he added.

Broad-based surge in prices

The yearly increase was an acceleration from the seven-per cent gain seen in December, while the month-on-month change was the same as in that month, with the data showing prices rising for a wide range of goods.

Groceries and other items in the food-at-home category were up one per cent, much higher than the 0.4 per cent increase in December. For the 12-month period, they were up 7.4 per cent.

Energy prices rose 0.9 per cent on a monthly basis, and climbed 27 per cent for the year, though the data did show a monthly decline in gasoline prices. Used cars, which have seen major price gains as the economy recovered and a semiconductor shortage constrained supplies of new cars, saw prices rise 1.5 per cent last month, less than their increase in December.

If there was good news to be found in the report, Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics said it could be found in new car prices, which climbed throughout 2021 as manufacturers slashed production due to shortages of crucial semiconductors.

While they were up 12.2 per cent compared to January 2021, the increase compared to December was zero, according to the data.

"This is a significant development," Shepherdson said.

"Rising inventory, on the back of increasing chip supply, is both boosting sales and capping prices. We expect new vehicle prices to fall outright over the next few months. Used vehicle prices will fall, too."

How big a hike?

With some economists saying the central bank is behind the curve when it comes to controlling inflation, Fed chair Jerome Powell said after last month's policy meeting that they are "of a mind" to hike rates at their next conference beginning March 15.

The remark was an unusually clear signal of what the Fed may do, leading to speculation that central bankers could raise rates from zero by more than their expected hike of 0.25 per cent.

St. Louis Fed President James Bullard on Thursday told Bloomberg he would be open to hiking rates outside of regularly scheduled meetings, and would like to see them up to one percent by July.

AFP



شركة التغليف المحدودة (ش.م.ع.)
Packaging Co Ltd. (SAOG)

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT		Statement Of Financial Position As At 31st December 2021	
		31.12.2021 RO	31.12.2020 RO
On behalf of the Board of Directors, we present the Chairman's Report of "Packaging Co Ltd (SAOG)" for the year ended on 31st December 2021			
The year ended with revenue of RO. 9,538,597/- and net profit of RO.252,556/- (after tax) as against revenue of RO. 8,886,709/- and net profit of RO.323,764/- (after tax) in the same period of previous year. The profit before depreciation is RO.788,144/- (after tax) for the year 2021, compared to profit before depreciation of RO.808,225/-(after tax) in the previous year 2020.			
The availability of paper is continue to be scarce and prices have reached to such levels which has not been seen before. The non/less availability of paper has impacted production.			
We would like to place on record our thanks to all our employees for their dedication and hard work.			
We would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to all of you for the patience and confidence reposed in the company. We also thank the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and the Muscat Securities Market for their support.			
On behalf of the Board or Directors, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq bin Taimur for his vision and growth oriented policies aimed at bringing about a prosperous national economy.			
Chairman of the Board of Directors			
		Statement Of Comprehensive Income For The Year Ended 31st December 2021	
		31.12.2021 RO	31.12.2020 RO
REVENUE		9,538,597	8,886,709
Cost of sales		(8,395,106)	(7,644,631)
GROSS PROFIT		1,143,491	1,242,078
Other operating income		426,821	351,700
Depreciation		(7,572)	(10,416)
Allowance for expected credit losses		(8,398)	(36,779)
General and administration expenses		(687,989)	(611,333)
Selling and distribution expenses		(392,194)	(412,357)
PROFIT FROM OPERATING ACTIVITIES		474,159	522,893
Finance costs		(176,833)	(141,730)
NET PROFIT FOR THE YEAR BEFORE TAX		297,326	381,163
Income tax expenses for the current year		(44,770)	(57,399)
NET PROFIT FOR THE YEAR AFTER TAX		252,556	323,764
Basic earning per share		0.084	0.108
Note: The Complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who request them either in Arabic or English within 7 days of the receipt of the request at the company's address at PO Box No 2818, Ruwi, Postal Code 112, Sultanate of Oman.			

Bank Muscat: An innovative journey in offering banking services and products

Over the past four decades, Bank Muscat has firmly established itself as one of the leading financial institutions in the sultanate. It has been contributing to enhancing the services provided in the banking sector and has become the customers' first choice as a banking partner. Moreover, the bank has played a pioneering role in planning and implementing CSR programmes and initiatives as well as developing Omani human resources. Its long-standing experience since the 80s has culminated in the broad success of its outstanding suite of services and products, which were developed in alignment with the technological transformation of the modern age. This success would not have been possible without the strong support of its valued customers who have been partners in the bank's journey since the beginning and its constant development over the past 40 years. Bank Muscat is delighted to dedicate this success to its loyal customers and assures them that it is working to continuing this inspiring journey with them and play a part in making their dreams come true. Today, Bank Muscat leads the financial services sector in the sultanate with over RO12bn in assets, 174 branches and more than 800 ATMs and CDMs spread across the country making it the preferred choice for customers.

Speaking on the occasion, Ahmed Faqir al Bulushi, chief banking officer, Bank Muscat, said: "We are delighted with the bank's outstanding achievements over the past four decades and are proud of the prominent role it plays in the sul-



Ahmed Faqir al Bulushi

tanate. As one of the great success stories of the Blessed Renaissance, Bank Muscat has become a trusted partner to one and all, whether to the government, corporates or individuals. The bank has strengthened the sultanate's banking sector as an Omani institution that provides a full suite of banking products, services and solutions. It is also notable that the bank is contributing greatly to helping our valued customers achieve their dreams and aspirations."

Bulushi, explained that Bank Muscat would continue to harness all its capabilities and expertise to provide the best possible services across the sultanate. He added, "Digital transformation has elevated the services and facilities offered to our large family of customers. The bank's efforts have been instrumental in achieving greater financial inclusion in the sultanate and today, customers can obtain banking services quickly and promptly whether they are at their homes, offices or even on the move. We would like to assure our customers that Bank Muscat will continue its journey of inspiring innovation powered



by new global banking trends, valued feedback from our customers and the government's efforts to take the fruits of growth and development to all parts of the country as part of the ambitious and forward-looking Oman Vision 2040."

Experienced and qualified human resources

Bank Muscat has been greatly encouraged by the results of its continuous investments in human resources. It has been closely supporting efforts for further development of youth through specialised programmes and courses to realise national development goals. The bank recognises that employees are its core strength and the primary reason for its success and accomplishments. Hence, it constantly invests resources and time to further develop their skills and help them reach their peak potential. From the moment of joining the bank, suitable training and development oppor-

tunities are provided to make employees skilled with work-related processes and procedures such that they can deliver to the best of their abilities. The bank is responsive to employee feedback and strives to ensure a professional work environment that is based on fair and equal opportunities to all employees, cutting-edge technology and global financial best practices. The bank has over 3800 employees and boasts of an excellent Omanisation ratio of over 95 per cent. With its positive work culture, common values, fostering of innovation, employee engagement activities, and sound HSE (Health, Safety and Environment) practices, Bank Muscat is a dream employer for many job seekers in the sultanate, particularly those who are interested in the banking and financial services sector.

Developed banking network

In line with its commitment to enhancing financial inclusion and

ensuring wider availability of its services and products, Bank Muscat has the largest network in Oman with 174 branches and over 800 ATMs, CDMs and other electronic devices. Customers can enjoy a large number of services through this network starting from opening accounts to helping them get finances that meet their various needs such as Sayyarati, Baituna or personal finances and many more. The shift from traditional to digital banking remains an ongoing process with new features and services being continuously added for the benefit of customers. The biggest advantage of digital banking is that it gives people more ways than ever to access the services they need for their daily banking needs. Today, digital banking provides many tools and features that were not available in the traditional banking space. The development in digital services in the sultanate has gone through different stages and has witnessed a quantum leap thanks to techno-

logical advancements in the recent past.

Exclusive banking services

In line with its vision 'To serve you better, everyday' and commitment to customer service excellence, Bank Muscat is keen to further develop its services and products to meet customer aspirations and needs and in line with global financial trends. Its Retail Banking unit offers a full suite of products and services designed specifically to the needs of individual customers of all ages. In particular, Bank Muscat Premier Banking has been setting benchmarks through the banking facilities offered by Asalah Priority Banking and Al Jawhar Privilege Banking. These innovative services are aimed at offering suitable customer-centric financial solutions.

The dynamic nature of the payments landscape is constantly opening up new opportunities for innovation and growth. Today, customers can enjoy a fast and secure banking experience 24/7 from the comfort of their homes and offices. Already a large number of customers are using the various features available such as bill payments, mobile top ups, payments within Bank Muscat and Oman and international payments and transfers, enabling/disabling Debit Cards for international usage, opening new accounts through the website, opening new savings account for existing customers through Mobile banking, booking of fixed deposits, QR-code-based PoS payments etc. They can make Speed Transfers to Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri

Lanka, Philippines and Egypt with instant credit to the beneficiary account in many cases, in addition to remittances across the globe through the SWIFT network. The bank's customers find digital banking channels a convenient option to pay school fees, mobile top ups, transfer of funds within the bank and within Oman, change of PIN, loading funds on mobile wallet, prepaid card and cheque book requests among others.

The development of electronic services in the sultanate has gone through different stages, each of which witnessed a qualitative leap thanks to the development of technology and information technology. These services saw their beginning in the field of retail banking to give customers more options and greater ease of access to various services thanks to the multiple tools and features available around the clock.

Contact Centre services

Bank Muscat's Contact Centre represents an important channel of communication for the bank's customers to get in touch quickly with the bank whenever the need arises. As part of its customer-centric strategy, Bank Muscat operates the largest Contact Centre in the banking sector in the sultanate, which is manned by a team of competent and highly-trained Omani phone bankers. The Contact Centre uses an integrated voice response (IVR) system to respond to simple queries, while phone bankers are always available 24/7 to handle more complex queries and clarifications.



Belkin International opens 2 exclusive stores in Oman

Belkin International, a global consumer electronics leader, opened two exclusive Belkin stores in Oman in partnership with AAMAAL LLC. The outlets, located at the Mall of Oman and the City Centre Qurum, showcases the unique and latest range of Belkin products while increasing brand awareness across the Middle East. The opening follows the success of two trial franchise concepts in the sultanate.

The grand opening was inaugurated by the Omani footballer Ali al Habsi. Belkin has signed Oman national football star and 2022 FIFA World Cup Ambassador Habsi as the face to drive brand awareness about the upcoming Belkin stores and Belkin products. He will also represent the brand at various official functions.

Fawad Mir, regional managing director of Belkin EMEA, said, "The retail environment in the region is increasingly sophisticated, with customers looking to experience products before making their buying decisions. Our

two new stores in Oman cater to this trend while reaffirming our commitment to the region. We invite customers to experience our innovations and premium quality in an attractive and modern setting. We will continue to expand and grow our business while keeping customer centricity at the heart of our operations."

Sheikh al Harith al Khalili, the executive partner at AAMAAL LLC, said, "This is an important milestone in Belkin's journey in Oman and the region. Belkin stores aim to provide state of the art customer experience, which the brand has to offer. This collaboration will strengthen AAMAAL's footprint in the region, and AAMAAL looks forward to a sustainable business partnership with Belkin."

The stores will offer a one-of-a-kind retail experience for customers across Oman to explore products in an interactive setting. A custom-built video wall at the storefront and audiovisual projections on the inner LED screens

will guide consumers through the product journey. Customers will also have access to a customer experience desk with an experiential display showcasing top-selling products in categories such as audio, power banks, Magsafe charging products and more. The full range of Belkin products will be in stock with trained salespeople to guide customers through the product experience. The stores will also host exclusive product launches and special events for customers.

Speaking on his collaboration with Belkin, Habsi, said, "I am honoured to be representing a globally renowned brand like Belkin, which is synonymous with premium quality and unique designs. Belkin continues to offer its consumers innovative and smart products, providing them with convenient and upgraded lifestyles. I look forward to contributing to the brand's continued success in the Sultanate of Oman and the Gulf region."

Pakistan Navy ship 'Aslat' visits Port Sultan Qaboos

In pursuance of Pakistan Navy's commitment to regional security and affirmation of its role as a force with global outlook, Pakistan Navy ship Aslat (with embarked helicopter) visited Port Sultan Qaboos, Muscat from February 9-12 for a good will visit during its Regional Maritime Security Patrol (RMSP).

RMSP is Pakistan Navy's initiative of maintaining presence in the critical sea lanes in order to contribute to regional maritime security and freedom of navigation.

During the stay in port, the ship hosted a reception onboard (while abiding by the SOPs and instructions issued by Supreme Committee dealing with COVID-



19) which was attended by diplomats including ambassadors

and military attaches of various countries, senior officers from

Royal Navy of Oman and prominent Pakistani community members. Officers and men from Royal Navy of Oman visited the ship for professional briefings and interaction.

The ship's visit was aimed at strengthening the bonds of friendship between Sultanate of Oman and Pakistan in general and Royal Navy of Oman and Pakistan Navy in particular as well as exploring new vistas for future collaborative initiatives between the two brotherly countries.

The ship sailed on February 12 to take part in the sea phase of the International Maritime Exercise 2022 (IMX 22) conducted off Muscat coast.

Kalyan Jewellers launches limited edition jewellery to celebrate Valentine's Day

February is the season to bestow yourself and your loved ones with gifts that they will cherish forever and will signify your love for them. Celebrating the spirit of Valentine's Day, Kalyan Jewellers, a leading jewellery brand, has launched an exclusive collection for everyone who wants to gift special jewellery that highlights the uniqueness of their companionship. This unique line comprises lightweight gold jewellery including pendants, rings, earrings and more - studded with precious stones and diamonds. The collection also includes jewellery with exquisite motifs in rose gold.

Celebrating this season, Kalyan Jewellers has also announced a 'Spin and Win' offer



for all their customers with assured gifts for all purchases made over OMR100 until February 14. These gifts include gift vouchers, gift cards, diamond pendants, and also calls from their brand ambassadors.

Talking about the launch of the limited edition jewellery for Valentine's Day, Ramesh Kalya-

naraman, executive director, Kalyan Jewellers said, "Our newest collection curated for the occasion of Valentine's Day is affordable, lightweight, stylish and complements the theme of the occasion with distinctive designs. The collection is attractive and matches the higher quality associated with the brand."

As part of the Kalyan Jewellers' 'We Care' COVID-19 guidelines, the company has instituted the highest level of safety and precautionary measures across all showrooms to safeguard the health and safety of both customers and staff alike. The company has also appointed a safety measure officer to ensure safety protocol guidelines are strictly followed.

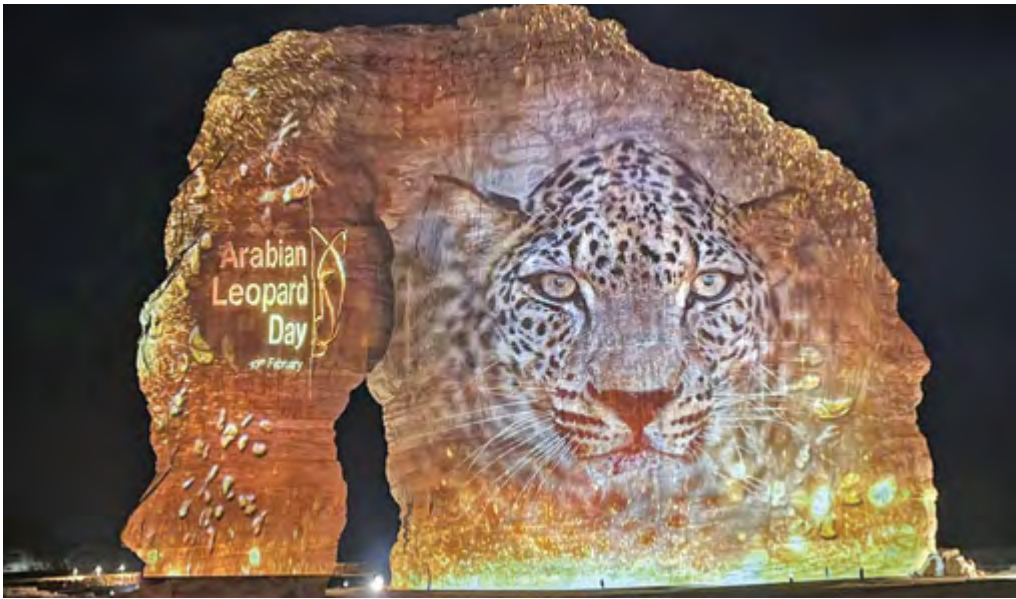
Kalyan Jewellers draws from a product portfolio of thousands of contemporary and traditional designs and offers selections for everyday wear, as well as bridal wear and festive occasions across 151 showrooms in India and the Middle East. Customers can also avail the benefits of Kalyan's 4-Level Assurance Certification on gold jewellery. While jewellery retailed at Kalyan Jewellers goes through multiple purity tests, the 4-level assurance certificate promises customers payment on the value of purity mentioned in the invoice during exchange or resale. The certification also assures free lifetime maintenance of ornaments at any Kalyan Jewellers' showroom in the country.

Inaugural Arabian Leopard Day kicks off across the region

Iconic buildings and historic landmarks in Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE were proudly lit up on February 10, to mark the first-ever Arabian Leopard Day. Stunning illuminations, inspired by the majestic but critically endangered big cats, were simultaneously projected on Riyadh's King Faisal Foundation building, Jeddah's King Road Tower, Adeer Tower in Al Khobar, Elephant Rock in AIUla, plus Burj Khalifa and KSA's Expo 2020 pavilion in Dubai as well as a highly prominent electronic billboard on Sultan Qaboos University Road in Muscat, Oman.

Across the region Arabian Leopard Day was marked with classroom education initiatives as well as social media outreach throughout the day with the hashtag #ArabianLeopardDay. And in a public show of support, many government entities across Saudi Arabia incorporated the official Arabian Leopard Day logo on their websites and social media.

In an important step forward, the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Catmosphere foundation to strengthen regional efforts to protect the future of the Arabian Leopard. RCU and Catmosphere will work closely together on a series of sustainable and innova-



tive events, campaigns, and outreach initiatives research with the shared goal of safeguarding the future of the Arabian Leopard, an animal of national pride in Saudi Arabia and around the region.

The inaugural Arabian Leopard Day highlights the desperate plight of the species, which once freely roamed the Arabian Peninsula but is now restricted to small, scattered populations in Saudi Arabia, Oman and Yemen.

Prince Badr bin Abdulla bin Mohammad bin Farhan al Saud, governor of AIUla and Minister of Culture, said, "The signing of the MoU supports RCU's Arabian Leopard conservation pro-

gramme, which is at the heart of extensive sustainable development plans for the wider AIUla region. This agreement also significantly strengthens existing partnerships with entities concerned with the conservation of natural fauna and flora, including the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)."

Princess Reema bint Bandar al Saud, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the United States and founder of Catmosphere, said, "The signing of this new MoU supports Catmosphere's mission to secure a future for Big Cats, including the Arabian Leopard. It builds momentum around regional conservation efforts with

a focus on supporting RCU as it strives to achieve its far-reaching ambitions to reintroduce the species to the wild."

Amr Al Madani, CEO, Royal Commission for AIUla, said, "The Arabian Leopard is a powerful symbol of RCU's aim to conserve and safeguard AIUla's natural environment through far-reaching conservation efforts designed to protect the natural flora and fauna of this incredible part of north-west Arabia. It is a sad reality that the Arabian Leopard is Critically Endangered. Ongoing threats to its natural habitat highlight the pressing need to step up conservation efforts that are so vital to the species' long-

term survival. We really want people to mark Arabian Leopard Day and engage with activities to raise awareness of, and help to protect, these majestic big cats."

The Arabian Leopard is emblematic of Saudi Arabia and RCU's extensive environmental sustainability ambitions. The species occupies a unique place in the collective consciousness and imagination of the region; images of the big cat have been found in ancient rock art, have inspired folk tales, and are even used in modern everyday expressions.

Numbering fewer than 200 in the wild, the Arabian Leopard is categorised as Critically Endangered by the IUCN and is considered to be at an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild.

Last year's birth of a female cub at the Arabian Leopard Breeding Centre in Taif, Saudi Arabia, highlighted the great potential for reintroducing the species into the wilderness and mountains around AIUla and beyond. However, there remains a long and difficult road ahead with efforts ongoing to establish a protected habitat to restore the population.

Saudi Arabia's Council of Ministers has designated Arabian Leopard Day to take place on 10 February each year.



Oman Insurance shares tips to spruce up your car this Valentine

Did you know that, the average consumer in the UAE spends AED1,000-15,000 just to buy bouquets, sweets and gifts, on February 14th to please their better half?

Even when love is in the air, some of us might forget to plan a day for that special someone in our lives. Whether you are cruising along the Jumeirah Beach Road or driving to a restaurant, your car better impress your date in the passenger seat. It could seem trivial but taking steps to get your car ready for the occasion can go a long way!

Whatever your situation, we've got you covered with the tips on showing your car some love and prepping it for date night.

1. You can't go wrong with a good ol' scrubbing

When it comes to enjoying a romantic night out in town with your special someone, you'll make sure to look extra nice to leave your mark. Make sure your car makes a stunning statement too. Start with the exterior and work your way in. For all you parents, look for those breadcrumbs artistically tucked away between your seats and give the car a vacuum. Too much work? Just take it down to your nearest car wash. A car that smells fresh and looks clean will add to the charm of the night.

2. Check up on maintenance

Now that you've freshened up the exterior and interior of your vehicle, it's time to look under the bonnet. Remember, looks aren't everything, it's what's on the inside that counts.

Julien Audrie, head of consumer lines and marketing at Oman Insurance, shares his two cents on this, "Having your own car in the UAE is a blessing in more ways than one, but often

people tend to avoid regular maintenance of their cars and I am not just talking about the engine. Hundreds of accidents happen every year because people do not attend to wear and tear on their tires, keep proper tire pressure, regularly change engine oil, check the coolant levels and battery life etc. While we provide 24x7 roadside assistance for exactly those issues, the last thing you want is for your car to go caput on date night. Ouch!"

3. Don't forget the tank

While you're checking up on that maintenance, make sure that your car's fuel gauge is in the right place. To avoid any inconvenience, fill up your tank in advance. The fuel station probably isn't the romantic detour your partner had in mind, unless you are planning to take her to the burger joint tucked in the corner.

4. Grab the right scent for the occasion

It's that time to spruce up your ride. Why not try something to freshen up your car by using a fragrant air freshener? Just in time for the upcoming spring! A quick internet search throws up a whole host of options when it comes to selecting an air freshener. Psst... buy the one that has the shape of a heart and thank us later.

5. Cue the music!

Sure, turning on the music aboard your car is the age-old tactic when the conversation goes awkward or when it's awkwardly quiet. But you know what's more awkward is turning on the music and what comes blaring out is just plain old radio and static. We suggest some ambient music to set the mood for a joyful evening. Better yet, prepare a unique playlist. Your date will love the attention.

OABC hosts 'Oman's Legal and Tax Landscape' for members

In collaboration with ALC Lawyers and Counsels (ALC) and PwC Middle East, the Oman American Business Center (OABC) hosted 'Oman's Tax and Legal Landscape' on February 7, at the Sheraton Oman Hotel.

The session included a brief time of business networking over breakfast, followed by legal and tax presentations covering a variety of key topics, and ended with plenty of time for Q & A.

Speaker Abdulredha al Lawati, founder of ALC, discussed the current laws related to court processes and commercial practice. His presentation was followed by PwC Middle East's Ghaila al Sharji, tax senior manager, who covered Oman's 2022 State Budget. Finally, Darcy



White, tax and legal services partner discussed e-invoicing, personal income tax, regional trends, and the future of Oman's tax legislation.

"Events like this one are part of OABC's overall mission to facilitate trade and investment between Oman and the US, and to support ease of doing business in

Oman," said Ali Daud, founder and chairman Emeritus of OABC. "Oman is moving towards its Vision 2040 and more changes affecting the private sector will certainly come. We are proud to partner with firms like ALC and PwC Middle East and host sessions that keep our members informed about key developments

across all sectors."

"The past few years have seen a big shift in the global tax landscape in terms of how countries are expected to tax, record, and report on resident entities and individuals," said Darcy White, tax partner at PwC Middle East. "Global influence on local tax policy is greater than ever before,

fueled particularly by the OECD's Inclusive Framework on BEPS, which Oman is a member of. The BEPS Project brings with it significant compliance requirements to meet multilateral cooperation objections. This coupled with the increased focus on taxation in Oman's Vision 2040 and the 2022 budget means that taxable entities will need to ensure they are 'tax ready' for the future. This doesn't just mean ensuring they are aware of compliance matters, as with the introduction of new taxes and compliance requirements, for example, e-invoicing. Being tax ready also means ensuring entities have the right policies and systems in place to meet the government's reporting obligations."

High performance intelligent Changan CS95 available at low EMI

Changan's high-performance intelligent seven-seat SUV CS95 is now available at an EMI starting from RO260 for six years. EMI is calculated based on 20 per cent down payment and six years loan tenure. Subject to banks or finance company approvals. T&C apply. Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment, which is part of Bahwan International Group has also announced that the price includes 5 per cent value-added tax (VAT).

A spokesperson for AGAE said, "CS95, a flagship model of Changan, is a perfect seven-seater SUV for a large modern family who wants to travel in luxury, with business class comfort in all road conditions with its intelligent 4WD system. We are thrilled to offer low EMI on CS95 which is packed with endless features and has numerous advantages over its segment competition."

The 2.0L turbo engine, 224 hp, 6-speed AT, and 4WD Changan CS95 which magnifies driving experience with sophisticated luxury and superior comfort has been designed to stir the driving emotions. Under the

hood is a Blue Core 2.0L turbocharged engine mated with a six speed AT which produces a 360 Nm of torque. Changan CS95 4WD features Business class comfort with perforated leather seats and lane departure warning. With a commanding presence and muscular stance, Changan CS95 is designed to demand attention wherever it goes. With meticulously crafted details complemented by convenient technology, the CS95 ensures refined luxury in every drive for up to seven passengers.

With a range of innovative driving technologies, the CS95 delivers an assured sense of confidence and control to the driver. Its Blue Core Powertrain Technology based on the principles of power, clean and quiet provides owners with a highly efficient and energy saving performance.

Technical specifications

CS95's vehicle specifications includes length x width x height of 4949mm x 1930mm x 1790mm, Blue Core 2.0L T GDI Turbocharged Gasoline Direct Injection engine, wheelbase of



2810mm, maximum output of 233 HP at 5000-5500 rpm, maximum torque of 360 Nm at 1750-3500 rpm, tyres with 55/245 R19 alloy wheels and fuel tank capacity of 74ltr.

Changan CS95 SUV : Flagship model

Changan CS95 4WD wide-winged grille represents strength and comfort and its matte texture with a bright strip are well

matched. The original C-shaped light combines position lights, steering lamps, and daytime running lights. The sculpted waist-line wraps around the entire body, creating an extraordinary visual. The floating roof design affords the vehicle a sense of speed. The two-tone rim design highlights the dynamic outline. Additionally, Changan shows ingenuity by integrating its V logo in the details. The refined instru-

ment panel with silver highlights aligns with the exquisite man-machine function button. Broad central control matches high-grade multi-functional storage space. A variety of seating combinations are offered to meet a diversity of customer needs. Second and third row seating is spacious and foldable.

Intelligent performer

2022 CS95 4WD 7seater Outfit-

ted with Bosch medium-range radar MMR ev04, CS95 can find forward vehicle. Adaptive Cruise Control System move-stop function with speed range from 0 to 150km per hour guarantees CS95 to activate from stationary and accelerate or decelerate intelligently. Keeping safe distance, stopping, or moving following forward vehicle and adapting varies road conditions makes CS95 easier to drive.

Advanced Safety

Fitted out with Bosch MPC2Plus camera, CS95 can detect the lane line and to warn drivers when deviating from the lane, preventing accidents from fatigue or distracting driving. The distance lights and passing lights can be switched intelligently when driving at night. CS95 can also automatically detect speed limit and avoid speeding when driving on express way.

The three intelligent functions, car distance warning, forward collision warning, and collision mitigation, equipped in CS95 can avoid or ease the collision by alarm and auxiliary braking.

Endowed with great audio System

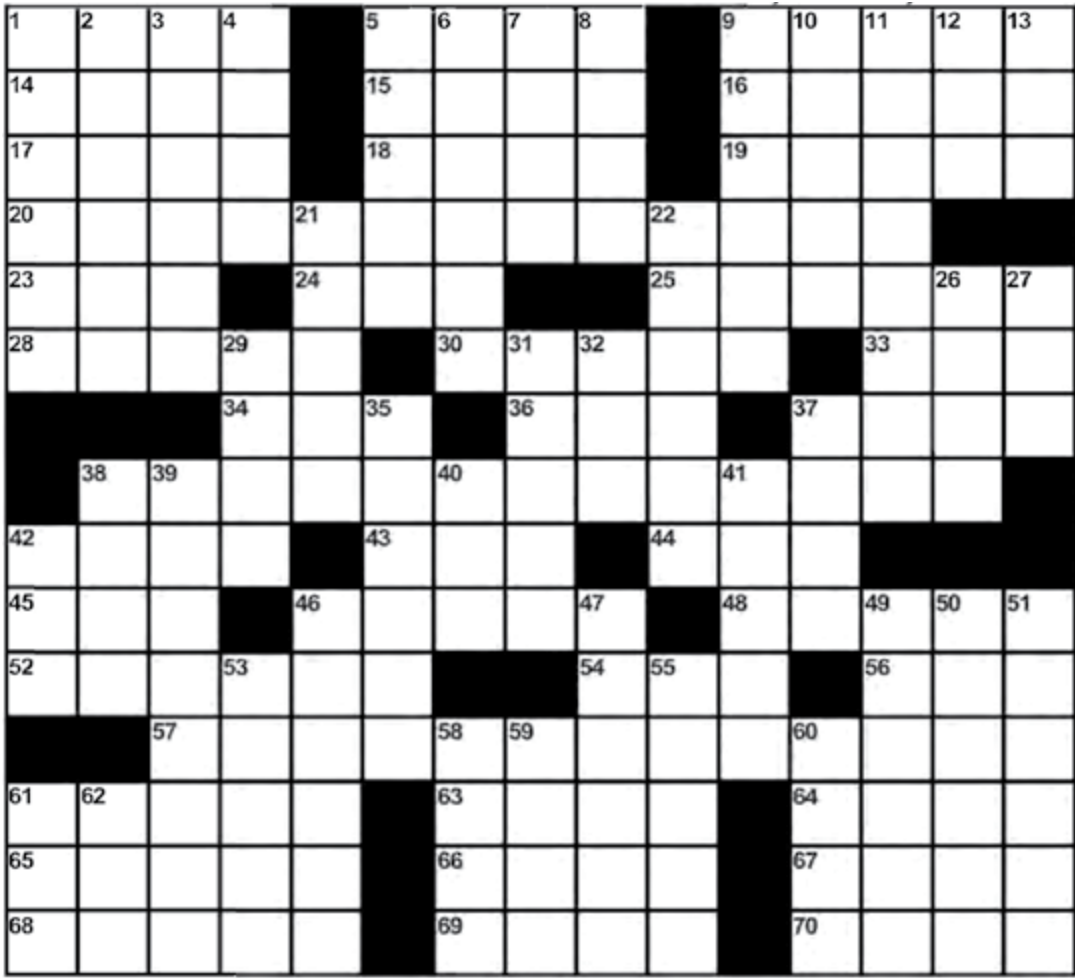
CS95 is endowed with 10 Pioneer HiFi Speakers & DSP power amplifiers to deliver fresh, new audio experiences to every passenger.

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

About AGAE

Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment which is part of Bahwan International Group has set up a spacious and state-of-the-art Showroom in Al Qurum and Service centre in Ghala, Muscat. AGAE has already tied up for Periodic Maintenance Services in many cities including Salalah, Sohar, Sur, Nizwa, Ibra and Barka etc. Changan OMAN offers 5 years or 150,000 kms manufacturer warranty on all passenger vehicles in Oman.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

 - 1) Sore feet, in slang
 - 5) Bygone Russian ruler
 - 9) Familiar places of comfort
 - 14) Almond-shaped
 - 15) Tingle that irritates
 - 16) A Muse
 - 17) Proofreader's instruction
 - 18) Pasture female
 - 19) Correct
 - 20) Sprout up
 - 23) Former Japanese capital
 - 24) Keats work
 - 25) Gilligan's stranding place
 - 28) Brief expression of a guiding principle
 - 30) Ramshackle, as a watermelon?
 - 33) Deception
 - 34) Hinny's kin
 - 36) "Long... and far away ..."
 - 37) Composes
 - 38) Place to go when hacked WHO GIVES A HOOT?
 - 42) Face-to-face exam
 - 43) River rodent
 - 44) Tentative taste
 - 45) Last half of a cock-tail?
- 46) Hebrew letters
 - 48) Word with "human" or "alien"
 - 52) Treeless plain
 - 54) Shed tool
 - 56) Negative link
 - 57) What nerds have
 - 61) Low, dull impact sound
 - 63) Subordinate of a marquis
 - 64) Capital of Latvia
 - 65) Insect-catching bird
 - 66) Liver spread
 - 67) It gives the eye its color
 - 68) Ascended, as from a grave
 - 69) Technical school (abbr.)
 - 70) Walking stick

DOWN

 - 1) Old bumper car trademark
 - 2) Bite off too much?
 - 3) Awkward bloke
 - 4) Killed, as a dragon
 - 5) Hardly outgoing
 - 6) Tent securers
 - 7) Farm measure
 - 8) Ostrich look-alike
 - 9) Joan of Arc's offense
 - 10) College at Oxford
 - 11) Another college at
 - Oxford
 - 12) Suffix for some ordinal numbers
 - 13) Drunkard
 - 21) Fit to be tied?
 - 22) Wives of avid sports fans, facetiously
 - 26) Last digit in a price, often
 - 27) "Plaines" leader
 - 29) Asian weight unit
 - 31) "Planet of the Apes" setting
 - 32) Bad attribute of many a prima donna
 - 35) DiMaggio's 56 games, e.g.
 - 37) Prop for Sherlock Holmes
 - 38) German "Mrs."
 - 39) Beautiful arcs
 - 40) It's passed for funds
 - 41) Slander relative
 - 42) Legendary Giant Mel
 - 46) In need of a good fixing
 - 47) Some summer attire
 - 49) A Gandhi
 - 50) Something to knock some sense into?
 - 51) Bribe, in slang
 - 53) Gifted one?
 - 55) Forest fledgling
 - 58) Foreign Legion headwear
- 59) Palindromic Indian bread

60) Clapton of "Layla"

fame

61) EMT's skill

62) Flowery gift

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You're about to begin mingling with all kinds of interesting and unusual people, and you'll love every minute of it. There's at least one new acquaintance who'll be around for a while thanks to an astrological setup that will keep that parade of people you'd otherwise never have met going strong. Whether they turn out to be friends or partners is up for grabs, but who cares? Think of this as a social buffet.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

If anyone is usually quite sure of what, how, and when they want to do what they want to do, it's you. At the moment, however, you're torn between being good (preparing yourself for tomorrow and going to bed early) and being bad, which would basically entail staying up as late as you like. The final decision rests with your conscience, but with the right movie, and a big bowl of popcorn, there won't be a contest.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

It's over, temporarily, at least. That work binge you were on has finally come to an end. That's not to say that you won't be putting in your time and continuing to do whatever is necessary to keep your head above water and your reputation on the job intact, but you may also suddenly find that you need to make time for your family and neighbours. Reintroduce yourself to them, and rest assured that you'll receive a warm reception.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

That new and quite authoritative person you've met is probably quite well outfitted from head to toe at this point. They enjoy spending money, but if you want to keep up, better check the balance on your credit cards and the balance in your bank account. If you can't quite keep up, don't try. There are better ways to impress them, but even if you end up doing some serious damage to your wallet, think of it as a lesson.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

It's indisputable that you have a way with words, a gift for presenting logical, practical arguments that are awfully hard to disagree with. That talent will come through for you beautifully now, as always, especially at work, and especially if you add just a touch of charm to the mix when you're chatting with co-workers. After all, you know what they say about bees and honey.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You're busy, as usual. That, of course, is nothing new, and it's something you've become used to. Just for the moment, though, why not devote some time to pure, unadulterated fun? That's after you're done with your work for the day, and it includes not just your usual chores but also something your partner has either managed to forget to do or put off until later. Win those brownie points.

1. Which of these fought to unify Italy in the 19th century?
- A. Joachim Murat
 - B. Benito Mussolini
 - C. Giuseppe Garibaldi
 - D. Canaletto

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Whether it feels comfortable to you or not (and initially, at least, it probably won't), you're going to be at centre stage for a couple of days and maybe longer. Better accept it and try to get your sweetheart used to the idea too, because they may also find the spotlight trained on them if they're in the vicinity. There are definitely worse things than being worshipped by a crowd of admirers. You'll both just have to buck up and smile pretty.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

If you're still thinking about travel, today the cosmos could make it just about impossible for you to resist any longer. Make the decision. You don't even have to decide exactly where you're going, not just yet. All you really have to do at this point is to inform the powers that be that you'll need some time off. Once that's done, it will make the situation real and put you in the mood to choose your destination. Oh, go ahead.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You've always been the objective type, far more prone to look to facts and figures than anything that even remotely resembles nostalgia. At the moment, however, you're feeling like a regular tissue commercial, and you're not at all shy about spouting phrases you would have made fun of not too long ago. It all comes down to just one thing: that love is, indeed, grand, and that you're not afraid to express it.

2. What is the national anthem of the UK?
- A. Land of Hope and Glory
 - B. God Save the Queen
 - C. Rule Britannia
 - D. Jerusalem

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

The heavens are primed for encounters of the most delightful kind, and there's a touch of extremely unexpected romance in the air too. In your case, however, especially if there's someone you've been secretly thinking about and wondering if they're doing the same, the news is particularly good. Don't be surprised if you receive an answer to that question via a startling coincidence that brings you two together.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You've been thinking about letting a certain person know just how much you care. In fact, you've been thinking about doing that for some time now. You're right on the verge of having a 'state of the relationship' meeting to tell them how you feel. Well, what's the holdup? You know they feel the same and you know they'll be delighted to hear it. You've even got heavenly envoys on your side. What could be better?

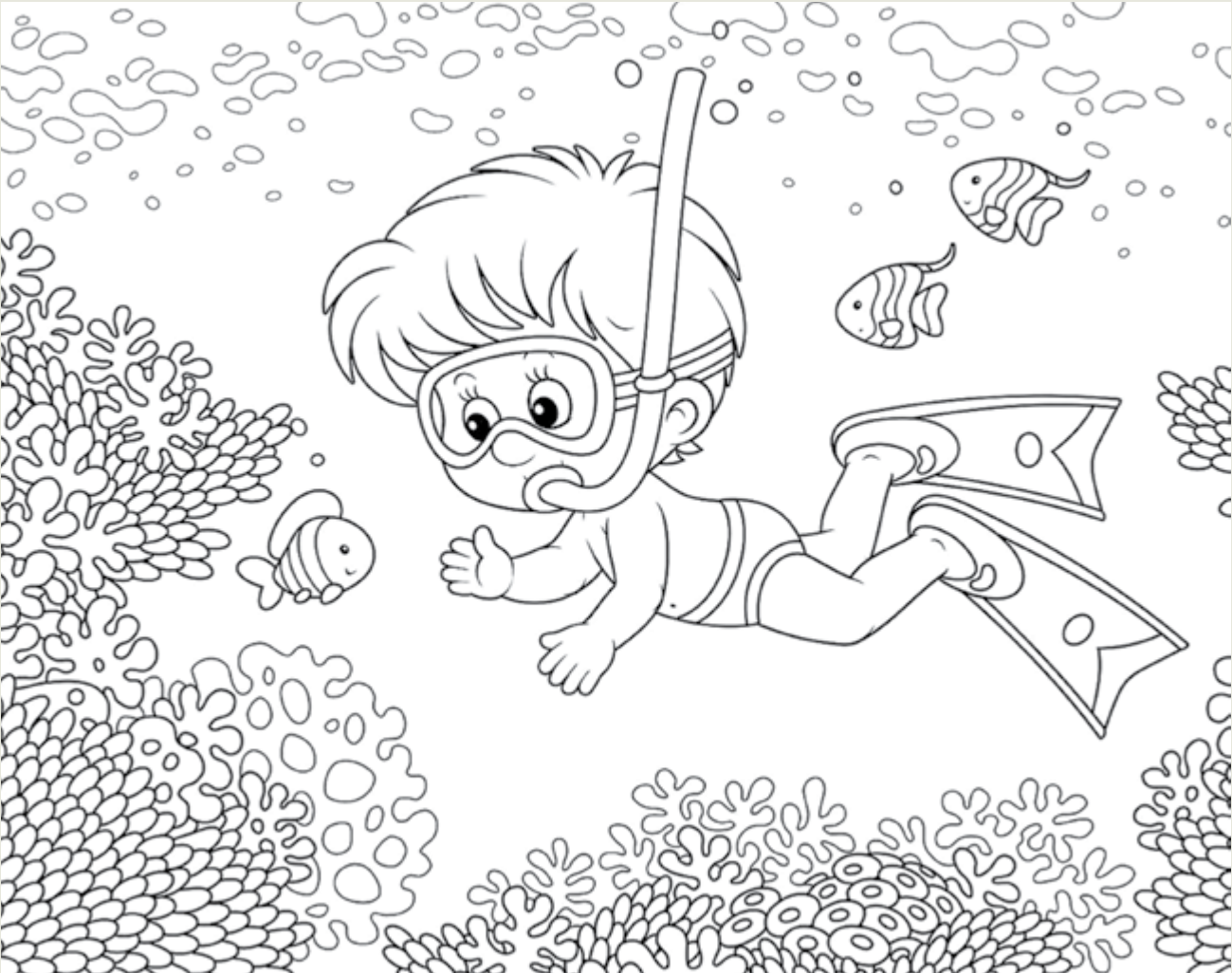
PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

The universe has officially granted you 'off duty' status. Your compassion knows no bounds, but you've done absolutely everything you can for the ones you love. It's time now for them to take care of themselves and for you to stop feeling guilty about not doing more. Besides, there's someone out there who could do with a bit more of your time and attention, not to mention your company, in private. How about it?

3. The filings of wood or metal are referred to as ...?
- A. Shavings
 - B. Swarf
 - C. Shavetails
 - D. Sweals

Answers: 1. C 2. B 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

E	T	E	T
A	Y	D	R
W	M	H	I
B	A	I	E

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Winter drought hits Portugal

Pampilhosa da Serra, Portugal - In central Portugal, a sustained drought has revealed the ruins of a village that was totally submerged underwater when a large reservoir was created nearly 70 years ago.

"I have never seen that!" says Carlos Perdigao, 76, as he gazes at the ruined stone houses of Vilar which were swallowed up by the Zezere river when a dam was opened in 1954.

Vilar stands on the banks of the river, surrounded by cracked yellow earth, another sign of the ongoing dry spell during what is normally a rainy winter season, with the drought also hitting neighbouring Spain.

Weather services in both countries say it was the second driest January on record since the year 2000.

The current drought is extraordinary because of 'its intensity, scale and length', says climate scientist Ricardo Deus of Portugal's meteorology agency IPMA.

Of Portugal's 55 dams, 24 are only holding half of their water capacity, and five are below 20 per cent, according to the European Union's Copernicus Earth observation service.

The Algarve, Portugal's southernmost province, and one of Europe's top tourism destinations, is one of those most affected by the drought.

Meanwhile Spain only got a quarter of the precipitation it normally gets in January, said the AEMET weather service.

The dry spell, which began at the end of 2021, is ruining crops, leaving farmers struggling to feed livestock and hampering hydroelectricity production.



An aerial view of the Zezere river at Pampilhosa da Serra, central Portugal on February 8 (AFP)

'It's a disaster'

Earlier this month, Portugal ordered five of its hydropower dams to suspend water use for electricity production in order to prioritise human consumption.

Nearly 30 per cent of Portugal's electricity comes from hydropower dams.

And in Spain, Agriculture Minister Luis Planas on Tuesday said the government was 'concerned' about the drought and would adopt the 'necessary measures' depending on how the situation evolves.

Spain's water reserves are currently at less than 45 per cent of their capacity, officials say, with the southern Andalu-

sia region and Catalonia in the northeast worst hit.

Farmers in both countries are worried. "Look! The grass isn't growing to feed the animals," says Antonio Estevas, a cheese producer who owns a herd of around 30 goats in Portela de Fojo Machio, a village in central Portugal near the town of Pampilhosa da Serra.

"If it doesn't rain in the coming days, it's going to be very complicated," he sighs, gazing at his drought-stressed pastures.

The lack of rain is also jeopardising the town's efforts to draw tourists inland with a floating pool structure set up for

bathers in the Zezere river.

But the pool's plastic lining lies slumped on the ground, with the drought forcing the river to recede. "For us, it's a disaster," says the town's mayor, Henrique Fernandes Marques.

The same area was badly hit by a wave of wildfires that raged through parched farmlands and forests in 2017, claiming over 100 lives.

More frequent and intense droughts are expected to put enormous strain on climate-vulnerable regions as temperatures rise, and will likely heighten the risk of related natural disasters such as wildfires, scientists say.

While the alternation between dry and wet years is normal in southern Europe, "we have observed a decline in the percentage of rainy years lately," said Filipe Duarte Santos, an environment specialist at Lisbon University.

These droughts are 'one of the most serious consequences of climate change', he added.

"Until greenhouse gas emissions are drastically reduced, the problem will continue."

The situation is not likely to improve in the coming weeks as forecasters expect rainfall in both countries to be below the seasonal average.

AFP



Prison officials stand prepared for the release of prisoners outside the Insein prison in Yangon on Saturday (AFP)

Myanmar's junta gives amnesty for 814 prisoners

Yangon, Myanmar - Myanmar's junta on Saturday announced an amnesty for more than 800 prisoners, as it held a parade and show of force in the capital to mark the country's Union Day.

The country has been in turmoil since last year's coup, with mass protests and a subsequent military crackdown that has killed more than 1,500 civilians, according to the UN's human rights office.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing issued the 'pardon order' - a regular feature of major holidays in the country - for 814 prisoners, state media said, marking the 75th Union Day.

The annual holiday commemorates an agreement between independence hero Aung San and several ethnic groups to form a Union of Burma independent of British rule. Those given amnesty will be mostly from prisons in commercial hub Yangon, junta spokesperson Zaw Min Tun told AFP.

He did not say whether Australian academic Sean Turnell - who has been detained for more

than a year - would be among those released.

The economics professor was working as an adviser to civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi when he was arrested last February, days after she was ousted by the military. He has been charged with violating Myanmar's official secrets law and faces a maximum penalty of 14 years in prison if found guilty.

About 100 people gathered outside Yangon's Insein prison on Saturday morning hoping to be reunited with loved ones, AFP correspondents said.

Four minibuses left the prison around noon local time (0530 GMT) and drove away, with those inside waving as people in the crowd shouted the names of relatives.

Thin Thin Aye, 46, waited in the hope her son - jailed last year for incitement against the military - would be among those freed. She kept waiting even after the last bus pulled away and prison staff said no other prisoners would be released.

AFP

'Detained Afghan protester released'

Kabul, Afghanistan - An Afghan woman protester who went missing after taking part in a rally against the Taliban had been detained by the hardliners for several weeks before being released on Friday, a relative and an activist said.

Parwana Ibrahimkhel went missing in Kabul on January 19 along with another female protester Tamana Zaryabi Paryani just days after they participated in a women's rally calling for rights to work and education.

The Taliban, the hardline fundamentalists who now rule Afghanistan, had denied the two women protesters were detained by them, but on Friday a close relative of Ibrahimkhel told AFP that she had been released after being detained by the group for weeks. "We confirm that Parwana has been released today. She had been detained by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," the relative said requesting that his name not be revealed.

Prominent Afghan women's rights activist Hoda Khamosh confirmed that Ibrahimkhel had been released. "I contacted close family members of Parwana. She has been released today and is currently doing well," Khamosh told AFP.

She did not specify whether Ibrahimkhel had been detained by the Taliban. Ibrahimkhel and Paryani had gone missing along with four of their relatives. The fate of Paryani and the four relatives is still unknown. Since the two women disappeared the Taliban have denied any knowledge of their whereabouts, saying they were investigating the matter.

AFP

US to reopen Solomon Islands embassy to counter Chinese influence

Nadi, Fiji - United States will re-establish an embassy in the Solomon Islands, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Saturday, in an effort to counter China's influence in the politically troubled Pacific island.

Blinken announced the move during a visit to nearby Fiji, where he met virtually with around 18 Pacific island leaders to stress Washington's attention to the region in an attempt to curb Beijing's push for greater influence.

The United States closed its embassy in the Solomons Island capital Honiara in 1993 and is now represented by a consulate there, directed from the US embassy in Papua New Guinea.

The move comes just a few months after riots in the island chain of 800,000 people in No-

vember when protesters tried to storm parliament and then went on a three-day rampage, torching much of Honiara's Chinatown.

The unrest was sparked by opposition to veteran Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and partly fuelled by poverty, unemployment and inter-island rivalries, but anti-China sentiment also played a role.

Pushing back against Beijing

US officials said they were particularly concerned about China's growing influence in the Solomons.

Beijing said in December it would send police advisors and riot gear to the country as foreign peacekeepers began leaving the



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken watches a cultural farewell ceremony during his visit to Nadi, Fiji on Saturday (AFP)

Pacific nation after being deployed during the deadly protests. A subplot to November's unrest was Sogavare's efforts to forge closer ties with Beijing after abruptly breaking off

the island's long-time ties with Taiwan in 2019.

China balks at any official exchanges between other countries and self-ruled Taiwan, which it sees as its own territory

US sanctions have stopped Bangladesh killings: Rights activists

Dhaka, Bangladesh - From Russia to North Korea to Zimbabwe, the impact of diplomatic sanctions has long been questioned. But Bangladeshi activists have no doubts: extrajudicial killings have suddenly stopped since punitive US measures were imposed two months ago, they say.

Around 2,500 Bangladeshis have allegedly been killed by security forces since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina came to power in 2009, according to rights group Odhikar, which maintains detailed records, with hundreds more enforced disappearances.

It has tallied nearly 1,200 such deaths in the last four years, or an average of 25 per month.

But since Washington on December 10 imposed sweeping Magnitsky Act sanctions against the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) elite security force including seven of its top officers, killings have totalled zero, it says.

"I wish this sanction was slapped a lot earlier," said Afroza Islam Akhi, whose brother vanished eight years ago. "A lot of lives would have been saved."

Akhi is now a coordinator for Mayer Daak, which represents hundreds of families of victims of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

The RAB was set up in 2004 to tackle Marxist insurgents and religious extremism as well as curb human trafficking - goals it pursued mercilessly and officials say effectively. More recently its targets have largely been alleged criminals and drug dealers, with authorities insisting that deaths have only occurred during exchanges of fire in legitimate law enforcement operations.

But critics say political opponents have also died at the hands of security forces and that gunfights are staged to deny the victims due legal process.



Rita Begum, mother of Rakib Howlader, mourns during an interview at her home in Dhaka on February 9 (AFP)

Akhi's brother Sajedul Islam Suman was among at least 18 activists with the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) allegedly picked up by RAB officers in December 2013 in the run-up to national elections. "My mother went to the

RAB headquarters every day for more than a year as we heard RAB officers detained him," Akhi told AFP. "But he never returned."

Nur Khan Liton, head of Bangladesh's top rights group Ain O Salish Kendra, said the US

sanctions have directly improved the country's rights situation.

"People are happy with it and many have started speaking out."

'Every bone broken'

According to activists, almost all victims of extrajudicial killings are detained and then shot dead.

Rita Begum last saw her 14-year-old son Rakib Howlader handcuffed and detained at a police station in old Dhaka in 2018.

The next day her father told her the boy - accused of peddling drugs - had been beaten to death and then shot to make it appear he had died in an exchange of fire. "Every bone in his body was broken and then he was shot," she told AFP. "I didn't get justice."

When she tried to file a complaint, she said, "Police came to my house. They held a pistol to

my head and made me sign a lot of papers."

"I want the American sanctions to prevail," she added.

"I don't want to see any more mothers losing their children. I don't want anybody else to suffer my fate. I lost my gem of a boy."

In some cases RAB officers have been prosecuted, with at least 26 people including an RAB commander sentenced to death for seven murders in the central city of Narayanganj in April 2014.

Dhaka and Washington normally have warm relations, co-operating on security issues and with Bangladesh often voting alongside the United States at the United Nations.

The sanctions include asset freezes and visa bans and were imposed on the RAB and current or former RAB officials, including its ex-head Benazir Ahmed, now the national chief of police.

AFP

Ukraine girds for Russian warships' drills

Russia’s navy launched large-scale exercises in the Black Sea ‘to defend the coast of Crimea peninsula’

Sea of Azov, Ukraine - Ukrainian captain Oleksandr Surkov looks askance at his patrol boat’s machine guns and laments how futile they would be fending off an attack from Russian warships now steaming across the Black Sea.

“Our weapons are mostly designed to protect our state borders, not to wage war,” the 32-year-old says as his boat bobs through grey mist enveloping the coast of Ukraine’s industrial port of Mariupol.

“But if they attack, we will defend ourselves with every weapon we have.”

Surkov’s worries reflect that of Ukraine as a whole as it girds for a feared invasion from more than 100,000 Russian troops who have encircled the ex-Soviet state from nearly every side.

Ukraine’s old navy - stationed almost entirely in the Crimean port of Sevastopol - practically vanished when Russia annexed the peninsula and took all its ships in 2014.

Military analysts say Ukraine now has just one major warship and a dozen or so patrol and coastal craft of the type captained by Surkov.

Russia has sent six more warships into the region for a week of naval drills involving dozens of navy ships starting this weekend. Russia’s navy on Saturday launched large-scale exercises in the Black Sea even as Moscow dismissed as ‘hysteria’ a US warning that a Russian attack on Ukraine could begin within days.

“Over 30 vessels from the Black Sea fleet took to the sea



A Moskva Russian cruiser undertakes naval exercises outside the Crimean port of Sevastopol on Saturday (left) and



patrol boat casts off the border base in Ukraine’s Black Sea port of Mariupol on Friday (AFP)

from Sebastopol and Novorossiysk in accordance with the exercise plan,” the Russian defence ministry said on Saturday morning.

“The aim of the exercise is to defend the coast of the Crimea peninsula, the bases of the forces of the Black Sea fleet as well as the country’s economic sector ... from possible military threats,” the ministry added.

Ukrainian military analyst Mykola Beleskov says Russia now has 13 major battleships in the Black Sea on Ukraine’s southwestern coast that can enter the landlocked Sea of Azov on its southeast at any point.

“The situation is tense,” Beleskov said.

‘Prepare for the worst’

“The presence of Russian patrol

boats is growing,” Surkov says. “They are whipping up tensions.”

Mariupol lies on the edge of the front line separating government-controlled territory from that overseen by Russian-backed separatists in the rebel stronghold Donetsk.

Ukraine’s old navy, stationed almost in the Crimean port of Sevastopol, practically vanished when Russia annexed the peninsula and took all its ships in 2014. Ukraine has just one major warship now

It came under repeated attack in the early months of the separatist conflict as the rebels tried to grab its port - vital for Ukraine’s lucrative steel exports - and establish a land bridge be-

tween Russia and Crimea. Ukrainian forces were able to hold the line at a heavy cost.

The UN estimates that the entire separatist conflict has claimed more than 14,000 lives and forced 1.5mn from their homes. Coast guards patrolling

the waters off Mariupol today doubt they would be able to repel a serious Russian amphibious assault that might accompany any land invasion from Ukraine’s east and north.

“The six Russian ships that entered the Black Sea region have weapons that can be used on land as well as at sea. They have missiles,” border guard captain Igor Chernov said.

“We have to hope for a diplomatic solution,” added Surkov. “But we have to prepare for the worst.”

‘Difficult to pull off’

Naval fores expert Nick Childs of London’s International Institute for Strategic Studies said an amphibious assault on Ukraine would not be easy to pull off - even for someone of Russia’s military might.

“There has been much attention paid to movements of Russian amphibious ships into the Black Sea to bolster forces already there,” Child told AFP.

“However, amphibious oper-

ations would present hazards for Russian forces, and Ukraine has some coastal defence capabilities, including anti-ship missiles in development.”

Ukrainian analyst Beleskov agreed that an amphibious landing would be ‘very difficult to pull off’. “We have good defences in Odessa and along the Black Sea coast,” he said. “If they limit themselves to an amphibious landing alone, we would survive.”

‘Massive assault’

But veteran Russian military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer said the Kremlin has been preparing such an attack for nearly a year.

“They staged an amphibious landing drill on the Opuk firing range in Crimea last April,” Felgenhauer said.

“The plan is to concentrate a massive amphibious assault

force of 10,000 troops in the first wave.

The Ukrainians would never be able to repel that,” he said. “And then the second wave would come. An amphibious landing would be very hard to fight off because of Russia’s superiority not only at sea, but also in the air.”

The idea of a war of such scale breaking out at any time is leaving captain Surkov and his family feeling increasingly stressed.

He says he has spent almost all his time at sea since the start of the year because of the Russian war games.

“My wife is feeling nervous because I spend so little time at home,” the captain says. “She is always asking me if everything is alright. But things are getting heated.”

AFP

US says diplomatic path remains open, urges Russia ‘to deescalate’

Washington, US - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on Saturday that diplomatic channels remained ‘open’ to avoid conflict in Ukraine but would require Moscow to ‘deescalate’, the State Department said.

A Russian invasion of Ukraine ‘would result in a resolute, massive, and united Transatlantic response’, State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a statement.

During a call between Washington and Moscow’s top diplomats on Saturday, ‘the secretary made clear that a diplomatic path to resolving the crisis remained open, but it would require Moscow to deescalate and engage in good-faith discus-

sions’, Price said.

The statement comes ahead of a hastily arranged call between US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin aimed at defusing one of the gravest crises in East-West relations since the Cold War.

Weeks of tensions that have seen Russia surround its western neighbour with more than 100,000 troops revved up another notch when the Kremlin launched its biggest naval drills in years across the Black Sea.

According to Russia, Lavrov accused the United States during the call of seeking to provoke conflict in Ukraine.

“The propaganda campaign unleashed by the United States and its allies concerning ‘Russian



Ukrainian servicemen make 200km day-night-day march as part of combat training in Chernihiv region on Saturday (AFP)

aggression’ against Ukraine pursues provocative goals,” Lavrov said, according to the Russian foreign ministry.

Earlier on Saturday the United

States ordered all non-emergency Kyiv embassy staff to leave Ukraine because of the threat of invasion.

Multiple other countries, in-

cluding the Netherlands and Germany, have also advised their citizens to leave.

Germany on Saturday advised German citizens without an ‘imperative’ reason to stay in Ukraine to leave, saying a ‘military conflict cannot be excluded’ after Washington warned a Russian invasion could begin ‘any day’. “Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have again shot up in the last few days due to the massive movements of Russian military units near the Ukrainian border,” the German foreign ministry said.

“If you are currently in Ukraine, make sure that your presence is imperative. If that is not the case, please leave the country for the time being.”

Germany also said it was re-

ducing its diplomatic representation in Ukraine. “We will keep our embassy open in Kyiv but reduce diplomatic staff,” said Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock during a visit to Egypt.

Belgium and the Netherlands joined Germany in becoming the latest Western countries to advise their citizens to leave Ukraine. Russia also announced that it had withdrawn some diplomatic staff fearing ‘provocations’ from the West or Kyiv.

The US embassy in Kyiv on Saturday ordered the evacuation of non-emergency staff.

Russian leader Vladimir Putin was due to talk to US President Joe Biden and France’s Emmanuel Macron by telephone later on Saturday.

AFP



Volodymyr Zelenskyy (AFP)

‘Warnings of attack stoking panic’

Kiev, Ukraine - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Saturday that warnings of an imminent Russian attack on his country were stoking ‘panic’ and demanded to see firm proof of a planned invasion.

Zelenskyy’s comments came a day after US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan warned that a Russian attack on its western neighbour could ‘begin at any time’.

Ukrainian leaders have been trying to talk down the prospects of an all-out war because of the damaging effect it was having on the country’s teetering economy and public moral. “We understand all the risks. We understand that the risks are there,” Zelenskyy told reports. “Right now, the people’s biggest enemy is panic in our country. And all this information is only provoking panic and not helping us,” he said. “If you or anyone has any additional information about a 100-per cent chance of an invasion, give it to us,” he added.

AFP

Play and glitter: New York Fashion Week kicks off amid COVID

New York, US - Experimentation, play, and glitter: a coronavirus-impacted New York Fashion Week got under way on Friday with Fall/Winter 2022 shows by Proenza Schouler and Christian Cowan.

In its collection, presented in an art gallery in Manhattan’s trendy East Village, New York brand Proenza Schouler played with shape, contrasting fitted waists with loose or slightly rounded skirts.

Designer Lazaro Hernandez said the idea was to exaggerate and juxtapose different forms to respond to ‘this whole body obsession these days with social media and everyone showing the body.’

Model Bella Hadid wore an outfit featuring buttoned sleeves, accentuated shoulders, and a black velvet hooded top - giving off a Catwoman vibe. “Experimentation and play are key,

perhaps now more than ever,” Proenza said of its collection.

Glamour and glitter-

Christian Cowan - who has dressed Lady Gaga and rappers Cardi B and Lil Nas X - presented his collection in the observatory atop the One World Trade Center skyscraper that replaced the Twin Towers felled on 9/11.

The show had the atmosphere of a nightclub, highlighting the British designer’s taste for glitter and glamour.

Ahead of the runway, the label teased fans with what might be in store by posting an image of the ‘Freedom Tower’ all in pink on its Instagram page.

Despite pandemic restrictions and the Omicron variant upsetting preparations, several other brands have opted for in-person shows, including Michael Kors, Altuzarra, Tory Burch, Brandon Maxwell and Telfar.



A model walks the runway wearing Burning Guitars at Runway 7 Debuts Fall 2022 Collections during New York Fashion Week on Friday (AFP)

A notable absence was Tom Ford, chair of the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) that organises the event.

He was due to close the week next Wednesday but cancelled at the end of January due to a surge of COVID-19 cases among his team.

“We have tried everything possible to avoid cancelling our New York show but ultimately are faced with the sad fact that we will simply not have a completed collection in time,” he said.

For several years now, New York has had to deal with big names deciding to skip the event in favour of displaying their latest collections elsewhere.

Some designers are also choosing to eschew the classic runway calendar, with growing criticism that the frantic pace of fashion is out of step with sus-

tainability.

The absence of top creators like Christopher John Rogers - the CFDA’s women’s designer of the year 2021 - and Kerby Jean-Raymond’s Pyer Moss brand, also provided an opportunity for emerging talents to grab the headlines.

Or at least that is the hope of labels such as Melke and Dauphinette, which promote sustainable and ethical fashion.

“It is really rewarding realising that people can see the work that I’ve been doing and they think that it deserves a place amongst a bunch of other very successful brands,” 26-year-old Emma Gage, who founded Melke during the pandemic, told AFP.

“It kind of really solidifies you as someone that people know is going to be around for a long time,” she said inside her small studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

‘Unauthorised’: French cops clamp down on Canada-style blockade

Paris, France - A French ‘freedom convoy’ of cars and vans began arriving in Paris on Saturday for a protest over coronavirus restrictions, but the police moved quickly to prevent a Canadian-style blockade of the capital by issuing hundreds of fines.

Inspired by the truckers that shut down the Canadian capital Ottawa, thousands of demonstrators from across France said they planned to form ‘a mass of vehicles that the security forces would find impossible to contain’.

Several hundred vehicles, mostly vans, mobile-homes and cars, converged on the main ring road around the city after spending the night camped on the outskirts of the capital.

But the police acted quickly, issuing 283 fines for ‘participation in an unauthorised protest’ by mid-morning.

‘Fatigue leads to anger’

The demonstrators include anti-COVID vaccination activists, but also people angry at fast-rising energy prices, some of whom took part in the ‘Yellow Vest’



A man speaks with police officers, as convoys of protesters arrive in Paris on Saturday (AFP)

protest movement of 2018/2019.

Just two months ahead of presidential elections and with the government desperate to avoid a repeat of the ‘Yellow Vest’ riots that shook the capital, Macron said on Friday he understood the ‘fatigue’ linked to the

COVID-19 pandemic.

“This fatigue also leads to anger. I understand it and I respect it. But I call for the utmost calm,” he told the *Ouest-France* newspaper.

Nearly 7,200 officers have been deployed to prevent a blockade, with the Champs-Ély-

sees avenue, which was the epicentre of the ‘Yellow Vest’ protests, under particularly heavy guard.

Police showed off their anti-blockage arsenal on Twitter, publishing photographs of loader tractors for the removal of barricades as well as trucks

equipped with cranes or water cannon.

Gendarmerie armoured vehicles have also been deployed in the streets of the capital for the first time since the ‘Yellow Vest’ protests.

Prime Minister Jean Castex vowed to remain steadfast.

“If they block traffic or if they try to block the capital, we must be very firm about this,” he told France 2 television.

The convoys set out from Nice in the south, Lille and Vimy in the north, Strasbourg in the east and Chateaubourg in the west.

‘It’s a betrayal’

They are demanding the withdrawal of the government’s vaccine pass, which is required for access to many public spaces, and more help with their energy bills. “People need to see us, and to listen to the people who just want to live a normal and free life,” said Lisa, a 62-year-old retired health worker travelling in the Chateaubourg convoy, who did not want to give her surname.

Paris police banned the gathering saying it posed a threat to

public order and said protesters who tried to block roads would face fines or arrest.

The order prohibiting the assembly of convoys was upheld on Friday by the courts, which rejected two appeals.

“It’s a betrayal. The basis of the order is not respectful of the law, of the freedom to demonstrate,” anti-vaccine and ‘yellow vest’ activist Sophie Tissier told AFP.

The prime minister defended the clampdown.

“The right to demonstrate and to have an opinion are a constitutionally guaranteed right in our republic and in our democracy. The right to block others or to prevent coming and going is not,” he said.

From Paris, some of the protesters plan to travel on to Brussels for a ‘European convergence’ of protesters planned there for Monday.

Phil, a 58-year-old on his way by truck from Brittany, said his refusal to get vaccinated had created ‘upheaval’ in his family and work relations. “When you join a demonstration you feel less alone,” he told AFP.

AFP

Norway scraps all curbs in open

Oslo, Norway - Norway on Saturday lifted its final COVID restrictions, scrapping social distancing and masks in crowded spaces despite a surge in Omicron infections.

“The metre is disappearing. We are taking away the recommendation on social distancing,” Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store told reporters at a press conference.

“Now we can now socialise like we did before, in nightlife, at cultural events and other social occasions. And on the way to and from work on buses, trains and ferries,” he said.

Norway lifted most of its other COVID curbs earlier this month, including remote working, crowd size limits and restricted alcohol sales in bars and restaurants.

The requirement to isolate for four days after a positive COVID test was meanwhile on Saturday downgraded to a recommendation, and children with respiratory symptoms are no longer required to get tested for COVID.

AFP

China gives conditional approval for Pfizer pill Paxlovid: Regulator

Beijing, China - China on Saturday said it had given ‘conditional’ approval for Pfizer’s COVID-19 drug Paxlovid to treat adults with mild to moderate illness and a high risk of developing severe disease.

The drug has so far been authorised in about 40 countries including the United States and Israel, while the European Union has permitted member states to use it ahead of formal approval as an emergency measure against the rapidly spreading Omicron variant.

Unlike COVID-19 vaccines, Pfizer says that preliminary studies show that Paxlovid does not target the ever-evolving spike protein the coronavirus uses to invade cells, meaning it should theoretically be more

variant-proof. China’s National Medical Products Administration on Saturday said further research on the drug needed to be undertaken and submitted to the regulator.

Beijing has not yet approved any foreign-made coronavirus vaccines. Lab tests have shown Omicron patients jabbed with the Chinese-produced Sinovac vaccine experience larger drops in antibody levels than those given the Pfizer version.

Earlier this week, Pfizer, whose vaccine developed with Germany’s BioNTech was the first approved in the US, forecast more than US\$50bn in 2022 sales for its coronavirus jab and therapeutic treatment.

The company expects to make 120mn treatment courses

of Paxlovid, with executives describing ongoing contract talks with about 100 governments.

Beijing’s conditional approval of the pill comes as China - where the coronavirus first emerged in late 2019 - has slowed new cases to a trickle with a strict ‘zero-COVID’ strategy of targeted lockdowns, travel restrictions and lengthy quarantines.

The country has fought several isolated flare-ups in recent months, with some driven by the delta variant and others by the Omicron strain.

All 40 of China’s new domestic cases on Saturday occurred in just two cities, according to the National Health Commission.

AFP

Thousands protest vaccine mandates in Canberra

Sydney, Australia - Thousands of protesters marched through Australia’s capital to the parliament building on Saturday to decry COVID-19 vaccine mandates, the latest in a string of rallies against pandemic restrictions around the world.

Demonstrators packed Canberra’s streets before massing outside the parliament, some waving the red Australian ensign flag associated with ‘sovereign citizens’ who believe national laws do not apply to them.

Protesters, many with children, rallied under bright skies brandishing banners proclaiming ‘Fight for Your Freedom & Rights’, ‘Free Aus Freedom Now’, or ‘No forced drugs’ written above a symbol of a syringe.

Police estimated there were up to 10,000 protesters.

They were ‘generally well behaved’, a police spokesman said.



Protesters march in Canberra on Saturday (AFP)

Three people were arrested including one man who drove his truck through a roadblock.

Two others were taken into custody for a breach of the peace.

Australia says 94 per cent of people aged over 16 have had at least two COVID-19 vaccinations. Though getting the jab is voluntary, it is generally required for people entering the country

and for those working in a range of professions deemed at particular risk such as caring for the elderly. Some Australian states such as New South Wales have begun to relax proof-of-vaccine requirements for entry to pubs, restaurants or shops.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who must call a general election by mid-May, called on the protesters to act peacefully.

But Morrison also said he understood their concerns, and stressed that the states - not the federal government - were responsible for many of the vaccine requirements.

‘Free country’

“My message to them today is Australia is a free country and they have a right to protest and I would ask them to do that in a peaceful way and a respectful way,” Morrison told reporters when asked about the rallies.

“Those who are protesting today are speaking up for the things that they feel strongly about.” Morrison said he wanted to be ‘very clear’ that the federal government had only supported mandates that relate to aged care workers, disability workers and those working in high-risk health situations.

AFP

Biden’s vow to pick Black woman for top court draws Republican fire

Washington, US - US President Joe Biden’s pledge to nominate a Black woman to the Supreme Court is coming under fire from Republicans even before he unveils his pick, a sign of a potentially testy Senate confirmation battle to come.

Biden, during his 2020 presidential campaign, said the nation’s highest court should ‘look like the country’ and it was ‘long past time’ an African-American woman served on the bench.

After Justice Stephen Breyer announced his plan to retire last month, the Democratic president reiterated his vow to replace the liberal stalwart with a Black woman.

Biden said he has a ‘short-list of nominees who are incredibly well-qualified’ and he would announce his choice before the end of February.

Among the names being circulated are veteran judges from some of the top law schools in the country such as Harvard and Yale.

Conservative Republican lawmakers have pushed back at the notion that the vacancy on the

nine-member court should be filled by a Black woman.

“Black women are, what, six per cent of the US population?” said Senator Ted Cruz, a Republican from Texas who sits on the Senate Judiciary Committee, which will conduct the nomination hearing.

“He’s saying to 94 per cent of Americans, ‘I don’t give a damn about you’,” Cruz said. “He’s saying, ‘If you’re a white guy, tough luck. If you’re a white woman, tough luck. You don’t qualify.’”

“I want a nominee who knows a law book from a J. Crew catalog,” said Senator John Kennedy, a Republican from Louisiana who also sits on the committee. “I want a nominee who’s not going to try to rewrite the Constitution every other Thursday to try to advance a ‘woke agenda.’”

For Senator Roger Wicker, a Republican from Mississippi, Biden’s selection would be the beneficiary of a racially discriminatory ‘sort of quota’.

‘Disingenuous’

Since the Supreme Court was es-



Joe Biden greets well-wishers as he walks to Marine One prior to departing from the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC, on Friday (AFP)

tablished, 107 of the 115 justices have been white men, two have been African-American men and five have been women - four white and one Hispanic.

Douglas Keith, counsel at the Brennan Center for Justice, said critics were being ‘disingenuous’.

“The idea that Joe Biden is doing anything different than presidents have always done when appointing Supreme Court justices is just incorrect,” Keith said.

“Presidents have always made their decision about who

to appoint based on some combination of politics and thinking about the very personal characteristics that their nominee would bring to the bench.”

Ronald Reagan, a Republican, vowed during his 1980 presidential campaign to name a woman

to the court and did so the next year when he nominated Sandra Day O’Connor. She was confirmed 99-0.

Religion has also played a role. During the second half of the 20th century, one seat was tacitly reserved for a Jewish justice and another for a Catholic.

Michael Tesler, a political science professor at the University of California, Irvine, said the negative reaction to Biden’s pledge illustrates the growing divide between Republicans and Democrats over the question of racism in the United States.

“This is yet another reminder of the remarkable shift partisans’ racial attitudes have undergone in the past decade,” Tesler said in an article on FiveThirtyEight.com.

“(Republican Party) politics are increasingly animated by the belief that anti-white discrimination is as big of a problem in American society as biases against racial and ethnic minorities,” he said.

With Democrats in control of the Senate, Biden’s nominee should win confirmation and it

remains to be seen just how contentious the nomination hearing will be.

Memories of Kavanaugh

Republicans have not forgotten the bitter Senate confirmation battle of Donald Trump’s nominee Brett Kavanaugh, who received only a single Democratic vote after being accused of sexual assault, charges he denied.

And while Cruz, Kennedy and other Republicans have been vocal critics of Biden’s selection process, Senator Susan Collins, a Republican from Maine, said the party needs to tread carefully.

“The idea that race and gender should be the No. 1 and No. 2 criteria is not as it should be,” Collins told *The New York Times*.

“On the other hand, there are many qualified Black women for this post and given that Democrats, regrettably, have had some success in trying to paint Republicans as anti-Black, it may make it more difficult to reject a Black jurist.”

AFP

SOLO EXHIBITION

COLOURS AND LIFE



Photos: Syed Fasiuddin

Iranian artist Zohreh Sadegh presents a vibrant solo exhibition, displaying her mastery with resins in diverse artistic expression – on wooden canvas, mirrors, aluminium, et al

Hubert Vaz

When you enter the Art & Soul gallery in Water Front mall, at Shatti Qurm, this week, you would think a joint exhibition by multiple artists is currently underway. And rightly so, given what you behold. But, one would soon be in for a pleasant surprise...

The wide array of exhibits, which comprise thought-provoking abstract canvases, multi-media portraits of the former and current Sultans, chic table décor, awe-inspiring wall hangings, intricate woodwork, artistic mirrors of all shapes and sizes, and even true-to-life sculptures of landscapes in Oman, are all created by one young, Iranian artist – Zohreh Sadegh, who presents her first solo exhibition in Oman.

The exhibition, titled 'Colours and Life', which was inaugurated by art veteran Prof Ibrahim Noor al Bakry on February 8, will continue till February 18 and the proceeds are expected to fund more interesting projects concerning Oman by the artist.

A resident of Oman since just a year, Zohreh, who studied and taught art in Iran - especially the skill of using fluid resin to solidify her creativity in many vibrant hues and patterns - has lofty ambitions for her artistic journey



ahead. And she believes that Oman has played a vital role in fanning her creative pursuits onto a new path which is evident from her diverse offerings in this exhibition.

Resin art is a unique painting style where the artist does not use typical brushes or acrylic/oil paints. It is a new age artistic technique yet at its infancy but it distinguishes resin artists quite significantly from other artists.

"Epoxy resin is the main material I use for my art and it is prepared by combining two components – resin and hardener. This is available in three categories – slow, medium and fast – which denotes the time taken for drying up and hardening. I use the medium format as



it gives me adequate time to complete the result I am looking for," said Zohreh, adding that "Very few artists in the world have taken up this art form and I am one of them."

Zohreh uses resin mostly on wooden canvases and mirrors to create a variety of abstract as well as realistic designs. She has also created a few artworks on glass as well as aluminium sheets. The colours mixed with the resin are in the form of either powder or

gel and are available in many hues – though shades of blue are her favourite.

There are around 100 exhibits on display including around 40 that involve resin on wood, a few on mirrors, a few on aluminium and other mixed media creations, Zohreh disclosed, adding that she would like to promote this art form by exploring her own creativity as well as teaching those interested. And this exhibition is expected to spark that interest among others, she hopes.

Truly thrilled about Oman as a place rich in inspiration for artists, Zohreh, who had undertaken a masterclass at the National Museum of Oman a year ago, believes that budding artists in Oman have a wonderful journey ahead given the good support the art movement in Oman currently receives. And, she hopes to be an effective link on that journey with her resin art and its promising scope among the new generation of artists.



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SOCIAL MEDIA



TikTok user Tom Rosenthal in his studio in his house, in London

HOW TO BE A TIKTOK MUSIC *Megastar*

Tom Rosenthal is a 35-year-old singer-songwriter from London. He had already built a decent career over a decade, but when he joined TikTok in 2020, he said the impact was 'seismic'.

Rosenthal's songs - including hits like 'Lights Are On', 'It's OK' and 'Go Solo' - have been used on 1.6 million TikTok videos, driving fans to other music services where he has picked up hundreds of millions of streams. He shared a few tips on the secrets of his TikTok success:

Good video

"Some things are a must: you will not go viral without the lyrics written on the screen. It's a funny thing, but lyrics have never been more important than now. It has to be lit really well. Also, face is key - you've got to show your face. And, in the swiping culture, the first milliseconds matter. You can't be seen fumbling with a guitar," says Rosenthal, summing up how to kick start a good video.

People often begin their video by speaking first, or introducing the song or album. "That's better than if you just start singing a song about Nelson Mandela," he said, adding, "Don't get fancy. TikTok doesn't reward high production costs. Me sitting in my studio, singing a song, is no different than if I had 50 oiled-up dancers in

a football stadium."

Simple hooks

"There's a crudeness to my piano style. It's gentle, melodic and rhythmic, but quite blocky - not up and down the keys like a virtuoso. That means it edits nicely for TikTok videos.

"They're hooky lines, which is important because you only get 15 seconds (the most common time for TikToks). Plus, I've got a pleasant, inoffensive voice - you're not going to throw up in your tea if you hear it," says Rosenthal, asserting, "TikTok is a great leveller. Anyone can do it. Maybe you've got two chords on the guitar. You can put it on TikTok and millions can find it."

Ignore the easy money

"When one of my songs goes viral, the labels rush in and they are absolutely praying that I'm 22 and haven't got a clue what's going on and will take £20,000 (US\$25,000) for the rights. But I tell them, 'I know exactly how much these songs are going to be worth, so if you want to start talking, fine, but it's going to be in the many millions'." As soon as they realise you know something about how this business works, they disappear.

"There's still a place for record labels, they'll be fine. But if you're doing well as an independent artist and you're slightly good at organisation, you don't need them," says Rosenthal, pointing out,

"A friend had 200 million streams, but unfortunately he was with a major label and he's yet to see a penny from it."

You can't force it

"I've seen artists of significant calibre who write a whole album that they think will be perfect for TikTok and it's totally flopped. It doesn't work for an artist to say, 'My song deserves to be viral'. Sixty thousand songs are released every day - it's not for them to decide, it's for the listener," he asserts, adding that the songs that shot off for him weren't quite planned to succeed.

"I've done nothing. The songs are out in the world, people I don't know have used them. You can't control it," he pointed out.

You can connect

With TikTok, you know people are listening but they might not know who you are. You have to connect to them, and say, 'I'm the one who did that song, come over here for a bit.' It's important to connect your face to the sound.

"There's a lot of moaning pop stars at the moment, saying, 'Oh no, I'm not a content creator, I'm a musician, I couldn't possibly make a video explaining what I do.' But really it's not that hard to make the occasional video!" says the successful TikTok megastar.

AFP



Discovering artists

With a billion users, TikTok has rapidly become one of the most important players in the music industry, and now has its sights set on revolutionising the way artists are discovered and get paid.

Success stories such as Lil Nas X, whose 'Old Town Road' became effectively the biggest-selling US single of all time after going viral on TikTok, have demonstrated the power of the short-form video app.

Major labels, which initially freaked out over TikTokers using their music without a licence, quickly realised they needed to get on board.

"When a disruptive tech platform appears, understandably the rights-holders get uncomfortable," TikTok's head of music Ole Obermann told AFP.

He was brought in from Warner Music in December 2019 to thrash out deals with the labels.

"Obviously we had to pay out substantial amounts of money. The good news is we're totally licenced now and we're talking to them every day about new things that haven't been done before," Obermann said.

He also hopes to revolutionise the way that songs are used for adverts - a part of the business that is currently worth around US\$500mn globally per year but could be worth much more.

OLE OBERMANN



Lindvik ends Norway's Olympic drought with large hill title

Zhangjiakou, China - Marius Lindvik said it felt "insane" to end Norway's 58-year Olympic ski jumping individual title drought on the large hill on Saturday, after he denied Japan's Ryoyu Kobayashi a golden double at the Beijing Games.

Lindvik became the first Norwegian to triumph on the Olympic large hill since Toralf Engan at the 1964 Innsbruck Games, coming from behind to edge out normal hill champion Kobayashi.

"It's pretty sick that I managed to perform two good jumps when it counts," said the 23-year-old Lindvik, who is currently fourth in the World Cup rankings. "It feels insane. I couldn't imagine it."

Kobayashi was bidding to become the first Japanese man ever to win both titles at the same Games, after capturing gold on the normal hill the previous week.

He took the lead after a first jump of 142 metres, with Lindvik trailing in second 2.2 points behind. But the Norwegian came roaring back with his second attempt, screaming "come on" as he slid into the finish area after jumping 151.3m to take the lead on 296.1 points.

"I knew before that Kobayashi is really strong when he is in first position after the first run, so I knew I just had to go for it and I think I did today," said Lindvik, who finished a disappointing



Norway's Marius Lindvik competes in the Ski Jumping Men's Large Hill Individual 1st Round on February 12, 2022 at the Zhangjiakou National Ski Jumping Centre (AFP)

seventh on the normal hill.

"After I landed it was a lot of adrenaline and a lot of joy, and after that it was a nervous moment when I had to watch Kobayashi jump."

Kobayashi was unable to pull one last trick out of the bag, settling for second place on 292.8 points. The 25-year-old was attempting to become the first Japanese man ever to win both

individual titles at the same Games but he was satisfied with his silver medal performance.

"I'm really happy but I'm also a little frustrated that I missed out on the gold," said Kobayashi,

who admitted that the pressure got to him a little. "Overall, I did two good jumps but Lindvik was great tonight and I lost."

World Cup leader Karl Geiger put in an improved performance

to finish third on 281.3 points.

The German had been out of sorts all week at the Beijing Games, finishing a dismal 15th place on the normal hill.

"Not just on the normal hill

problems, also on the big hill on the first two trainings -- I was on the bottom and I had no idea what I should do," said a visibly relieved Geiger.

AFP

MEDALS TABLE				
	G	S	B	T
Germany	8	5	1	14
Norway	8	3	6	17
USA	5	5	1	11
Netherlands	5	4	2	11
Sweden	5	2	3	10
Austria	4	6	4	14
China	4	3	1	8
ROC	3	4	6	13
Italy	2	5	4	11
Japan	2	3	5	10
Slovenia	2	1	2	5
Switzerland	2	0	5	7
France	1	6	0	7
Canada	1	4	8	13
Australia	1	2	1	4
South Korea	1	2	1	4
Finland	1	1	2	4
Czech Republic	1	0	1	2
New Zealand	1	0	0	1
Slovakia	1	0	0	1
Belarus	0	1	0	1
Spain	0	1	0	1
Hungary	0	0	2	2
Belgium	0	0	1	1
Latvia	0	0	1	1
Poland	0	0	1	1
G Gold S Silver B Bronze T Total				

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Jaclyn Narracott competes in the final run of the women's skeleton event during the Beijing games (AFP)

Narracott grabs Australia's first Olympic medal in sliding

Yanqing, China - Jaclyn Narracott earned Australia's first Olympic medal in a sliding sport Saturday with silver in the women's skeleton as Germany continued their domination of the high-speed events at the Beijing Winter Games.

Hannah Neise claimed victory with a combined time of 4min 7.62sec, meaning German racers have now won all six events so far at the Yanqing National Sliding Centre.

Narracott, the overnight leader, grabbed an Australian flag in the finish area after taking silver with a time 0.62sec slower.

Neise had earlier usurped her in the rankings by breaking the track record in Saturday's third heat.

The German was also fastest in the decisive fourth race, clocking a top speed of 128 kilometres per hour (79 miles per hour).

Dutch racer Kimberley Bos,

Jaclyn Narracott celebrates on the podium with her silver medal

this winter's overall World Cup winner, produced two stunning performances to take bronze at 0.84sec back despite having been 10th after the first heat on Friday.

The Olympic silver medal caps a stunning few weeks for the 31-year-old Narracott, who is based at Bath University in England, where Britain developed its own tradition in skeleton.

She became the first Aus-

tralian to win a World Cup race at the iconic St Moritz track last month.

German racers has now won nine of the available 18 medals in the sliding events at these Games.

Germany could sweep the gold medals as their racers have already won the four luge and two skeleton events with four bobsleigh disciplines to come.

AFP

US outgun Canada 4-2 in Olympic hockey as China stay winless

Beijing, China - The United States outslugged Canada 4-2 on Saturday in an Olympic clash of hockey heavyweights that lacked none of the intensity of their long rivalry despite the absence of NHL superstars.

The preliminary-round victory by the United States gives them North American bragging rights, for now, and puts them in the driver's seat of Group A, the "Group of Death".

Also in the group, 2018 silver medallists Germany beat hockey newcomers China 3-2, denting the host nation's already fading chances of making it to the knockout round.

The USA and Canada were both forced to throw together mixtures of young and old skaters with no playing experience after the NHL's late decision to prevent its stars travelling to Beijing due to pandemic. But the Americans, who defeated China 8-0 two days earlier, have clicked like old friends.

"I think you all see it. There is a togetherness with this group," said USA coach David Quinn.

"The lines have been playing together for about a whole week now," he added with a laugh.

"So there is a chance to form more chemistry."

AFP

India's rising star Kishan fetches \$2mn in IPL auction

Bangalore, India - India's rising star Ishan Kishan fetched a whopping \$2mn in the auction for the Indian Premier League, the world's most valuable cricket tournament, on Saturday.

Five-time champions Mumbai Indians bought back the 23-year-old Kishan, a wicketkeeper-batsman, in a fierce bidding war on a dramatic first day in Bangalore that witnessed auctioneer Hugh Edmeades retire midway after a fall.

Ten teams, including two new additions in Lucknow Super Giants and Gujarat Titans, started with a total purse of nearly \$75mn to spend across two days.

Kishan's fee fell short of the Indian record of \$2.2mn paid to Yuvraj Singh in the 2015 edition of the auction, which sets players' salaries for the tournament.

South Africa's Chris Morris is the most expensive IPL player ever, selling for \$2.23mn last year. Second to the left-handed Kishan, who made his international debut last year, was bowling all-rounder Deepak Chahar who was bought back by Chennai Super Kings for \$1.85mn.

Shreyas Iyer, who stood out with his match-winning 80 in India's 3-0 ODI whitewash of the West Indies on Friday, was won by Kolkata Knight Riders for \$1.62mn.

Kolkata secured a return for Australia's Pat Cummins, who went to the same team for a record \$2.17mn in 2019 but was released last year, for nearly \$1mn.

Cummins and Iyer remain Kolkata's options for the cap-



India's Ishan Kishan plays a shot during the first one-day international cricket match between India and West Indies at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Motera on February 6, 2022. (AFP)

South Africa's Chris Morris is the most expensive IPL player ever, selling for \$2.23mn last year

Bowling all-rounder Deepak Chahar was bought back by Chennai Super Kings for \$1.85mn

spinner ran out the star batsman at the non-striker's end in a Mankad dismissal.

"We spoke to Jos prior to the auction and just talked through all of our prioritisation of players. Honestly he didn't even think about it," said Rajasthan chief executive Jake Lush McCrum.

"I had to sort of bring it up to check it was okay and he said it's absolutely fine."

South Africa's Faf du Plessis went to Royal Challengers Bangalore while Delhi Capitals got David Warner for \$826,000.

West Indies wicketkeeper-batsman Nicholas Pooran went to Sunrisers Hyderabad for \$1.42mn. West Indies all-rounder Jason Holder went to Lucknow for \$1.16mn.

New Zealand quick Lockie Ferguson went to Gujarat for \$1.32mn while England pace bowler Mark Wood went to Lucknow for \$1mn.

The teams have been bidding for 600 foreign and Indian players in the auction - which concludes Sunday - to reset their teams after retaining few of their top players. The 15th edition of the IPL begins in late March, with the final in May.

AFP

taincy after they did not retain England's Eoin Morgan -- who led them to the runners-up spot last season.

Pace bowler Harshal Patel, who played just two T20 matches for India last year, went for \$1.42mn to Royal Challengers

Bangalore, who also got Sri Lankan spinner Wanindu Hasaranga at the same price.

Edmeades - a former chairman of Christie's South Kensington in London - collapsed during the bidding for Hasaranga and organisers said later he was

"stable" under medical care.

Veteran sports presenter Charu Sharma took over for the rest of the day.

Mankad pair reunited

The auction kicked off with

Shikhar Dhawan, the Indian opener going to Punjab Kings for \$1.09mn. Punjab also got South African pace bowler Kagiso Rabada for \$1.22mn.

New Zealand pace bowler Trent Boult also crossed the million-dollar threshold with his

\$1.06mn signing by Rajasthan Royals, who also won the bidding for Indian spinner Ravichandran Ashwin.

Ashwin joins England's Jos Buttler at Rajasthan after a sportsmanship row between the two erupted 2019, when the

QUADRANGULAR T20 SERIES IN MUSCAT

Ireland and UAE register comfortable wins over Oman and Nepal

Muscat - Ireland thumped Oman by nine wickets in the third game of the quadrangular T20 series at the Oman Cricket Academy Ground on Saturday.

Batting first after losing the toss, Shoaib Khan rescued the Omani innings after the openers were dismissed for a combined score of two. His magnificent 57 off 38 balls kept the hosts in the game and offered the counter-attacking impetus needed to post a competitive score. Ayaan Khan provided some much-needed stability at the other end, and their 41-run partnership turned the game into a contest.

However, in another familiar turn of events, wickets in quick succession proved to be Oman's undoing. From 73/2 they were reduced to 100/6, thanks to some brilliant spin bowling by Simi Singh. He finished with figures of 3/9.

Keeper Naseem Khushi's 14 ball 24, along with a customary six from Kaleemullah at the very end ensured that Oman got past the total they managed against Nepal. But once again the hosts were unable to bat out their quota of 20 overs, folding for 137 with four balls to spare.

Oman's quest to pick up early wickets and swing the game's momentum in their favour never really got going. Openers Paul Stirling and Andy Balbirnie looked beyond comfortable in the middle, stitching together a 103-run partnership that effectively decided the game in Ireland's favour.

By the time Stirling was dismissed for 51, an Irish victory was merely a formality.

Oman to their credit were sharper in the field and with the ball than the previous game but failed to hold on to

one very crucial catch that would perhaps have thrown some complications in the mix. Ultimately, Ireland got over the line with 17 balls to spare.

Earlier in the day, the United Arab Emirates were in cruise control for four hours in their game against Nepal. Batting first after losing the toss, Chirag Suri and Rohan Mustafa put together a 97 run third wicket partnership to pile the pressure on their opponents, who were clearly below their best after their exertions against Oman just 17 hours prior.

Suri stayed put until the very end, and some power hitting at the death from Basil Hameed and Mohammad Boota ensured that the UAE posted a colossal total of 192 at the end of 20 overs.

In response, the Nepali batsmen were never really able to keep up with the sky-high

asking rate. Everyone on the roster put in a valiant effort and chipped in with useful totals, with Dipendra Singh Airee in particular top scoring with a classy 33 ball 41. But ultimately, they fell well short, losing by 25 runs.

BRIEF SCORES:

Oman 137/10 in 20 overs (Shoaib Khan 57(38) 9 x 4; Simi Singh 9/3; Mark Adair 25/3) lost to Ireland 140/1 in 17.1 overs (Andy Balbirnie 75(49) 7 x 4; 3 x 6 Paul Stirling 51(42) 3 x 4; 3 x 6; Khawar Ali 33/1) by 9 wickets

UAE 192/3 in 20 overs (Chirag Suri 84* (53) 5 x 4, 5 x 6 Rohan Mustafa 49(35) 5 x 4, 2 x 6; Sandeep Lamichhane 23/1) beat Nepal 167/5 in 20 overs (Dipendra Singh Airee 41(33) 5 x 4; Rohan Mustafa 26/2) by 25 runs

Man Utd blow lead again in Southampton draw

Manchester, United Kingdom - Manchester United defender Luke Shaw warned there is "no way" the Red Devils will reach the Champions League next season if they continue to throw away leads after a 1-1 draw with Southampton on Saturday.

For the third consecutive game, United let a 1-0 half-time lead slip as Che Adams' strike early in the second period earned the Saints a deserved point.

Jadon Sancho's first Premier League goal at home rewarded a bright start from Ralf Rangnick's men. Yet the Red Devils again failed to build on their advantage and were punished when Adams slotted within two minutes into the second half. A point edges United level on points with fourth-placed West Ham.

But Arsenal are just a point behind with two games in hand, while Tottenham have played three fewer games and are four points back.

AFP

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TOUR OF OMAN 2022



Third stage leaders

RANK	RIDER	TEAM
1	Anthon Charmig	Uno-X Pro Cycling Team
2	Jan Hirt	Intermarché - Wanty - Gobert Matériaux
3	Elie Gesbert	Team Arkea - Samsic
4	Fausto Masnada	Quick-Step Alpha Vinyl Team
5	Rui Costa	UAE Team Emirates

Charmig charms third stage of Tour of Oman



Muscat - Anthon Charmig, of Uno-X Pro Cycling Team, won the third stage of the Tour of Oman on Saturday. The 180km race was flagged off from Sultan Qaboos University and ended in Quriyat. Charmig had set himself the goal of taking his first pro win this season - the 23 year-old Danish talent did it as early as February, with a dominant performance on the slopes of Quriyat.

His victory ahead of Jan Hirt (Intermarché-Wanty-Gobert Matériaux) and Elie Gesbert (Arkea-Samsic) also makes him the third leader of the race, after Fernando Gaviria (UAE Team Emirates) and Mark Cavendish (Quick-Step Alpha Vinyl Team). But the gaps remain extremely tight ahead of more climbing challenges on Day 4 and the iconic ascent of Jabal Akhdhar on Stage 5.

The Uno-X man beat Jan Hirt at the top of the short final climb at Quriyat. Charmig is now four seconds ahead of Czech Hirt at the top of the overall standings, with Portugal's Rui Costa eight seconds further back.

Cavendish struggled on a difficult day for the sprinters, finishing 82nd on the stage to slip down the rankings.



Anthon Charmig took the overall lead from Mark Cavendish and took the Red Jersey on Saturday

Temperatures were already high as the 98-man peloton rolled from Sultan Qaboos University ahead of a 180km rolling stage to Quriyat. The challenges of the day attracted six early attackers: Peio Goikoetxea (Euskaltel-Euskadi), leader of the most aggressive rider classification, was back on the move, alongside Kevin Van Melsen (Intermarché-Wanty-Gobert Matériaux), Samuele Zoccarato

The Uno-X man beat Jan Hirt at the top of the short final climb at Quriyat. Charmig is now four seconds ahead of Hirt at the top of the overall standings.

(Bardiani CSF Faizane'), Louis Blouwe (Bingoal Pauwels Sauces WB), Angel Fuentes (Burgos-BH) and Umberto Poli (Team Novo Nordisk).

UAE and Quick-Step control the day

The two teams covered 42.2km in the first hour of racing to open a gap of 3'10". Goikoetxea lead

the way to the summit of the climb of Al Jabal Street (Bawsher-Amerat, km 43), as well as in the intermediate sprint of Amerat (km 56.5), strengthening his hold on the gold jersey and claiming a total of six bonus seconds. He was only 13" behind Cavendish at the start of the stage. UAE Team Emirates and the Wolfpack controlled the day and brought the gap down to 2' as the race entered the last 50km. Umberto Poli dropped from the breakaway back to the bunch before the final challenge of the day.

All in on the final ascent

Goikoetxea lead the way to the second intermediate sprint of the day (km 157.5). The gap dropped down to under 1' with 20km to go. And the attackers are eventually reeled in just ahead of the final 10km.

Cavendish and Gaviria set the pace to the last ascent: 2.8km with an average gradient of 6.5%. Arkea-Samsic set a high tempo for Elie Gesbert, but Charmig powered to victory with an impressive final kick.

Sunday's fourth stage race is a 119.5km ride from Al Sifah to Royal Opera House Muscat.



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