

Oman gears up for a 'normal' Ramadan



(Muscat Daily)

Shaddad al Musalmi
Muscat

For the third successive year, Muslims will mark Ramadan in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, with the numbers of cases significantly low and most restrictions relaxed in Oman, many are looking forward to observing the month like they did before the pandemic.

The daily case count in the recent past has averaged less than 100. 'Seventy-four new infections were reported on Monday taking the total number of cases registered in Oman to 388,160. No deaths were reported on the day, keeping the total number of deaths at 4,250, while the number of recoveries is 382,636,' the Ministry of Health stated on

We missed the real feel of the month the last two years. This Ramadan will be full of activities. I hope to finish all my shopping so that I can be free to observe the month piously

BADER AL HARTHI

Monday.

Expected to begin early next week, Ramadan is the most anticipated time in the Islamic calendar with elaborate preparations taking place in the weeks before to stock up ingredients for traditional dishes for the duration of the month.

"Ramadan is the most sacred month and hence deserves adequate preparations. We missed

the real feel of the month the last two years, so we are happy that this Ramadan will be full of activities because almost all COVID-19 restrictions are removed. I hope to finish all my shopping so that I can be free to observe the month piously," said government employee Bader al Harthi, as he shopped in a supermarket in Muscat.

Ramadan, however, is not just

about food. It is also a social occasion when family and friends come together. "Many of us were not able to physically be with our loved ones for the holy month in the past two Ramadans. So we are happy we will get to celebrate Ramadan evenings with our family and friends. I just hope no restrictions are put in place," said Sohar resident Mohammed al Balushi.

Speaking on a radio programme recently, H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, reminded listeners that COVID-19 is "still prevalent with the daily caseload starting to rise in many countries". Urging all to get the booster dose, he cautioned against lowering the guard and not following preven-

Ramadan moon sighting on Friday

Muscat - The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MARA) has called on everyone to be alert for sighting the crescent of the month of Ramadan on Friday evening.

In a statement, MARA said, 'We invite all to look out for the crescent of the month of Ramadan on Sha'ban 29, 1443 AH, which corresponds to April 1, 2022.'

In the event of sighting the new moon, it requested the information be relayed to the concerned authorities or call its phone numbers: 24694400, 24644037, 24644070 and 24695551.

tive measures.

"Meetings will be held to review recommendations of the technical team of the Supreme Committee on COVID-19 before Ramadan," H E Dr Sa'eedi said.

With shopping centres wooing customers with special Ramadan offers, Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) informed of efforts to monitor markets for irregularities. "CPA has been conducting an intensive campaign in commercial centres and has issued notices against violators to control prices, promotions and discounts for Ramadan," a CPA official said.

Muscat Municipality has also intensified inspection and control visits to ensure the quality of foodstuffs and storage facilities to ensure public health.



(Muscat Daily)

Taraweeh prayers allowed after 2 years

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Special night prayers during Ramadan - Taraweeh - will resume in mosques after a two-year hiatus due to the pandemic, the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MARA) has announced.

According to an internal memo issued by the ministry, directions have been given to assign preachers and religious supervisors to lead worshippers for Taraweeh in mosques where currently there are no imams.

A MARA official told *Muscat Daily*, "We thank God for the return of Taraweeh prayers, because it is an important part of the month of Ramadan."

There was relief among the devout following the decision. Seeb resident Sultan al Rawahi

said. "I'm really excited for the month of Ramadan to begin from next week and offer Taraweeh prayers."

He added that every Muslim should try offering Taraweeh regularly. "It is important to note that our relationship with the Q'uran this month should not be limited to just in the nightly Taraweeh prayers. We must devote ourselves to studying the holy book outside of prayer as well."

Hamoud al Hadrami said, "I consider Taraweeh extra credit and I actually like offering these prayers."

He added, "I am very happy with the return of Taraweeh prayers and the drop in the number of COVID-19 cases registered daily. I think that the return of Taraweeh prayers is a return to normal life."

Shura approves bill to repeal Article 32 of Press and Publications Law

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Members of the Majlis a'Shura on Monday voted in favour of repealing Article 32 of the Press and Publications Law and forwarded the bill to the State Council for approval.

Article 32 of the Press and Publication Law states that it is

prohibited to publish any news, article, picture or document which is banned by virtue of a decision issued by the Minister of Information, unless otherwise authorised to publish such information by the same.

Additionally, the shura voted with 77 per cent majority to host the Minister of Information for a session.

(From March 13 to April 13)

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DRILL ASAD AL BAHAR CONTINUES

Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) has stated that it is continuing the Asad al Bahar (Sea Lion) 1/2022 naval drill in Al Wusta Maritime Zone. The drill, conducted with the support of Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO), will conclude on Wednesday with the participation of several vessels of the RNO fleet with air support from RAFO aircraft (ONA)



MoCIIP warns shops against distorting Omani dresses

Our Correspondent Muscat

To preserve the Omani identity, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotions (MoCIIP) has called on owners of shops selling and stitching men's and women's dresses not to distort traditional Omani dresses and headdresses, such as the kummah and mus-sar.

The ministry stated that with the advent of Ramadan, there is growing demand for traditional dresses, both readymade and stitched, in preparation of the festival of Eid al Fitr.

On Monday, the ministry through a statement, alerted that the traditional dishdasha and abaya must not be distorted

The ministry alerted that dishdashas and abayas must not be distorted either by sewing or printing slogans and trade-marks of foreign clubs or with drawings contrary to the public interest

'either by sewing or printing slogans and trademarks of foreign clubs, with drawings contrary to the public interest or by merging designs of mussar and



kummah or other traditional dresses'.

The Directorate of Commercial Affairs and Electronic Commerce in MoCIIP empha-

sised that the Omani dress is an important symbol of the Omani heritage.

The ministry regularly warns all commercial institutions and

companies through its announcements against any tampering of traditional Omani clothes and costumes.

In January, H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, issued Ministerial Decision No 209/ 2021 related to the Omani standard for the dishdasha.

The decision confirmed that the Omani standard specification No 1639/2021 OS is a binding specification for the Omani dishdasha.

The decision stipulated an administrative fine not exceeding RO1,000 for anyone who violates the provisions of the decision. The fine can be doubled in case of repetition of the offence.

Scale model of Al Ghanja ship raises awareness on Omani maritime history

Our Correspondent Muscat

Mohammed Taleb al Raisi, 30, has created a 2m long remote control scale model of a traditional Omani ship weighing 6kg to raise awareness on Oman's maritime heritage.

Painstakingly built over a four-month period, Raisi hopes to revive interest in Oman's shipbuilding tradition through his effort.

An amateur creator of remote control aircraft - a hobby he has pursued since he was 12 - Raisi designs and fabricates using simple household items, including wood and cork.

His latest creation is a scale model of an Al Ghanja ship, a unique ship the wilayat of Sur was famed for constructing. An Al Ghanja ship typically took a year to make.

In order to memorialise this type of ships, the people of Sur - the hub of the traditional ship-building industry in Oman - have installed a model of an Al Ghanja



ship called the *Fatah al Khair* in Sur Maritime Museum.

"I used simple materials to make the model - cork, paper, wood and other recyclable materials," Raisi told *Muscat Daily*.

"I took time to make the model because I wanted it to have all the details seen in the

original ships to preserve the traditional designs."

Powered by batteries, the model is fitted with two motors and a signal receiver.

According to Raisi, his scale model of the Al Ghanja can be developed for use for scientific purposes, marine navigation and

photography, besides highlighting Omani maritime heritage.

Raisi recently also crafted a remote control Boeing 737 painted with the colours and logo of Oman Air in a nod to the national carrier's efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Raisi has won several awards

in competitions for making scale models of aircraft, including one in Kuwait, and a talent competition at Sultan Qaboos University.

Besides raising awareness on Omani maritime history with his latest scale model, he hopes it will encourage Omani youth to pursue creative hobbies.

MARA inaugurates 'Paradise for Fasting' exhibition in Bausher



Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MARA), represented by the Department of Education and Women's Guidance, on Monday inaugurated the eighth edition of 'Paradise for Fasting' exhibition.

The exhibition aims to strengthen the belief of fasting among women and school students while introducing them to its provisions and preparing them for the holy month of Ramadan.

The exhibition, which will last for three days in the lecture hall of Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Bausher, coincides with the

run-up to Ramadan to demonstrate the importance of the blessed days in the life of a Muslim.

H H Hujajia bint Jaffer al Said, chief guest of the occasion, stressed the importance of the exhibition as it highlights important aspects, whether jurisprudence, spirituality, fatwas or rulings related to the month of Ramadan.

Jokha bint Ali al Harthiya, assistant director of Preaching and Guidance Department in MARA, said, "The 'Paradise for Fasting' exhibition is an episode in a series of annual events that the ministry supports. It seeks to contribute to better understanding of Ramadan in society."

Transport ministry starts work on Liwa dual carriageway



Our Correspondent Muscat

Work on a road project linking Liwa Roundabout on Batinah Road with Batinah Expressway has begun.

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) announced on Monday that it has started implementation of the Liwa dual carriageway project in

the Governorate of North Batinah. The road is of 5.5km length and 8.9m breadth.

The project includes construction of two new roundabouts along with development of the existing roundabouts connecting the two roads and entry and exit lanes, besides service roads on both sides of the dual carriageway, which will result in smooth commute for passenger and commercial traffic.

Ministry of Social Development launches electronic services

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Social Development on Monday launched the first package of its digital transformation project, which includes social security services and social aid along with 20 other e-services.

H E Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development, said that launching the

first package of social security services and social assistance electronically is very important in light of a large number of services provided by the ministry to citizens.

She said the ministry is keen that the services reach citizens in order to reduce the burden on auditors of the departments and directorates, and social aid requests can be submitted through the



ministry's portal. These services will also allow follow up of requests through computers or mobile phones.

H E Dr Laila revealed that the ministry is looking forward to launching another package of services related to the field of social protection and for persons with disabilities.

Ahlam bint Abdullah al Toobia, director of information technology in the Ministry of So-

cial Development, said that the launch of the package comes within the strategic plan for digital transformation to keep pace with Oman's direction in improving the quality of government services and ways to provide them in accordance with specific controls, standards and stages to ensure integration with various government institutions.

Ahlam added that the social

welfare sector was chosen for this project as it serves a wide segment of citizens. According to the latest statistics, the number of social security cases is 72,786.

"The ministry has managed over the past years to develop the Takaful system, which contains a number of internal electronic systems to facilitate work procedures within the ministry's divisions," Ahlam informed.

Charity aims to raise RO45,000 in Ramadan for 450 needy families

Muscat - Zakah Committee Muttrah aims to support 450 needy families this Ramadan through donations for which information desks have been set up in Lulu Darsait, Nesto Wadi Kabir, City Centre Qurum and other commercial centres.

Eager to increase the number of families and individuals it supports every year, besides providing aid in the form of food to needy families, the committee will offer financial help too. "We will support one family every third day of Ramadan. We have identified people who have defaulted on their loans - some are already in jail and others who will end up in jail if we don't help," said Salim bin Mohammed al Ghamari, chairman of Zakah Committee Muttrah.

The committee has shortlisted 450 families, from more than 1,500 applications, and estimated a cost of RO45,000 for the charity programmes it intends to run this Ramadan.

In 2021, Zakah Committee Muttrah collected RO155,000 and supported 3,755 families comprising 9,700 individuals through the year. "In 2022, we wish to support more families for which we need donations of over RO300,000," said Ghamari.

Stringent beneficiary criteria and transparency

The committee has a stringent monitoring and selection process to identify its beneficiaries. "If someone approaches us to receive zakah or donations, we ask them to submit a bank statement, salary certificate of the applicant and any other working family member, rent details, utility ex-



We calculate the income of the whole family and decide if the applicant is eligible for zakah. We pay an amount based on the number of family members

SALIM BIN MOHAMMED AL GHAMARI

penses, and loan and installment details," Ghamari added.

"We calculate the income of the whole family and decide if the applicant is eligible for zakah. We pay an amount based on the number of family members. If the family is big, we pay a bigger amount."

Every wilayat in Oman has a Zakah Committee connected to a central database. Applications for assistance in more than one wilayat are automatically rejected. "We have a clear and

transparent system. If someone wishes to know where we have distributed zakah, we can provide a statement of the exact account of the transactions - where and to whom we have paid his or her zakah amount. The details will include the names and phone numbers of beneficiaries. They can be called directly if anyone wants to crosscheck," Ghamari informed.

Portal of trust and convenient

Zakah committees fall within the

administrative structure of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. The ministry has a portal - <https://zakah.om/> - through which those interested can donate.

"The zakah e-portal has various programmes to choose from to support the needy, including programmes in wilayats across the sultanate," Ghamari said.

Besides zakah, donors can give sadaqah (voluntary donation) and kaffarah (atonement) on the e-portal. Beneficiary cat-

egories listed in the portal include orphans, the underprivileged, school and university students, new Muslims, prisoners' families, the elderly, widows, disaster victims, the disabled, jobseekers, patients, insolvent debtors and divorcees.

Zakah payments account for over 80 per cent of the total funds collected through the portal.

Ghamari noted that the distribution of zakah is limited as per sharia guidelines, while sadaqah donations are more flexible to spend and have more scope to run various initiatives.

To donate directly to Zakah Committee Muttrah, call 95194269/92713115. (Text and photos by Syed Fasiuddin)



Awareness on rare baobab trees in Dhofar raised through hiking event

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, in cooperation with Ard Alloban - a hiking group - organised a hike in Dhofar governorate recently to raise awareness on giant baobab trees and promote tourist sites.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Mandhar Nasser al Zaheen, leader of Ard Alloban, informed that the 1.2km hike started at 3pm in Wadi Hasheer in the wilayat of Mirbat with 45 hikers participating.

"The giant baobab trees are more than 300 years old. Some trees have a circumference of more than 20m," Zaheen said.

According to the hiker, such events help participants explore varied terrain, including mountainous, and encourage the culture of fitness among people.

Ard Alloban - or land of frankincense - was set up in September 2017 and currently has 234 members. It has organised over 170 hiking events in Dhofar to date. The group is keen to promote Oman's tourism potential through its activities.

"We organise many hikes



through the year. Participants go through plains, wadis and mountains. We chose unexplored sites in Dhofar for most events. Ard Alloban also organises clean-up campaigns and mountain climbing events," Zaheen said.

The group's activities involve elaborate planning. Locations are chosen after much deliberation and research. An advance team is sent to study the site and weather conditions. "We are also careful when deciding how many people can be taken for a particular trip," Zaheen said.

Ard Alloban will organise the fourth of a series of 60km challenges flagged off from Salalah to the wilayat of Thumrait in the coming days, which Zaheen urged citizens and residents to join.

Outward Bound Oman opens third training centre in Jabal Akhdar

Muscat - A ceremony was held to announce the opening of Outward Bound Oman's third national outdoor training centre in Jabal Akhdar on Monday.

The ceremony was held under the auspices of H E Dr Madiha bint Ahmed al Shaibani, Minister of Education, and attended by H E Salim bin Nasser al Afi, Undersecretary in the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Construction of the OBO Centre was a Ministry of Energy and Minerals' CSR initiative with contributions from Petroleum Development Oman, Occidental Oman, BP Oman, OQ, Daleel Petroleum, and CC Energy Development.

Occidental Oman managed the establishment of the centre on behalf of all the companies. The centre was completed within two years at a cost of RO2mn after a memorandum of understanding was signed with CSR corporates in 2019.

The centre has two fully equipped learning rooms, a 60-seater AV theatre, four outdoor learning pods, equipment stores, prayer rooms and accommodation facilities. It offers unique experiential learning and training courses to a wide variety of groups, including school and university students, organisations, government institutes and private companies.

In line with Oman's future en-



ergy policy, the centre was built to high international standards. It utilises renewable energy from 164 solar panels and three micro-wind turbines and has ten solar powered LED streetlights.

The taps and lights in the centre are equipped with timer switches. "This will not only reduce energy consumption but will reflect the energy sector's role in applying renewable energy resources in its projects. It will also contribute to minimising its environmental impact," a press release said.

Speaking at the opening, H E Afi said, "We are pleased to an-

nounce the opening of the third branch of Outward Bound Oman in Jabal Akhdar as part of the ministry's initiative for social responsibility. With generous support from oil and gas companies, this branch complements the previous two branches in the wilayat of Al Qabil in North Sharqiyah and Al Khoud in the Governorate of Muscat to meet the needs of young people and hone their skills and expertise."

Mohamed al Zadjali, CEO, informed that Outward Bound Oman has been operating for 13 years and has delivered training courses to more than 17,500 in-

dividuals. "Completion of three centres over the past five years is just the first stage of what is a 25-year vision, aligned with Oman Vision 2040. Our focus now is to optimise the use of these world-class learning and training facilities by ensuring as many people as possible benefit from them in the coming years."

Launched in 2009, OBO aims to create an interactive environment that attracts young people with a unique opportunity to learn, train and gain practical experience. It currently delivers more than 100 training courses for over 3,000 people a year.

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*Rates as on March 28
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

ECB extends liquidity lines over war risk

The European Central Bank said Monday it had extended liquidity lines with central banks in five neighbouring countries to contain the risk posed to the eurozone by the war in Ukraine.

The lines were designed to "prevent spillover effects" in the eurozone "in the context of heightened geopolitical tensions triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine", the ECB said in a statement.

The Frankfurt-based institution agreed to open a new "precautionary" swap line with the Polish central bank under which it could access up to 10 billion euros.

The ECB also extended repo agreements with central banks in Hungary, North Macedonia, San Marino and Albania worth just under five billion euros.

Omantel AGM approves cash dividend of 55bz per share

Muscat – Omantel held its annual general meeting (AGM) on Sunday at the company's headquarters at Madinat Al Irfan, under the chairmanship of Mulhim bin Bashir al Jarf, chairman of Omantel board of director in the presence of shareholders, board members, external auditors, legal adviser and observer from the Capital Market Authority.

During the meeting, Omantel shareholders approved a proposal to distribute cash dividends of 55bz per share to the registered shareholders as of March 27, 2022.

The AGM also approved chairman's report on the company activities and financial performance for the fiscal year ended December 31, 2021. The meeting also approved the company's corporate governance report and auditors' report on the audited financial statements for the financial year 2021 at which the company net profit after adjusting for minority interest stood at RO67.1mn.

Commenting on this, Jarf said, "Despite the challenging market conditions, increased competition and challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic at the local and international levels, Omantel Group achieved a good



financial performance during 2021."

"Zain Group, in which Omantel has a strategic stake, continued delivering good performance and growing its net profit despite decline in revenues. Zain Group achieved a net profit growth of 2 per cent compared to the same period in 2020. Moreover, the contribution of Omantel's subsidiaries in the sultanate to the group's revenues increased during the past year compared to the same period in 2020," he said.

Jarf further said, "The COVID-19 outbreak continues to have a profound impact on the global and local economies as well as the telecom sector in specific.

Following the acceleration of vaccination programs, the expectation of a return to normal is growing and the domestic economy is expected to gradually return back into a growth scenario."

On his part, Talal bin Said al Mamari, Omantel's chief executive officer, said, "Omantel has implemented its new strategy that continues to be our primary tool to optimize value generation for both our customers and shareholders. Shift Gear builds further on the key transformation initiatives started under 'Omantel 3.0' and focuses on a number of key business enablers including Omantel's transition to a digital operator, building on the

company's position and leveraging the sultanate's strategic position as a global communications hub."

He said that customer experience and innovation have been two main areas of focus for Omantel during 2021. "We continued to launch several initiatives in this regard, including the launch of 5G for mobile devices, the expansion of the 5G for fixed and mobile networks and building an integrated system for innovation and technology entrepreneurship through the launch of Omantel Innovation Labs, Omantel's Innovation Oasis and the 'E-Dukaan', the first unmanned store in the Middle East region."

With regard to social respon-

sibility, Mamari said, "Omantel focused in 2021 on providing support to the deserving families and those affected by tropical cyclone Shaheen in last October. The company also launched selective initiatives aimed at strengthening digital transformation and building the capabilities of a digital society. Omantel issued this year its fifth sustainability report, which covered Omantel performance in social, economic and environmental aspects".

Omantel's AGM also approved the other items listed on the meeting agenda, the most important of which is approving the allocation of RO500,000 for community service during 2022.

Oil prices sink over China demand fears

London, UK – Oil prices dived Monday as Shanghai's phased COVID-19 lockdown reignited fears over Chinese energy demand. US benchmark West Texas Intermediate oil and Europe's London Brent crude both dropped more than five per cent in value. WTI dropped 5.0 per cent at US\$108.22 per barrel, while Brent crude fell 5.3 percent at US\$114.27 per barrel. "Oil prices started this week trading lower after news of the lockdown in the financial hub of Shanghai shook markets with prospects of further economic slowdowns and supply chain issues," said XTB analyst Walid Koudmani.

"Oil benefited recently from the uncertainty surrounding the Russia-Ukraine conflict and as more countries considered banning Russian imports – but as many began to price in such an event, attention has turned to recent COVID-19 developments in the world's second economy."

The news impacted the global oil market because China is the world's biggest crude consumer. Equity markets brushed off the latest lockdown to focus on Ukraine peace hopes.

With Russia's Ukraine invasion now in its second month, investors are hoping the two sides will be able to make inroads on ending the crisis when they meet in Turkey on Monday.

AFF

Shell Oman appoints Lamees as new CFO

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Shell Oman Marketing Company has appointed Lamees Dawood al Lawati as chief financial officer, effective from April 1, 2022.

This appointment is a new milestone for Shell Oman's Omanisation story as Lamees has become the first Omani female to occupy the role of a CFO in the history of Oman's downstream oil and gas industry, the company said in a press statement.

As CFO, Lamees will become a member of Shell Oman's executive management team and will lead key finance functions along with legal, contracts and procurement and IT. On the other

hand, the incumbent CFO, Ian Fong, will move to a new role where he will remain available to assist the company with transition while leading key strategic projects.

Shell Oman CEO Dr Mohammed al Balushi said, "I am delighted to welcome Lamees to the leadership of our company. She combines diverse finance experience with a deep knowledge of Shell, and inherent qualities of a visionary leader who demonstrates a progressive outlook. We believe Lamees will continue to inspire and develop the younger generation of leaders in Shell and the society which will contribute to further reinforcing our approximately 96 per cent Omanisation."



Lamees Dawood al Lawati

"Meanwhile, we thank Ian Fong, the incumbent CFO, on his leadership and his contribution to Shell Oman during his tenure. Ian has been instrumental in nav-

igating the company throughout the pandemic and the parallel challenges while remaining focused on developing national talents in finance functions. We wish both Lamees and Ian all the best in their new roles and all future endeavours," Balushi said.

Lamees started her career with Shell more than 15 years ago in finance after graduating from Sultan Qaboos University. Since then, she has held several increasingly senior finance roles at Shell in both downstream and upstream sectors covering information management, treasury, controllers, internal audit and joint venture management.

Meanwhile, Lamees continued to be Shell Oman Marketing Company's board secretary.



GO FIRST resumes direct service to Oman

Muscat – GO FIRST (formerly known as GoAir) announced the resumption of its Oman operations from March 27, 2022.

GO FIRST is the first low cost Indian carrier to restore services in the region. The first flight on the sector arrived at Muscat on Sunday from Kannur. This comes after India's Ministry of Civil Aviation allowed the resumption of international flights from March 27.

GO FIRST has resumed services to Oman from Mumbai with four flights a week on Monday, Tuesday, Friday and Sunday and with three flights from Kannur on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. The services have been restored after almost one and a half years interruption due to COVID-19 pandemic. The resumption of these services will come as a huge relief to thousands of travellers who frequent

the country for business as well as leisure.

Kaushik Khona, CEO of GO FIRST said, "Relationship between India and Oman date back to several millenniums. The countries have rich history of trade, and it has grown manifold over the years. We at GO FIRST are delighted to resume direct flights to Oman and this move will benefit both the countries to further strengthen bilateral ties."

Paying for Russian gas in rubles is 'unacceptable', says G7

Berlin, Germany – Paying for Russian gas in rubles would be unacceptable, G7 countries reiterated on Monday, with German Economy Minister Robert Habeck saying the demand showed President Vladimir Putin's back was "against the wall".

"All G7 (energy) ministers agreed that this is a unilateral and clear breach of the existing agreements," said Habeck, whose country holds the presidency of the Group of Seven most industrialised nations.

"Payment in rubles is not acceptable and... we call on the companies concerned not to comply with Putin's demand."

Putin announced last week that Russia would only accept payments in rubles for natural gas deliveries to "unfriendly countries", which includes all of the European Union.

The move comes as Moscow struggles to prop up its economy in the face of debilitating sanctions imposed by the West over his invasion of Ukraine.



Robert Habeck

"I think we must interpret this demand as Putin having his back against the wall," Habeck told reporters following a virtual meeting with his G7 counterparts.

The club consists of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States.

French President Emmanuel Macron on Friday already rejected Putin's gas-for-rubles demand.

The Russian move "is not in line with what was signed, and I do not see why we would apply it," Macron said.

Like other European countries, Germany is racing to reduce its heavy reliance on Russian energy imports in the wake of the Ukraine war.

Germany has to wean itself off Russian oil, gas and coal "in order not to strengthen the regime", Habeck said, and because Moscow has revealed itself to be "an unreliable supplier".

Berlin was quick to pull the plug on the massive Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline with Russia in protest at Putin's aggression.

AFF

UAE reaffirms OPEC+ commitment, says West must be 'reasonable'

Dubai, UAE – The United Arab Emirates on Monday urged Western countries to be "reasonable" in their expectations, underlining its commitment to the global OPEC+ energy alliance.

The grouping of the 13 members of the Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and their 10 allies, including Russia, is an "alliance to stay".

"We always believe that whatever we do as countries, when it comes to production and this work, it needs always to stay out of politics," said UAE's Energy Minister Suhail al-Mazrouei during an energy forum in Dubai.

A surge in prices and supply fears since Russia's invasion of Ukraine last month have led to calls for OPEC to increase output.

But the OPEC+ group plans to boost production by just 400,000 barrels a day in April, the same pace as in past months.

"Russia is an important mem-



Suhail al-Mazrouei

ber and, leaving the politics aside, that volume... is needed today, and unless someone is willing to come and bring 10mn barrels, we don't see that... someone can substitute Russia," said Mazrouei.

Despite increased calls to ramp up production to calm the volatile oil market, Mazrouei said it was "difficult", with countries "facing a natural decline reduc-

tion" in large part due to shrinking long-term investments in the oil sector.

At the COP26 conference on climate change held last year in Scotland, "all of the producers felt that they are uninvited and unwanted and felt like they are in corner, but now we are on stage and they want us to produce more so we are again superheroes," he said.

A surge in oil prices and supply fears since Russia's invasion of Ukraine last month have led to calls for OPEC+ to increase output

"It's not going to work like that." Mazrouei called for long-term investments in the sector and a more "reasonable" approach to a clean energy transition. "If Europe needs gas and needs gas quickly... they need to sit with the producers and they need to identify the requirements, and they need to be reasonable and realistic," he said.

Mazrouei also called for a "diplomatic" solution to the Ukraine war, warning that it was also impacting other commodities, including food.

AFF

MSX index falls more than 1%

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) dropped by 1.04 per cent on Sunday to close at 4,232.54 points. Trading activity at the Muscat bourse remain higher compared to the previous day.

The sharp decline in the main index was caused by drops in all sectoral indices led Financial index which fell 1.26 per cent. Services and Industrial indices dropped by 1.07 per cent and 0.35 per cent, respectively. MSX Sharia index decreased 0.25 per cent to close at 486.12 points.

Total trading volumes dropped by more than 35 per cent to 25.5mn shares on Monday compared with 39.2mn shares traded on Sunday. Market turnover fell 13.2 per cent to RO7.63mn against RO6.74mn recorded in the previous trading session.

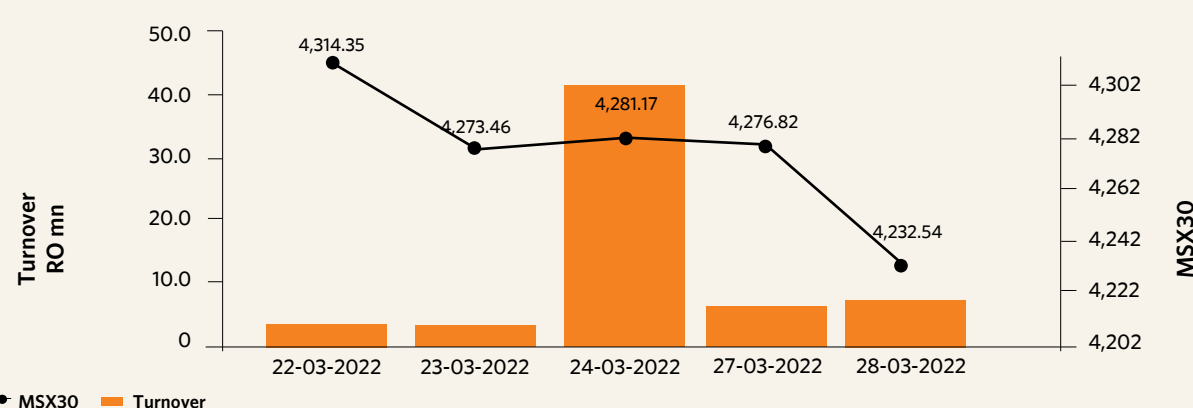


Market breadth of the MSX remained highly negative with seven advancing stocks to 23 decliners. As many as 15 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Top gainers were Galfar Engineering and Contracting (3.61 per cent), United Finance (3.53 per cent), Oman and Emirates Invest-

ment Holding (2.74 per cent) and Al Batinah Power (2.1 per cent). Top losers were Oman National Engineering and Investment (-8.41 per cent), Dhofar Generating (-7.02 per cent), National Bank of Oman (-4.85 per cent), Sohar Power (-4.65 per cent) and Raysut Cement (-4.62 per cent).

MSX INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



India's top multiplexes to merge to survive 'streaming onslaught'

Mumbai, India - India's two largest multiplex operators are set to merge, the companies said, as the industry recovers from the pandemic and battles a surge in subscriptions to streaming platforms.

Bollywood, India's Hindi-language film industry, was worth US\$2.5bn in 2019 and is the world's most prolific. Movies in English and other regional languages are also big business.

But pandemic lockdowns and restrictions sent the industry into a tailspin, with multiplex chains suffering major losses and dozens of small cinemas going bust in the movie-mad nation.

"The film exhibition sector has been one of the worst impacted sectors on account of the pandemic," PVR chairman Ajay Bijli said in a statement about the merger with INOX Leisure.

"Creating scale ... is critical for the long-term survival of the business and (to) fight the onslaught of digital OTT (over-the-top) platforms," he added.

The country of 1.4bn people



Branding of the INOX cinemas is pictured on the facade of the multiplex in New Delhi on Monday (AFP)

has attracted streaming giants Netflix, Amazon's Prime Video and Disney's Hotstar, all keen to tap into the boom in online audiences.

An upcoming merger of Sony's India unit with local broadcaster ZEE is expected to replicate the success of Disney's 2019 tie-up with homegrown streaming platform Hotstar.

India's entertainment market - valued at US\$24bn by ac-

countancy giant EY - is already one of the world's biggest, while smartphone adoption is forecast to expand further.

If the deal receives regulatory and shareholder approval, the new entity will operate 1,546 movie screens across 109 cities, the firms said.

"Both entities have a combined box office share of approximately 42 per cent," Elara Capital media analyst Karan

Taurani said in a research note.

The merged multiplex giant is also expected to pick up market share from smaller cinema chains and single-screen theatres struggling to keep their doors open.

Shares of PVR and INOX Leisure jumped by up to 10 and 20 per cent respectively in Monday trade on the Bombay Stock Exchange.

AFP

National Grid sells UK gas network

London, UK - Utility group National Grid has agreed to sell a controlling stake in Britain's gas network for £4.2bn to an Australian-Canadian investment consortium.

The company will sell a 60-per cent share of its gas division to a consortium including Australian bank Macquarie in order to refocus on electricity, it said Sunday.

"National Grid ... has agreed to sell a 60-per cent equity interest in its UK gas transmission and metering business to a consortium of long-term infrastructure investors," it said in a statement.

The consortium also comprises Canada's British Columbia Investment Management Corporation.

National Grid, which distributes energy to British homes and businesses, will retain a 40-per



cent share.

The deal is also aimed at "enhancing" the company's role in the energy transition, as the UK government eyes a 2050 net zero carbon target.

"This transaction further enhances our role in delivering the UK's energy transition, pivots our

portfolio towards electricity, whilst ensuring the security of the energy supply for the country," said chief executive John Pettigrew.

The deal, due to complete in the second half, values the entire unit at £9.6bn.

The agreement also gives the

National Grid has agreed to sell a 60-per cent equity interest in its UK gas transmission and metering business to a consortium of long-term investors for £4.2bn

consortium an option to purchase the remaining stake.

National Grid had flagged the possible sale last year, prior to the Ukraine conflict that sent gas prices spiking to recent record highs on concerns over Russian supplies.

AFP

Huawei posts record net profit in 2021 despite US sanctions



Huawei rotating chairman Guo Ping (centre) and Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou (right) attend the 2021 Annual Report Press Conference in Shenzhen, China on Monday (AFP)

Beijing, China - Chinese telecoms and technology giant Huawei on Monday reported record profit for 2021, defying the US sanctions aimed at it as executive Meng Wanzhou made her first public appearance since returning to China from Canadian custody.

The company has been caught in the crosshairs of a US-China trade and technology rivalry, with the administration of former President Donald Trump moving to cripple it over cybersecurity and espionage concerns.

The results, announced in Chinese tech hub Shenzhen, also marked the first return to the limelight of Meng since her high-profile return to China after nearly three years under house arrest in Canada.

Meng, daughter of CEO and founder Ren Zhengfei, spent the years in Canada fighting extradition to the US, as Washington accused her of defrauding HSBC bank by trying to hide alleged violations of US sanctions on Iran.

She returned home shortly

after two Canadians were released from prison in China, ending a diplomatic row that poisoned ties between Beijing and Ottawa for years.

Huawei's revenue fell by around 29 per cent last year to 636.8bn yuan (US\$100bn), as it grappled with US sanctions aimed at blocking access to key technology and supplies.

But the slump under US sanctions appears to be slowing, and the company said its net profits hit a new record - surging 75.9 per cent on-year to 113.7bn yuan.

"Despite a revenue decline in 2021, our ability to make a profit and generate cash flows is increasing, and we are more capable of dealing with uncertainty," Meng said in Monday's statement.

The company attributes its profitability to "improved product portfolios and more efficient internal operations", with a rise in net profit margin even with gains from the sale of its budget phone brand Honor excluded.

The company is not publicly

listed and its accounts are not subject to the same audits as companies traded on the stock market.

Huawei, a supplier of telecom networking gear and smartphone brand, has been struggling since Trump launched a campaign to contain the company in 2018. Smartphone sales stalled after the US cut Huawei off from key parts and barred it from using Google's Android services.

Last year Huawei logged 243bn yuan in consumer business sales - almost 50 per cent down from 2020.

Huawei has instead tried to shore up other parts of its business, refocusing on the Chinese market and diversifying to encompass enterprise and cloud computing, along with other business segments related to 5G networks.

Rotating chairman Guo Ping said in a speech at the event that Huawei's ability to "survive and thrive" depends on ongoing investment in development.

AFP

France holds talks with Saudi, UAE on diversifying Europe's gas supplies

Paris, France - France held talks Sunday with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on diversifying Europe's energy supplies in order to reduce the continent's dependence on Russia.

French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian in a phone call with his Saudi and UAE counterparts Faisal bin Farhan al Saud and Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan stressed the importance of coordination with the two Gulf states with a view to diversifying the oil and gas supplies of European states, according to a statement from the Foreign Ministry.

He underlined the "need for strong international mobilization, in all forums and in all circumstances, in the face of the aggression led by Russia in Ukraine,



Jean-Yves Le Drian

which represents a serious threat to European security," the statement said.

Le Drian is also scheduled to visit Qatar next week, during which the topic of energy diversification will be discussed. Doha is among the world's top three exporters of liquefied natural gas (LNG).

France is also in the planning stage of installing a floating LNG terminal in the port of Le Havre to increase its LNG landing capacity and reduce its dependence on Russian gas, French news daily Les Echos reported Saturday.

Russia is the leading supplier of crude oil, natural gas and solid fossil fuels to European Union states. The stability of energy supplies is threatened due to the sanctions imposed on Moscow over its war on Ukraine.

Under the French presidency of the European Council, France has declared the goal of pursuing energy independence for the EU in the coming decade, which can be achieved by diversifying supplies and sources of oil and gas.

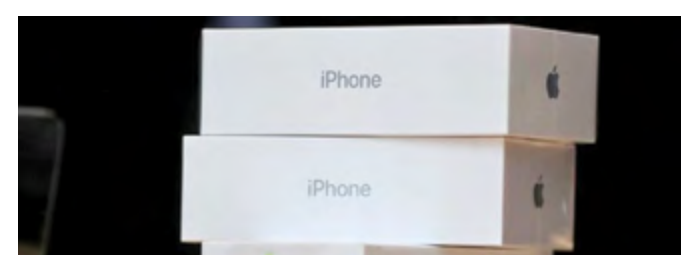
Anadolu Agency

Apple to cut iPhone output

California, US - Apple Inc is planning to cut the output of its iPhone and AirPods devices as the Ukraine crisis and looming inflation start to weigh on demand for consumer electronics, the Nikkei reported on Monday, citing sources.

The company plans to make about 20 per cent fewer iPhone SEs next quarter, or lower production orders by about 2mn to 3mn units than originally planned, due to weaker-than-expected demand, Nikkei said.

The US tech giant also reduced orders for its AirPods wireless headphones by more



than 10mn units for all of 2022, as it scales back the level of inventories due to lukewarm demand, the newspaper said, Reuters reported.

Earlier this month, Apple unveiled 5G connectivity to its iPhone SE, its low-cost model aimed mostly at buyers in

emerging markets. Counterpoint Research said the earlier 4G iPhone SE accounted for 12 per cent of total iPhone sales from its launch in the second quarter of 2020 until the end of 2021, with Japan being the biggest market after the United States.

AFP

Vodafone Oman brings 5G indoors with Ericsson multi-band Radio Dot

Vodafone Oman and Ericsson have announced the deployment of a 5G indoor system at the Vodafone Experience Hub in Mall of Oman as well as the Vodafone Oman headquarter offices. Visitors at the Experience Hub can now enjoy speeds up to 600Mbps that allow for faster downloads, seamless browsing, low latency and streaming services.

The experience of up to 600Mbps speed is achieved with Radio Dot 4475 with Indoor Radio Unit (IRU) 8848 using 5G New Radio (NR) Time Division Duplex (TDD) Band 41 along with Band 3 in data aggregation mode – the first in the Middle East for this specific band combination. Radio Dot 4475 with Indoor Radio Unit (IRU) 8848 are part of the Ericsson Indoor 5G portfolio.

Stelios Savvides, technology director at Vodafone Oman, said,



Stelios Savvides

“With so much time spent at home, offices, shopping malls or in airports, the quality of indoor 5G coverage is quickly becoming a must-have for our customers.”

“Enhancing the in-building user experience is a key priority for Vodafone Oman and the Ericsson 5G Radio Dot deployments at our flagship Experience Hub and our HQ offices are the first of many in this journey. We



Wojciech Bajda

see the Ericsson Radio Dot System as the right solution to offer a superior indoor experience to our valuable customers.”

Radio Dot 4475, one of the smallest tri-band small cells and weighing just 1.5kg, is a multi-band low-power radio transmitter with eight antenna elements. The IRU 8848 allows connections of up to eight next-generation Radio Dots in a single unit facilitating 5G and

4G deployment.

Wojciech Bajda, vice president and head of Gulf Council Countries at Ericsson Middle East and Africa, said, “Ericsson Radio Dot System is the industry-leading solution to significantly improve indoor user experience.”

“The solution enables Vodafone Oman to provide greatly improved service quality for indoor users for voice and data. As a strategic business partner to Vodafone Oman, we are committed to supporting them in providing the best user experience to consumers and enterprises.”

Ericsson 5G Radio Dot System supports multi-technology, multi-band, multi-operator and unlicensed deployments, as well as software features such as 4x4 MIMO, Carrier Aggregation, and 256 QAM in TDD mid-bands and FDD bands.

National Finance launches its Ramadan campaign

National Finance, the largest finance company in Oman, has announced the launch of its new campaign #RamadanFursati. As part of the offer, customers who purchase a new car can benefit from competitive interest rates and the liberty to pay their first installment only after 2 months. With a focus on fast, easy and flexible procedures, customers will be able to purchase their dream car this Ramadan.

Commenting on the new offer, Tariq al Farsi, chief executive officer of National Finance, said, “During the month of Ramadan there is an increase in interest amongst customers to purchase new vehicles. This is mainly due to the innumerable promotions presented by dealers and showrooms during this specific month. Hence, we decided to launch this attractive Ramadan offer to meet customers’ aspirations and provide them with seamless services that enable them to purchase their cars without any hassle.”

To facilitate the process of applying for a loan, National Finance boasts of a wide range of channels. Clients can apply for a loan by visiting one of the com-



pany’s 20 branches across the Sultanate or via the website or the phone application. In addition, customers can also directly get in touch through WhatsApp and the call center.

National Finance has built a reputation for thirty five years as a market leader in the segment and has earned the trust of thousands of customers across the Sultanate. Through its various branches, National Finance offers financial solutions for customers, Small and Medium

Enterprises (SMEs) and Corporates.

Recognising its efforts, the company won many accolades last year such as the ‘Best SME Finance Solution’ award by Capital Finance International (CFI.co) and the ‘Most Innovative Retail Finance – Automobile – Oman’ award by International Finance Awards. The company also won The ‘Best Non-Banking Financial Corporation’ at the Oman Banking & Finance Awards.

MHD launches luxury automotive brand Hongqi

MHD ACERE has announced the inauguration of the premium luxury automotive brand Hongqi. It marked the official entry of Hongqi into the promising Omani market, while introducing launch offers for local consumers this Ramadan. The official launching ceremony took place at Al Bustan Palace Hotel on Sunday and witnessed a large attendance of official and public figures.

Hongqi is the new definition of luxury. Every fine detail tells the story of prestige and opulence in a unique way, making Hongqi ‘A Class of Its Own’. The different Hongqi models come with top-standard features that ensure an unprecedented experience to the driver.

Among the initial models which will be available for local customers in Oman are H5, H55, H57, the H9, and the technological wonder E-HS9.

The Hongqi range of sedans and SUVs comes with powerful driving force, powerful start and perfect handling, equipped with the latest safety technology to guarantee a stable running through the toughest terrains.

The H5 is an extraordinary compact executive car, with exquisite and advanced appearance, perfect configuration and powerful performance.

The exterior and interior in this car collaborate to provide the ultimate luxury experience, featuring a stylish silhouette adorned with ‘Wing of Hongqi’ greeting light, and the panoramic sunroof which offers an inspiration from nature into your private space.

This model offers thrilling performance with acceleration from 0 to 100 Km/h in 9.7 seconds only, enabled by the brilliant 196 HP and 320 Nm maximum torque producing 1.8 L Turbo engine.

The exterior of the H9 stunning sedan model from Hongqi, has the new iconic design language of the protruding red trim, which is an integral part of the model’s front face, and the classic waterfall grill give this vehicle its flagship look.

The side profile will impress you with the flowing lines extending from the headlamps to the rear.

For its interior, the H9 model boasts a new design concept



called “oriental artistic conception”. It combines wood grain, leather and chrome-plated details, creating an impressive traditional atmosphere. In contrast, the full LCD (liquid crystal display) instrument clusters and large center console screen lend futuristic sense along with the 12-inch head-up display (HUD) and video-streaming rearview mirror.

This astonishing vehicle combines powerful driving force, powerful start, and perfect handling. H9 is available in two pow-

ertrain options, 2.0-liter turbocharged engine is able to pump out 180 kW, and 380 Nm of torque peak and is mated with a 7-speed dual-clutch transmission.

In the SUV category Hongqi Oman will offer H55, H57 and the technological wonder E-HS9. Hongqi H55 tries to define a sense of luxury that corresponds with aesthetic interests of consumers.

This AWD runs on a 2.0 L Turbocharged direct injection gasoline engine, perfectly bal-

anced power, fuel consumption and emissions and exerting a maximum of 340 Nm of torque.

Along with its dynamic exterior, the Hongqi H55 greets the driver with the unique Red Flag wings like an eagle spreading its wings.

The anterior is extremely comfortable with all means of luxury including premium leather and great dashboard details.

The other SUV model, H57 brings the exclusive off-road mode for the fun of conquest, constant breakthroughs with

professional off-road performance powered by the TCS all-wheel power control technology exclusively customized by Bosch. It is equipped with the new generation of 8-speed AMT for comfortable driving experience and excellent fuel economy.

The interior of the H57 comes with a BOSE 5.1 surround audio system, and double 10.1-inch HD touch displays fitted on seats covered with world-class Nappa leather, which harmonizes with the solid wood decoration, a flag-

ship luxury space is presented to you.

Last but not least is the all new E-HS9. This 5209mm long and 2010mm wide full-size smart SUV will captivate you with its majestic design. The adaptive beam headlights are joined by day-time running lights, and lighting details on the front and back of the car, adding an aesthetic touch that blends with the dynamic body lines.

Exploring the different layers of elegance and function-

ality in the E-HS9 interior, the cabin is made with top-grade Napa leather, housing high-quality powered front seats, adjustable to taste with memory function.

The seats also come with massage for your ultimate comfort. Technology makes a strong presence in this car to ensure giving customers a smooth and entertaining driving experience, with a 4-zone automatic climate control, 16.2-inch digital cluster, a 16.2-inch infotainment screen, and 12 speakers sound system. And to achieve high convenience, the car is equipped with wireless charging, electric power steering system, 360 view camera, and GPS.

The E-HS9 hosts some of the best modern safety features. In addition to the front and rear side airbags, it comes with a built-in pedestrian alert system, lane departure warning and assist system, forward collision warning, and blind-spot monitoring systems for a safe and smooth journey. Furthermore, the E-HS9 has cruise and electronic stability control, anti-lock braking system, ground clearance control, front and rear sensors, to provide you with the most force and control.

Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE – the sole distributor of Hongqi Motor cars in Oman – said, “At MHD ACERE, we are delighted to introduce an increasingly popular luxury automotive brand to Oman. The collaboration between Hongqi and MHD is most certainly a game changer in the automotive scene in the Sultanate. We believe that Hongqi will bring a new exquisite driving experience to local consumers with its outstanding performance, and elegant design”.

Hongqi was launched in 1958 as a limousine brand for government agencies in China.

The luxury car marque has become the fastest growing auto brand in China for three consecutive years since it released its development strategy of ‘New Era, New Hongqi’ in January, 2018.

MHD is largely committed to foster Hongqi growth in the sultanate through major emphasis on customer satisfaction and by providing world-class after-sales services in Oman.

Zubair SEC unveils its new identity



Nearly nine years after its establishment in 2013, The Zubair Small Enterprises Centre 'The Zubair SEC' on Monday revealed its new identity, which was designed to match its strategy of expanding by providing its services to the local community.

The Centre revealed its new name 'The Zubair Enterprise Development Centre', which reflects its new direction to provide its diversified advisory services to the largest number of institutions and commercial companies, regardless of their size.

The new identity of the Centre was revealed during a special ceremony held at Bait Al Zubair Museum, in the presence of a number of members of The Zubair Corporation's board of directors, as well as the strategic partners of the centre, and a number of representatives of

government and private entities related to the development of institutions, as well as a number of the centre's members from small enterprises.

On this inauguration, Al-Zubair bin Muhammad al Zubair, vice chairman of the board of directors of the Zubair Corporation, said, "Today we are meeting again after the recent crisis that the world has experienced as a result of COVID-19, asking The Almighty to grant us good health and help us to serve our dear country. Today, we celebrate together the launch of the centre's new identity, which was designed to comply with its strategy of expanding by providing its services to the local community, which reflects the new trend to provide diversified advisory services to the largest number of institutions and commercial

companies, regardless of their size."

Commenting on this step, Said Salim al Sahib, director of The Zubair Enterprise Development Centre, said, "Over the past years, the centre has been able to occupy a leading position in supporting small enterprises and emerging entrepreneurs, as the number of the centre's members exceeded 1,000 during this period. Today, the centre is taking a strategic step by launching its new identity, 'The Zubair Enterprise Development Centre' in order to expand its services to include institutions and companies of all sizes. This step is in line with our aspirations to play a greater role in achieving Oman's future vision 2040, which aims to enhance entrepreneurship opportunities in the sultanate."

He added, "The past years have proven the necessity of providing quality advisory services to emerging companies to help them grow and expand, which will have a positive impact on the national economy. We are happy to have played this role over the past few years, and today we are expanding in this field to serve all types of companies, which will maximize the impact at all levels. We would like to extend our thanks and appreciation to The Zubair Corporation, which established this entity to be its main arm in the field of social responsibility, believing in the importance of this sector in supporting the national economy of the sultanate. Also, we would like to extend our thanks and appreciation to all partners in the public and private sectors who have participated in this

march over the years. Thanks also goes to the centre's team, who spared no effort in providing everything that would help and support institutions to grow sustainably."

Since its establishment, The Zubair SEC has been distinguished by its high professionalism, and the diversity in the fields of knowledge it provides, as well as the multiplicity of its accumulated experiences through its support and communication with various institutions. In addition to its network of contacts and strategic partners locally and internationally,

The Centre offers a wide range of services, including advisory solutions, guidance, business development opportunities, capacity building, opportunities for networking and knowledge transfer.



Al Madina Takaful conducts workshop on adopting HSR

To strengthen an empathetic connection between the company and community, Al Madina Takaful, Oman's first Takaful insurance provider organised a workshop on the concept of Human Social Responsibility (HSR).

A model that is growing in popularity in the corporate world, HSR embraces the idea that people are at the centre of every organisation. Experts define HSR has the shift from focusing on corporate to human in how companies serve the community.

The workshop was led by Eng Nasser al Amri, Founder and General Manager of Sunaa Al-majd, which specialises in designing social responsibility projects and he introduced the concept of HSR to the employees of Al Madina Takaful.

With efforts like volunteerism, community friendly practices, philanthropy becoming key spotlights for companies across

Oman it is not surprising that HSR has become a growing idea among businesses of all sizes. These days companies are often seen taking the lead and venturing into humanitarian projects.

Usama al Barwani, CEO of Al Madina Takaful, said, "Having an HSR strategy will indicate that company is compassionate and treats all people well. HSR endeavours helps foster a more productive and positive work environment and promotes volunteering and positive efforts from employees."

"Today's customers look for companies that are committed to HSR efforts, and most employees choose to work for companies who give back to their communities in one way or another. We are driven by the belief that every employee has the ability to help make our local community better through special efforts," Barwani added.

Al Hail Cricket presents Danube Ramadan Tennex Ball Cricket 2022

AL Hail Cricket Club is organising the 3rd edition of the Danube Ramadan Tennex Ball Cricket Tournament 2022 at the Al Hail Cricket grass Ground in Mabelah on April 04.

The tournament matches will be played on a Knock-out basis with participation limited to 32 teams. The tournament is open to all the teams that are participating in OCC-conducted 'A' division and all other divisions below A division.

The organisers have decided to give some interesting prizes besides the main trophy and cash prize for the winners and Runners-up Team. There will also be prizes for the Best Bowler



and Best disciplined team apart from regular prizes.

All the matches will start at 9:30pm. The interested teams can register their team through our website. The website can be accessed via www.alhailcricketclub.com.

Registration will be on first-come first-served basis with limitation up to 32 teams max. The tournament draw is scheduled to take place in HCT ground in Mabelah at 7.30pm on March 31 in the presence of all the team captains and managers.

Whirlpool donates home appliances

Whirlpool Corporation, the US-based home appliances manufacturer, recently announced the distribution completion of a donation of home appliances, supporting Omani families in need.

The Company partnered with Oman Charitable Organization (OCO) that distributed appliances directly into people's homes.

"We are proud to be working closely with OCO, and our whirlpool brand-authorised distributor 'Mustafa Sultan', to distribute and install critical home appliances to 100 families in need," the company said in a statement.

"We believe a comfortable, secure, and healthy life at home is essential for everyone, and



wanted to play our part in the Middle East and in particular in the Sultanate of Oman to help some families who were affected by the tropical cyclone Shaheen," the statement further said.

Whirlpool Corporation is committed to being the best global kitchen and laundry company, in constant pursuit of improving life at home. In an increasingly digital world, the

company is driving purposeful innovation to meet the evolving needs of consumers through its iconic brand portfolio, including Whirlpool, KitchenAid, Maytag, Consul, and Amana.

Changan Hunter Pick-Up: Perfect for various road conditions

Equipped with safety features and modern driving systems, Changan Hunter pick-up with two engine variants - 2.4 turbo petrol (available in manual and automatic transmission) and 1.9 turbo diesel engine (manual transmission) ensures great performance.

One of the positive aspects of the Changan Hunter is its work horse capabilities and usage, being a heavy-duty pickup for loading, it is sturdy, spacious and of high quality, and is suitable for various load and road conditions. Boasting of class leading power and excellent ground clearance, it delivers an unmatched level of supremacy and capability especially for the farm and construction sector. Offering excellent seating comfort, SUV like interiors and manifold features, Changan Hunter ensures a pleasurable and comfortable drive for the passengers.

Changan Hunter's double cabin pick-up comes with a 2.4 turbo gasoline engine producing 210 hp with a 6 speed Manual (2wd & 4wd) and Automatic

transmission available only in 4WD. The 'power to perform' Changan Hunter also comes with a 1.9-litre turbo diesel engine producing 150 hp with a 6-speed manual transmission and is available in 4 WD.

This incredible pick-up is built on a large wheelbase of up to 3180mm, and measures 5330mm in length, 1930mm in width and 1835mm in height. With capacity to carry a substantial weight, it has a ground clearance of 230mm and fuel tank capacity of 80 litres.

Changan Hunter is equipped with all safety and security measures and innovative driving systems that provide a smooth ride and enhanced performance. Changan Hunter Pickups are targeted to meet the needs of local commercial transporters as well as small and medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Logistic solutions.

On the global level,

Changan 'Hunter' is described as a distinctive new generation of trucks that are characterized by strong capabilities and a very impressive exterior design with a practical and comfortable interior. All this is a result of the strong support of the research and development centres of Changan.

Changan Hunter 2WD manual P (Standard)

The exterior of Changan Hunter 2WD manual pick-up features 17" steel wheels, halogen headlamps, front fog

lights, ORVMS - electrically adjustable and sidestep. The aesthetically designed interiors offer fabric seats.

In terms of safety, the Changan Hunter gets front airbags, rear sensors, ESP and TPMS. The infotainment attributes includes multifunction steering wheel, 3.5" instrument cluster screen, two speakers. The rear AC outlets offer comfort.

Changan Hunter available in petrol 2WD manual



transmission ,4WD manual and automatic and 4WD diesel variants.

Changan Hunter 4WD manual & Automatic transmission includes the features of 2WD manual P (Standard) features plus other additional features. The exterior features includes 17" alloy wheels, door handles in chrome, welcome light, LED Headlamps, follow me home light, LED DRLs, ORVMs with heating and rear LED tail lamps.

The attractive interior includes leatherette fabric seats, electrically adjustable front seats, lumbar support, and rear armrest. The safety features offer rear differential lock, front side airbags, rear view camera, and rear disc brakes. It has a special feature which is the camera for right blind area which helps the driver sitting on the left side of the car to see the right side area behind the car with

help of a camera fixed to give the driver a view of that specific area.

The infotainment features include 4.2" coloured instrument cluster screen, 10" infotainment screen, mirror link, radio, USB, Bluetooth, six speakers. It also offers cruise control.

Changan Hunter 4WD manual diesel (platinum)

The exterior of the Changan Hunter 4WD manual diesel (Platinum) includes 17" alloy wheels, door handles in chrome, halogen headlamps, front fog lights, LED DRLs. The interior has leatherette fabric seats and rear armrest. With the help of another attribute ORVMs (Outside Rear View Mirror) can be electrically adjusted and has the function of heating to prevent the mirror from fogging up. There are turn indicators on the edges of the mirrors as well.

The safety attributes include rear differential lock, front airbags, rear sensors, rear view camera, camera for right blind area, ESP, TPMS and rear disc

brakes.

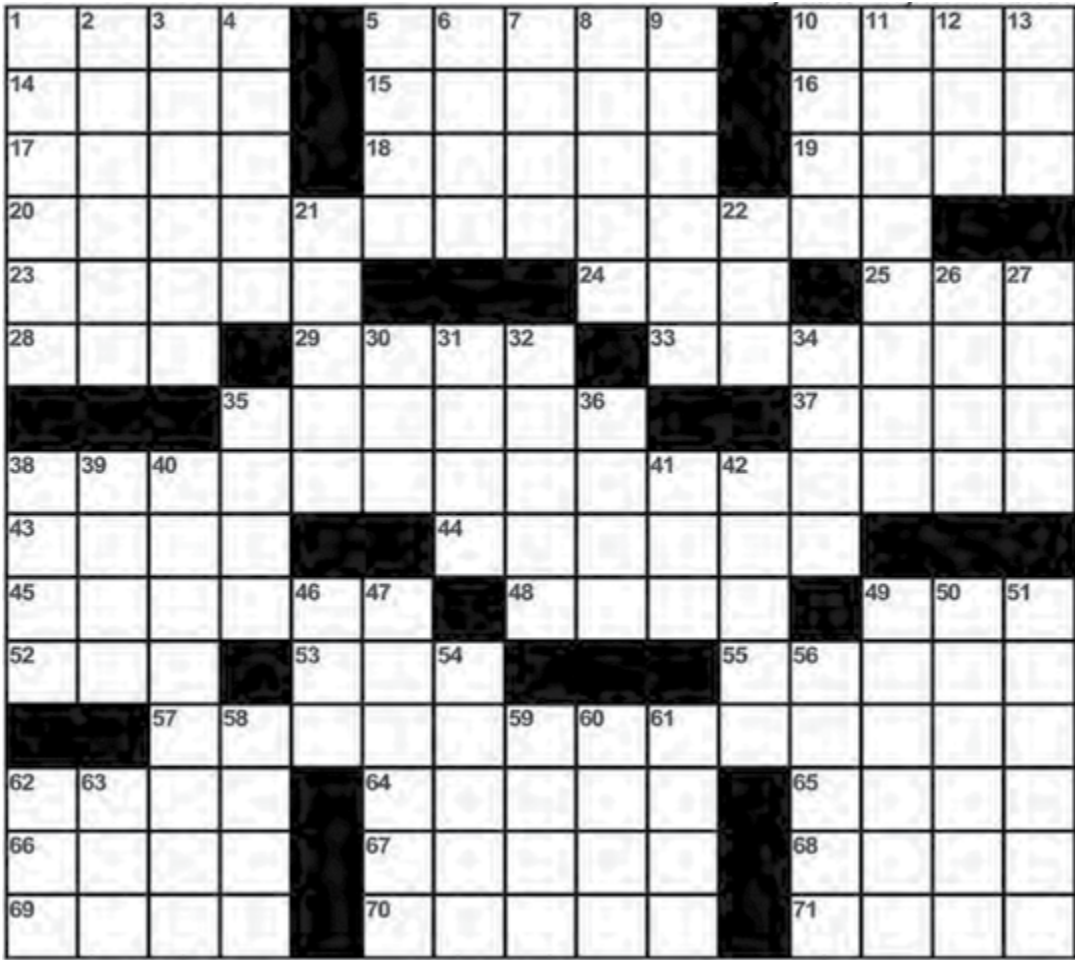
It has a DPF Filter which is an indicator which gets activated when the engine is being over-used or damaged due to the driver's negligence. For instance, the indicator comes on when the A/C is running for a long time and the car is stationary or when the driver is driving short distances and doing constant stop-starts or if engine has dust particles. The indicator can be switched off through a switch placed near the indicator.

It has a host of infotainment features such as 3.5" instrument cluster screen, 10" infotainment screen, mirror link, radio, USB, Bluetooth, 4 speakers and multifunction steering wheel.

It is also fitted with cruise control, rear AC outlet, auto AC.

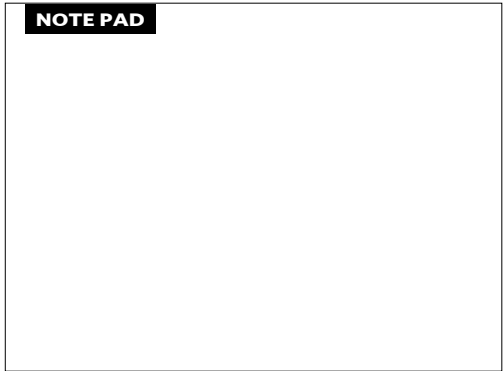
Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment LLC (AGAE), part of Bahwan International Group is official dealer of Changan brand in Oman. The premium automotive brand Changan has received overwhelming response among Oman customers.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1) Start for "lock" or "iron"
 - 5) Temple VIP
 - 10) Like a useless tire
 - 14) Vegas competitor
 - 15) Milky gems
 - 16) Whip end?
 - 17) Opposing
 - 18) Cowboy Bill of legend
 - 19) Catch a glimpse of
 - 20) Spooky residences
 - 23) "Bud" or "pal" kin
 - 24) Brisk energy
 - 25) _Wan Kenobi
 - 28) Citi Field player
 - 29) Jack of Sgt. Friday fame
 - 33) Fixed portion
 - 35) Fill with enthusiasm
 - 37) Aardvark morsels
 - 38) Dark, spooky place
 - 43) Affirm
 - 44) Agreeable
 - 45) Composed
 - 48) Desperately need a bath
 - 49) Khan's title
 - 52) Rubble maker, big-time
 - 53) Chinese restaurant quaff
 - 55) Consume heartily
 - 57) Spooky thing on the
- water
- 62) Ready and willing go-with
 - 64) Bus rider's "coin"
 - 65) Indication of a voicemai l
 - 66) One not using his brain
 - 67) Made mistakes
 - 68) Sign for the superstitious
 - 69) Healthy type of bean (var.)
 - 70) Little darlings
 - 71) Be literate, in a way
- DOWN**
- 1) Kind of cracker
 - 2) File menu option
 - 3) Read between the lines
 - 4) Executing
 - 5) Rodeo tool
 - 6) Imitated at a zoo?
 - 7) "Goldberg Variations" composer
 - 8) Softly hit single
 - 9) Producer of magazines or credit cards
 - 10) Run away
 - 11) Activity performed on a dude ranch
 - 12) It could cause a death on the Nile
 - 13) " _ will be done"
 - 21) Namely
 - 22) Place that exists to pamper
 - 26) Not just this one or that one
 - 27) "Meet Me _ Louis" (1944 film)
 - 30) Before, long before now
 - 31) Arctic floating chunk
 - 32) What a seller seeks
 - 34) Shadow, in a whodunit
 - 35) Common houseplant
 - 36) French door part
 - 38) Boss of a first lieutenant
 - 39) What one definitely isn't
 - 40) Intellectually
 - 41) Make it a new game
 - 42) Emulating a newborn
 - 46) In-flight info, for short
 - 47) Not just dinged
 - 49) Obeying a curfew
 - 50) Kind of pig
 - 51) Add supplementary material to
 - 54) "O come let us_ Him"
 - 56) Noted fur trader John Jacob
 - 58) _ carotene

- 59) Item of Creole cook-ery
- 60) " _ ... and_ the twin shall meet"
- 61) Stopping points
- 62) Showstoppers?
- 63) "I don't like your performance!"



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
Today, it might be time for a clean sweep, both literally and figuratively. You'll feel better when there is less clutter and more clarity in your world, so get rid of things (and people) that you just don't need anymore. It's a great idea to stay busy doing things that make your environment better, like cleaning and organising. Try to do some house cleaning, laundry or other chores before tonight when your energy is going to be flagging.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
The way the heavens are arranged at the moment can mean only one of two things for you: an existing relationship will become far more intimate, or a new relationship will take off like a rocket, aimed directly at both your hearts and libidos. Either way, you'll have to excuse the rest of the world if we're not sympathetic about you having to reschedule that meeting. Just grin and bear it.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
Words have always been your specialty, but today the cosmos will intensify your already enviable talents in that department. If you have an apology to accept or deliver, an emotion you just can't keep inside any longer, or something you've been waiting to say when the moment is right, well, clear your throat. The moment is officially right. It couldn't be any better if you'd set it up yourself.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
On the one hand, you're totally engrossed in your work for totally professional reasons. On the other, there's a certain authority figure who's been on your mind lately for totally unprofessional reasons. Isn't this interesting? There's only one thing to do: your job. Do it well and do it thoroughly. And if you really have to ask an awful lot of extremely detailed questions (just to make sure you're doing everything right, of course), that's just the way it is.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
You have a personal rule about dating co-workers. You tend to avoid it. Period. There are times in the life of every rule when exceptions need to be made, and one of those exceptions just walked by while you were trying to concentrate on your job. Everyone knows that rules were made to be broken. And wouldn't it be nice to have an easy conversation icebreaker ready once you sit down to dinner at your place? Yes, it would.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Here we go again. You're in the mood to shop and buy whatever it is that you're absolutely sure no one else has, or at least no one you know. Before you hit that "buy now" button, though, think about this one thing: if you really want to be different, why not put your money away and redo something you already own in your very own way. Invest in some paint and fabric. You might end up with a profitable part-time business.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
Sitting still is always a challenge for you. But at the moment, it's going to be nearly impossible. Why fight it? You need a change of scenery and there's someone you'd like to spend some time with. Whether it's a friend you need to catch up with, a lover you need some quality time alone with, or a family outing you know you can pull together, just do it. Get the show on the road!



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
This is just one of those days when it's good to be you no matter how you look at it. That will go double if the person you've spent so much time thinking about is clever enough to pick up on those hints and signals and show up when they're supposed to. The stars say they will. And bet you'll have tonnes of flirtatious fun when they do. This is what you wanted, so enjoy every moment and cherish it.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
All those rumours about your sign being cold, aloof and detached? Totally untrue. The stuff about you being objective, impartial, and incapable of prejudice? Absolutely true. You're about to prove all that and more to anyone who's willing to listen, and even to some who won't be. You're in the mood for romance. And while your style of wooing doesn't usually involve roses, whoever you're working your magic on won't forget it.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
Intimacy is the name of game now, and you, of course, being the emotional, sensitive creature that you are, won't mind a bit. Since you're so good at spoiling the ones you love, there's an excellent chance that you won't hear any arguments when you suggest to a certain someone that you two start the fun early. Especially since they've probably been waiting for you to make your move for some time now.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
Romance, extravagance, and nothing but the best, especially when it comes to flirting with a certain someone like they've never been flirted with before. That's your mission, and no one needs to ask if you'll accept it. You've been carrying on this behind-the-scenes infatuation for far too long. It's time to take this show on the road. Have fun and don't mind what others have to say about how you behave.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
It's fine astrological weather to be you, but no one has to tell you that, do they? You've been confided in by your dearest friends, and you've shared your own secrets with them too. It's not the intrigue that has you so mesmerised, exactly. More than anything, what you're so enjoying is the intimacy you've allowed yourself to give and receive, and the warmth of those post-conversation hugs isn't too hard to take either.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The home of the drink called "bourbon" is Bourbon County. What state of the USA is it in?

- A. Kentucky
- B. Tennessee
- C. Arkansas
- D. Louisiana

2. Olympic gold medalists Natasa Janics and Alfréd Hajós represented

which country?

- A. Serbia
- B. Romania
- C. Estonia
- D. Hungary

3. What is the best-known English blue cheese?

- A. Salop
- B. Badminton
- C. Stilton
- D. Queensberry

Answers: 1.A 2.D 3.C

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

I	G	I	T
U	E	A	F
C	R	S	S
I	N	S	O

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Ukraine warns of Mariupol's catastrophic humanitarian crisis ahead of peace talks

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukraine warned on Monday the humanitarian crisis in the pulverized city of Mariupol was now 'catastrophic', while signalling grounds for compromise ahead of new face-to-face peace talks with Russia in Turkey.

About 20,000 Ukrainians have been killed in Russia's month-old invasion and 10mn have fled their homes, according to Kyiv, and several cities are still coming under withering bombardment.

After an apparent retreat in Moscow's war aims to focus on eastern Ukraine, Ukrainian intelligence said Russia could be bent on carving up the country into two entities like Korea.

Russia has de-facto control over the southern peninsula of Crimea that it annexed in 2014, and the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Lugansk in the eastern Donbas region.

In the Lugansk city of Rubizhne, one person was killed and another wounded by overnight Russian bombardment, according to regional Ukrainian officials.

Further west near the capital Kyiv, Andrii Ostapets was determined to get back into his village of Stoyanka to bring food to his neighbours - and to his cats, if still alive - despite the threat of Russian snipers.

"We saw people killed, we saw burnt down houses, we lived through hell" when Russia occupied Stoyanka, the 69-year-old private museum owner told AFP, a week after fleeing the village.

But Ukrainian soldiers were



Ukrainian soldiers stand in front of a destroyed Russian armoured personal carrier on the frontline in the northern part of Kyiv region on Monday (AFP)

pushing back the invaders at the village, Ostapets said. "The Russians have no chance to stay alive - they can either surrender or die."

President Volodymyr Zelensky said the first round of in-person talks since March 10 - due to open in Istanbul on Tuesday after near-daily video contacts - must bring peace 'without delay'.

Red lines

Ukrainian 'neutrality', and the future status of Donbas in line with Russian demands, could be in the mix for the Istanbul meeting as negotiators from both sides headed to Turkey on Monday.

"We understand that it is im-

possible to liberate all territory by force, that would mean World War III, I fully understand and realise that," Zelensky said.

But stressing his negotiating red lines, he added: "Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity are beyond doubt. Effective security guarantees for our state are mandatory."

Humanitarian needs are direct in the southern port city of Mariupol, where Ukraine says about 170,000 civilians are encircled by Russian forces, with ever-dwindling supplies of food, water and medicine.

Ukraine's foreign ministry said the situation there was 'catastrophic' and Russia's assault

from land, sea and air had turned the city of 450,000 people 'into dust'.

France, Greece and Turkey are hoping to launch a mass evacuation of civilians out of Mariupol within days, according to French President Emmanuel Macron, who is seeking agreement from Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Ukraine decided against any humanitarian corridors on Monday because of potential 'provocations' by the Russians along designated routes, Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said.

Macron warned that any escalation 'in words or action' could harm his evacuation ef-



A woman arrives in Kyiv after fleeing her home in the outskirts of the city on Monday, amid Russian invasion (AFP)

orts, after US President Joe Biden's shock declaration that Putin 'cannot remain in power'.

The ad-libbed remark on a visit to Poland sparked outrage in Moscow, and seemed to undercut Biden's own efforts for the West to present a united front.

Biden himself rowed back on Sunday, denying to reporters that he had been calling for regime change, while Britain and Germany have joined France in distancing themselves from the remark.

What does Putin want?

With Russia's much-larger military hampered by fierce Ukrainian resistance, the three days of Istanbul talks will test whether battlefield setbacks have tempered Moscow's demands.

Russia last week appeared to scale back its campaign when senior general Sergei Rudskoi said the 'main goal' was now on controlling Donbas in the east.

For his part, Putin has avoided clearly defining the goals of his invasion, stating only that he wants to 'demilitarise and denazify' Ukraine.

On March 10, the Turkish resort city of Antalya hosted the first talks between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba since the start of the invasion.

There was no agreement then for a hoped-for ceasefire. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said it was 'important' that talks in person were resuming, after no 'significant achievements or breakthroughs' in the previous virtual rounds.

Divided nation

Many in Ukraine remain suspicious, however, that Russia could use the talks as an opportunity to regroup and fix serious tactical and logistical problems bedevilling its military.

"After a failure to capture

Kyiv and remove Ukraine's government, Putin is changing his main operational directions," intelligence chief Kyrylo Budanov said.

He was aiming now 'impose a separation line between the occupied and unoccupied regions', the Ukrainian official said. 'It will be an attempt to set up South and North Korea in Ukraine'.

The head of Ukraine's Lugansk separatist region says it may hold a referendum on becoming part of Russia.

But resistance in besieged Mariupol is the main obstacle preventing Moscow from gaining unbroken control of land from the Donbas to the Crimea.

Counterattacks

In the southern town of Mykolaiv, under heavy assault for weeks, the bombardments appeared to be easing.

That was a welcome respite for locals like 13-year-old Sofia, who suffered shrapnel injuries to her head during shelling in early March near Mykolaiv.

"Now I can move my arms and legs a little," she said, after undergoing three operations. "I still can't get up without my mother's help, but hopefully I can leave soon." The frontlines appeared to have receded from Mykolaiv, with a counteroffensive being mounted in Kherson, about 80km to the southeast.

In Kherson, the only significant city the Russian army claims to have seized, about 500 people took part in anti-Russian demonstrations on Sunday.

AFP

Ukrainian troops driving back Russians in Stoyanka

Stoyanka, Ukraine - Russian snipers are still targeting the deserted crossroads into the village of Stoyanka, but Andrii Ostapets hopes to bring food to his neighbours - and to his cats, if they are still alive.

The 69-year-old private museum owner has returned one week after fleeing the village on Kyiv's western edge, having heard that Ukrainian troops were driving back Moscow's forces.

"We saw people killed, we saw burnt down houses, we lived through hell" when Russia occupied the village, says Ostapets, protected from the biting cold by a thick leather jacket.

"Yesterday they pushed them back from our farm. The Russians have no chance to stay alive - they can either surrender or die."

A bitter wind whips through Stoyanka, which has been turned into a ghost village after nearly a month on the western frontline of Russia's attempt to encircle the Ukrainian capital.

The sound of shelling still booms from the low forested hills that surround the village - where Ukrainian defence volunteer forces say Russian snipers are lurking. Gunfire crackles at a distance. The fighting continues despite Moscow signalling on Friday that it had scaled down the aims of its month-old invasion of Ukraine, focusing now on the eastern Donbas area.

Ukraine says it is pushing back the stalled Russian advance on Kyiv in areas such as Stoyanka, just half a kilometre from the western city limits.

"I have a full car of groceries, the people and pets who stayed there, we'll bring them food," says Ostapets. "We are waiting



A soldier patrols at a checkpoint in Stoyanka, on Sunday (AFP)

for permission and we will go save those alive."

'Shot by snipers'

Most of the houses on the approach to Stoyanka appear to be empty, and some have been destroyed by shelling.

At a sandbagged checkpoint where people are waiting to deliver aid, one militia member said it was 'suicidal' to try to cross into the main part of the village at the moment.

"Two civilians were shot by snipers today," says a civil defence volunteer toting a Kalashnikov rifle, his face covered by an olive green balaclava.

The village was still being targeted by sniper fire, mortars and shelling, much of it coming from the surrounding woods, said the volunteer, asking not to be named.

Of the residents who have braved the fighting to stay, many are running short of food.

A surprise arrival at the scene is Ostapets' daughter, Snizhana Shokina, who says she has come

to join the aid effort because the war 'hurts the soul'.

"I didn't tell my parents I would come, because they would start worrying. I just decided to come," says the 45-year-old mother-of-two, wearing a designer biker jacket.

"They want to bring them food and I want to help and support them."

Her parents fled Stoyanka after a shell exploded in their garden, throwing her mother to the ground and leaving a large crater.

Their cats 'probably were killed but we hope most of them stayed alive'. The road ahead for the volunteers is dangerous.

A pile of twisted metal that used to be a petrol station sits on the other side of the debris-strewn crossroads on the main western highway out of Kyiv.

A van driven by military volunteers stops to check on a team of AFP journalists, warns them that Russian snipers are targeting the junction, then careers across at high-speed.

AFP

Ukraine war halts Sri Lankan flights to Russia

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Cash-strapped Sri Lanka's national carrier on Monday ended direct flights to Russia - the crisis-hit island's biggest source of tourists - because of the Ukraine war.

It was the only operator of direct connections and the move is a major blow to Sri Lanka's hopes of reviving its pandemic-battered tourism industry and earning foreign ex-

change to import food, fuel and medicines, which are in short supply.

Sri Lankan Airlines said it was stopping the Colombo-Moscow route with immediate effect, blaming prohibitive insurance rates after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

In addition, international sanctions on Russian banks made it impossible for its Moscow office to repatriate its

earnings, a spokesman told AFP.

No Russian airline operates direct flights between the two countries.

Sri Lanka is grappling with its worst economic crisis since its independence from Britain in 1948.

Out of the 82,300 foreign tourists who visited the country in January, about 13,500 or 16.4 per cent were Russians, fol-

lowed by 11,750 Indians and 7,770 Ukrainians.

Sri Lankan Airlines operated three flights a week to the Russian capital until fighting broke out last month and had reduced the frequency to two.

Travel agents said Colombo-Moscow airfares on alternative Middle Eastern carriers spiked after the Sri Lankan Airlines decision.

AFP

US, Philippines kick off their war games

Manila, Philippines - The Philippines and the United States launched the largest-ever joint military drills in the archipelago nation on Monday, signalling deepening defence ties as fresh tensions surface in the disputed South China Sea.

The war games are the last under outgoing President Rodrigo Duterte, who previously threatened to cancel exercises and axe a key military deal with longtime ally the United States as he pivoted towards China.

Nearly 9,000 Filipino and American soldiers will take part in the 12-day training event across the main island of Luzon, which is usually an annual affair but was cancelled or curtailed during the pandemic.

Philippine military chief General Andres Centino said at the opening ceremony in Manila that the largest round of the Balikatan war games reflected the 'deepening alliance' between the two countries.

US Major General Jay Barger said that the 'friendship and trust' between their respective armed forces would allow them to 'succeed together



The exercise directors of Philippines and US unfurl the Balikatan flag during the opening ceremony of joint military drill in Manila on Monday (AFP)

across the entire spectrum of military operations'.

The exercises will cover maritime security, amphibious operation, live-fire training and counterterrorism, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Recent manoeuvres between the two countries focused on potential conflict in the South China Sea, which Beijing claims almost in its entirety.

Since taking power in 2016 Duterte has moved closer to China, but has faced pushback

from the Philippine public and concern in the military wary of Beijing's territorial ambitions in the waters.

Trillions of dollars in trade pass through the strategic sea and it is thought to contain rich petroleum deposits, thus making it a frequent source of regional friction.

China has ignored a 2016 ruling by the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration that its historical claim is without basis.

It has reinforced its stance by building artificial islands over

some contested reefs and installing weapons on them.

Tensions spike

The future of the war games was thrown into doubt after Duterte said in February 2020 that he planned to axe the Visiting Forces Agreement, which provides the legal framework for the United States to hold joint military exercises and operations in the Philippines.

But he walked back the decision last July, as tensions between Manila and Beijing over the South China Sea spiked following the detection of hundreds of Chinese boats parked at a reef off the Philippines.

On the eve of the joint drills, the Philippine Coast Guard accused its Chinese counterpart of steering one of its ships within metres of a Filipino patrol boat near the disputed Scarborough Shoal - a flashpoint between the two countries.

That came weeks after Manila confronted Beijing's ambassador over a Chinese navy ship 'lingering' in the Philippines' archipelagic waters.

AFP

Taliban ban Afghan women flying alone in latest crackdown on rights

Kabul, Afghanistan - The Taliban have ordered airlines in Afghanistan to stop women from flying unless accompanied by a male relative, in the latest crackdown on basic human rights by the country's new rulers since seizing power.

The hardline Islamists have imposed sweeping restrictions on freedoms, mostly targeting Afghan girls and women, and on Sunday also ordered local television channels to stop broadcasting BBC news bulletins.

Over the weekend, they also decreed that men and women could not visit parks in the capital on the same days.

After returning to power in August the Taliban promised a softer version of the harsh rule that characterised their first stint in power, from 1996 to 2001, but restrictions have crept back - often implemented regionally at the whim of local officials.

Women are increasingly being shut out of public life - barred from high schools and most government jobs, and ordered to dress according to the Taliban's strict interpretation of Q'uran. In their latest crackdown, the Taliban ordered Afghanistan's Ariana Afghan Airlines and Kam Air to stop women from boarding flights unless they were escorted by a 'mahram', or adult male relative.

The decision was taken after a meeting on Thursday between representatives of the Taliban, the two airlines, and Kabul airport immigration authorities, aviation officials told AFP.



School girls travel on a vehicle in Kandahar last week after Taliban ordered girls' secondary schools in Afghanistan to shut just hours after they reopened (AFP)

"No women are allowed to fly on any domestic or international flights without a male relative," said a letter by a senior Ariana official to his staff, a copy of which was obtained by AFP.

A spokesman for the Taliban's religious enforcers, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, denied ordering the flight ban, but two travel agents told AFP they had stopped issuing tickets to solo women travellers.

'God's order'
The edict was not expected to

affect foreigners, although aviation officials reported that an Afghan woman with a US passport was prevented from flying last week.

"Some women who were travelling without a male relative were not allowed to board a Kam Air flight from Kabul to Islamabad on Friday," a passenger on the flight told AFP.

The Taliban have already banned inter-city road trips for women travelling alone.

The flight ban came as the vice ministry ordered that men and women should not visit

parks in Kabul on the same days. Women are now permitted to visit parks only on Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays, while the remaining days are reserved for men, a ministry notification said.

"It is not the Islamic Emirate's order but our God's order that men and women who are strangers to each other should not gather at one place," Mohammad Yahya Aref, an official at the vice ministry, told AFP.

The new restriction on women follows Wednesday's shutdown of all girls' secondary

schools just hours after they were allowed to reopen for the first time since August.

Tens of thousands of girls had flocked back to class, but officials ordered them home just hours into the day, triggering international outrage.

Taliban sources said that the decision was taken after a closed-door meeting of the movement's leaders last week in Kandahar, the de facto power centre of the group.

'Screws tightening'
Several Afghan women activists

have warned of nationwide protests if the schools were not open within a week.

Heather Barr, Human Rights Watch associate director for women's rights, said the latest restrictions were 'scary'.

"We see the screws tightening on women and girls every day now," she said.

"They have abandoned - at least for now - any effort to reach an accommodation with the international community, and that leaves them with nothing to lose."

The Taliban appear to have also set their sights on local media networks, which flourished under the previous US-backed regimes.

On Monday, Taliban intelligence agents raided four radio stations in Kandahar and detained six journalists, sources said.

The raids come a day after the authorities ordered the BBC's television partners in Afghanistan to stop broadcasting its news bulletins.

"Since the foreign TV channels are broadcast from abroad, the Islamic Emirate has no access to control their contents, especially when it comes to journalists' uniforms and dresses," government spokesman Inamullah Samangani told AFP.

The Taliban have already ordered women journalists working in Afghan television networks to wear hijabs, and stopped channels from broadcasting foreign dramas.

AFP

Malta's PM sworn in after big poll victory

Valletta, Malta - Malta's Prime Minister Robert Abela was sworn in on Monday following a landslide victory in weekend elections that delivered his Labour party a third term in government.

Labour won 55.11 per cent of the vote, final results showed - a bigger win than in 2017 or 2013 despite low turnout and the legacy of scandal over the murder of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia.

It was the first electoral test for Abela, a 44-year-old lawyer, since he took the helm of the tiny Mediterranean island nation in January 2020 following a Labour party vote.

His predecessor Joseph Muscat was forced to quit after being accused of shielding his allies from the investigation into Caruana Galizia's 2017 assassination in a car bomb.

She had accused top members of Muscat's administration of corruption. A public inquiry last year accused the state of creating a 'climate of impunity' in which she was killed.

In Saturday's vote, Labour secured a majority of almost 40,000 votes over its Nationalist Party rivals - a huge margin in the tiny EU state which has just 355,000 registered voters.

Vincent Marmara, a polling expert who lectures at the University of Malta, said the victory was 'historic'.

"Considering that it was a lower turnout this year, the difference of 39,474 is a massive victory," he told AFP.

AFP



Mexican soldiers patrol roads due to increase of violence in Jerez de Garcia Salinas municipality, in Zacatecas state, Mexico, on March 14 (AFP)

19 killed in shooting in central Mexico

Mexico City, Mexico - Nineteen people were shot and killed in central Mexico on Sunday, the State Attorney General's Office (FGE) said in a statement.

Authorities were called to the scene at around 10:30pm (0430 GMT Monday) following reports of an attack on a venue often used for hosting illegal betting on cockfights in the town of Las Tinajas, Michoacan state.

"Nineteen lifeless bodies were found (16 men and three women), who had gunshot wounds," the FGE said. Several others were injured and had been sent to hospital, it added.

Federal authorities are working 'with the aim of capturing those responsible for the violent acts', the office of Michoacan's secretary of public security said.

Authorities did not give a reason for the shooting.

But Michoacan and neighbouring Guanajuato are two of Mexico's most violent states, due to turf wars between rival gangs involved in drug trafficking and other illegal activities - including trade in stolen fuel.

Michoacan is also the world's biggest avocado-producing region and threats against a US inspector working there last month

prompted the United States to suspend Mexican exports of the fruit for more than a week.

Last month, an armed attack in the state believed to be the result of a gang dispute was reported to have killed up to 17 people at a wake. The attack was believed to be motivated by 'revenge' by one cell of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel against another, deputy security minister Ricardo Mejia said.

The government said it was unable to confirm the death toll because no bodies were found, although DNA samples of 11 possible victims were collected at the site. Mexico has been trapped in a spiral of cartel-related violence since 2006, when the government launched a controversial anti-drug operation with federal troops.

There have been more than 340,000 murders since then, most of them blamed on fighting between criminals, according to official figures. Earlier this month gunmen killed nine people in an attack on a house in central Mexico, in an 'execution' of six men and three women that shook a middle-class area of the usually peaceful town of Atlixco.

AFP

N Korea vows to build 'unstoppable' power

Seoul, South Korea - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has vowed to build up 'overwhelming' and unstoppable military power, state media reported Monday, days after he presided over the nation's biggest missile launch.

Kim's comments follow Pyongyang successfully carrying out the launch in defiance of crippling international sanctions on Thursday, the first time the North has fired an intercontinental ballistic missile at full range since 2017. Known as the Hwasong-17, the powerful ICBM was first unveiled in October 2020 and dubbed a 'monster missile'



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (left) walks around Hwasong-17 before its test launch in an undisclosed location in North Korea last week (AFP)

by analysts.

"Only when one is equipped with the formidable striking ca-

pabilities, overwhelming military power that cannot be stopped by anyone, one can prevent a war,

guarantee the security of the country and contain and put under control all threats and blackmails by the imperialists," Kim told workers involved in the launch, KCNA reported.

"We will continue to attain the goal of reinforcing national defense capabilities."

The missile launched Thursday - one of nearly a dozen North Korean weapons tested this year - appeared to have travelled higher and further than any previous ICBM tested by the nuclear-armed country, including one designed to strike anywhere on the US mainland.

Analysts say the successful

launch may have emboldened Kim's confidence that his country is on the right track to achieving nuclear deterrence and that more such tests should be expected. Long-range and nuclear tests were paused when Kim and then US president Donald Trump engaged in a high-profile bout of diplomacy that subsequently collapsed in 2019. Talks have since stalled.

The launch comes at a delicate time for the region, with South Korea going through a presidential transition until May, and the US distracted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

AFP

Macron's rivals turn up volume 2 weeks from vote

Paris, France - Candidates in France's looming presidential election are pushing to make themselves heard over the war in Ukraine, as polls suggest incumbent Emmanuel Macron remains the clear favourite to win.

Buoyed by his shuttle diplomacy and toughness on Moscow since its troops invaded Ukraine, the president is riding high with two weeks to go before polling, but has faced accusations of ducking real debate.

Questioned on Sunday on his meagre campaigning, a testy Macron told broadcaster France 3 that 'no one would understand at a moment when there's war' if he was out electioneering 'when decisions have to be made for our countrymen'.

Short of a major upset at the April 10 first-round vote, Macron's opponent in the runoff will be far-right National Rally leader Marine Le Pen - a repeat of five years ago.

But her far-right rival Eric



An employee of a display company pastes the official campaign posters for the French presidential election, in Saint-Herblain, near Nantes, western France, on Monday (AFP)

Zemmour, conservative Valerie Pecresse and left-winger Jean-Luc Melenchon still hope they can break out from the pack to reach the second round on April 24. "Everything could be decided in the two weeks to come," with four in 10 likely voters still undecided, Adelaide Zulfikarpasic of the BVA Opinion polling group told AFP.

Brawl on the right

Former columnist and TV commentator Zemmour on Sunday rallied thousands waving French flags near the Eiffel Tower. He urged more energy from his supporters after a speech hitting familiar notes of nostalgia for past French greatness and swipes at assimilated immigrants.

"We've still got 14 days left,

it's an eternity," Zemmour insisted, claiming to be 'the only candidate on the right'.

Now trailing below 10 per cent in some polls, Zemmour is far short of Le Pen's roughly 20 per cent and Macron at close to 30.

Le Pen strove to project serenity as allies - including her niece Marion Marechal - deserted her for the tougher-talking Zem-

mour. Instead Le Pen has pounded the pavements campaigning on French streets and market squares, and on Sunday again sought to cast herself as more mainstream and competent than her rival.

"Eric Zemmour's programme is brutal in form but very limited in substance, whereas I have a draft law ready to be passed" on Islam and immigration, she told weekly newspaper *Le Journal du Dimanche* on Sunday.

Senegal's ambassador to France meanwhile denounced Zemmour's 'racism' after the candidate claimed during a visit to a drugs-hit part of the capital on Friday that most of the dealers were Senegalese and should be deported. With Zemmour and Le Pen slogging it out for the hard-right and Macron sounding pro-business and law-and-order notes, conservative Valerie Pecresse has struggled to make herself heard.

AFP

Historic meet of US, Arab, Israel envoys held

The foreign ministers of the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Egypt met on Israeli soil for the first time

Sde Boker, Israel - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the top diplomats of Israel and four Arab states held a landmark meeting on Monday to discuss issues from the Iran nuclear negotiations to the global shock-waves of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The talks brought together for the first time on Israeli soil the foreign ministers of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco - which all normalised ties with the Jewish state in 2020 - and of Egypt, which made peace with Israel in 1979.

Its late-Sunday opening, in the Sde Boker kibbutz deep in the Negev desert, was marred by a shooting attack in northern Israel that killed two police officers.

And early on Monday, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's office confirmed he had caught COVID, a day after he held closed-door meetings with Blinken, followed by joint press conference without masks.

The State Department said Blinken, who was out jogging in the Negev early on Monday, was the only member of the US delegation considered a 'close contact' of Bennett's and that he would follow public health guidelines 'including by masking and undergoing appropriate testing'.

The Negev meeting takes place as the United States and



(L-R): Foreign Ministers Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani (Bahrain), Sameh Shoukry (Egypt) and Yair Lapid (Israel) pose with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and FMs Nasser Bourita (Morocco) and Sheikh Abdullah al Nahyan (UAE) following their meeting in Sde Boker on Monday (AFP)

European allies have expressed quiet frustration that Middle East countries generally have not shown strong support for efforts to back Ukraine following Russia's invasion and have not distanced themselves from Moscow. But Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas rebuffed any pressure to criticise Russia, instead castigating the West for 'double standards' that he said penalised Moscow while ignoring Israel's 'crimes' against the Palestinians. "The current events in Europe have shown blatant double standards," he told

Blinken on Sunday. "Despite the crimes of the Israeli occupation that amounted to ethnic cleansing and racial discrimination... we find no one who is holding Israel responsible for behaving as a state above the law," he said.

Iran nuclear deal

The talks on restoring the 2015 Iran nuclear deal were high on the agenda in meetings Blinken held on Sunday with Israel's Bennett, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and President Isaac Herzog.

Speaking alongside Lapid, Blinken said the US believes

restoring the agreement is 'the best way to put Iran's (nuclear) programme back in the box' after the US withdrew from the deal under former president Donald Trump in 2018.

The European Union's foreign policy chief said at the weekend that an agreement with Iran to restore the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action could be reached 'in a matter of days'.

Blinken stressed that 'when it comes to the most important element, we see eye-to-eye' with Israel. "We are both committed, both determined, that Iran will

never acquire a nuclear weapon."

Lapid said the two sides 'have disagreements' about the deal, whose restoration is in the final stages of negotiation in Vienna after almost a year of on-and-off talks. But 'open and honest dialogue is part of the strength of our friendship', Lapid said. "At the same time, Israel will do anything we believe is needed to stop the Iranian nuclear programme."

Terror group listing

Bennett, after his meeting with Blinken, said Israel was specifi-

Israel-Arab alliance deters Iran, says Israeli FM Lapid

Sde Boker, Israel - The deepening alliance between Israel and several Arab states 'intimidates and deters' Iran, Israel's Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said on Monday as he hosted an unprecedented meeting with four Arab foreign ministers. "This new architecture, the shared capabilities we are building, intimidates and deters our common enemies - first and foremost Iran and its proxies," Lapid said.

"They certainly have something to fear."

UAE and Bahrain formed ties with Israel under the Abraham Accords, brokered by former US president Donald Trump. Morocco then re-established relations with Israel under a separate

Trump-brokered agreement.

Israeli leaders have argued that the normalisations highlight a changed Middle East, where Arab leaders are no longer compelled to keep a distance from Israel so long as its conflict with the Palestinians remains unsolved.

The Abraham Accords infuriated the Palestinians, who argued that they marked a betrayal of a decades-old Arab League consensus against dealing with Israel until it agreed to the establishment of Palestinian state, with its capital in east Jerusalem.

Blinken has voiced strong support for the Abraham Accords, negotiated by the previous US administration.

AFP

cally concerned that the United States could meet one of Iran's reported demands - to remove its designation of the country's powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a 'foreign terrorist organisation'.

Speaking in Doha on Sunday, Robert Malley, the principal US negotiator for the Iran nuclear talks, played down that issue,

noting that in any agreement the IRGC would remain under heavy US economic sanctions.

In Israel on Sunday, Blinken also discussed strategies to ensure calm this year during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Christian Easter celebrations and the Jewish Passover holiday, which overlap.

AFP

Israel arrests 5 suspects after IS attack

Jerusalem - Israeli authorities have arrested five suspects following an attack claimed by the Islamic State group that killed two policemen, the police said on Monday.

The officers were shot dead on Sunday in the northern Israeli city of Hadera as the Jewish state hosted a landmark meeting of top US and Arab diplomats.

Five people were also wounded when the gunmen opened fire at the police and passers-by in Hadera attack - the second since Tuesday linked to the militant group.

The police officers killed were identified as Shiriel Aboukrat, a French-Israeli citizen, and Yazan Falah. They were both 18 years old. Their funerals were to be held later in the day.

A security source said the two gunmen were Israeli Arabs from the northern Arab-populated town of Umm al-Fahm.

Police said they were identified by Israeli intelligence as local IS operatives and killed by counterterrorism officers who hap-



Israeli security forces gather at the site of the attack in the northern city of Hadera on Sunday (AFP)

pened to be nearby.

Israeli police, in cooperation with the domestic Shin Bet security agency, carried out raids in the Umm al-Fahm.

"Three suspects were arrested there early on Monday on suspicion of membership in a terrorist organisation," a police statement said.

The two other suspects were captured elsewhere, the police said, adding that weapons and books linked to IS were seized.

IS, in a rare claim of an attack inside Israel, said the assault was carried out by one of its commandos.

On Tuesday, a man wielding a knife stabbed several people and ran over another in southern Israel, killing four, in one of the deadliest attacks in the country in recent years.

Authorities identified the attacker as an Israeli Arab who had previously been convicted for supporting IS.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who travelled to Hadera on Sunday, said in a tweet: "A second attack by ISIS (IS) supporters inside Israel requires the security forces to quickly readapt to this new threat."

Arab-Israeli lawmaker Mansour Abbas denounced the deadly attack in a statement saying: "Heinous terrorism by ISIS does not represent Arab society in Israel."

AFP

Myanmar's Suu Kyi 'in quarantine' after staff tests COVID-19 positive

Yangon, Myanmar - Detained former Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi has skipped three days of her trial in a junta court after COVID-19 was detected among her staff and she was placed in quarantine, a source with knowledge of the case said on Monday.

The 76-year-old's civilian government was ousted in a coup last year that triggered mass protests, and she faces a raft of charges that could see her jailed for more than 150 years.

Currently on trial for alleged corruption, breaching Myanmar's official secrets act and pressuring the election commission, Suu Kyi has not appeared in court since last Thursday, the legal source told AFP.

"Some people in her company have been infected by COVID-19... and so she's kept in quarantine, although she's not infected," the source said.

"We are worried because we haven't been able to see her."



This file photo shows Aung San Suu Kyi wearing a face shield and mask as she attends an election event in Naypyidaw on September 8, 2020 (AFP)

Former president Win Myint - charged alongside Suu Kyi - appeared at the court on Monday via video conferencing.

Suu Kyi and her personal staff have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 since being taken into military custody, her lawyer told AFP last July.

She missed a hearing in September due to illness, and in October, her lawyer said her health had suffered from her frequent

appearances before the junta-run court. Journalists are barred from the proceedings in the military-built capital Naypyidaw, and her lawyers have been banned from speaking to the press. Suu Kyi was previously sentenced to a total six years in jail for incitement against the military, breaching COVID-19 rules and breaking a telecommunications law.

AFP

Eastern half of Shanghai in lockdown to curb coronavirus outbreak

Shanghai, China - Millions of people in China's financial hub were confined to their homes on Monday as the eastern half of Shanghai went into lockdown to curb the country's biggest ongoing COVID-19 outbreak.

The move, announced late on Sunday, caused a run on grocery stores by residents who have become exasperated with authorities' inability to snuff out the outbreak despite nearly three weeks of increasingly disruptive measures.

Authorities are imposing a two-phase lockdown of the city of about 25mn people to carry out mass testing.

The government had sought to avoid the hard lockdowns regularly deployed in other Chinese cities, opting instead for rolling localised lockdowns to keep Shanghai's economy running.

But Shanghai has in recent weeks become China's COVID

hotspot, and on Monday another record high was reported, with 3,500 new confirmed cases in the city.

The area locked down on Monday is the sprawling eastern district known as Pudong, which includes the main international airport and glittering financial centre. The lockdown will last until Friday, then switch to the more populated western Puxi section, home to the historic Bund riverfront.

The government said the steps were being taken to root out infections 'as soon as possible'. The unpredictable neighbourhood-level measures employed in recent weeks have left many citizens frustrated with repeated, brief confinements at home.

Some complained on Monday that only several hours' notice was given for the new, larger lockdown.



A woman drives a scooter down a quiet street in Yangpu district, in Shanghai on Monday (AFP)

"We really don't understand Shanghai's management and control measures. There has indeed been some inconsistency," said a 59-year-old man who

gave only his surname Cao as he queued to buy groceries.

"After so much time, (the city) is not controlling the virus and the numbers are still going

up," Cao said.

The government has not specified any impact on Shanghai's main international airport or its bustling seaport.

'Not optimistic'

China largely kept the virus under control for the past two years through strict zero-tolerance measures including mass lockdowns of cities and provinces for even small numbers of cases.

But Omicron has proven harder to stamp out.

China has reported several thousand new daily cases for the past two weeks. Those numbers remain insignificant globally but are up sharply from fewer than 100 a day in February.

Tens of millions of residents in affected areas across China have been subjected to citywide lockdowns in response.

But as Shanghai has struggled, some cities have made progress.

The southern tech manufacturing hub Shenzhen - which locked down earlier in the current outbreak - announced that normal business activity was re-

summing on Monday as new cases have dropped. "I didn't think it will be so serious (in Shanghai)," said resident Guo Yunlong, 24.

"Every single detailed aspect of our lives from clothing, food, living and commuting has been affected. I don't feel optimistic, to be honest."

Some online posts complained of the impact on elderly Shanghai residents who may not know how to order supplies online. Other users accused Shanghai - which is envied by other cities for its wealth and cosmopolitan image - of putting its desire to maintain normality over health concerns.

Chinese authorities have watched nervously as a deadly Hong Kong Omicron surge sparked panic buying and claimed a high toll of unvaccinated elderly before later surging in mainland China.

AFP

OSCARS 2022

‘CODA’ TRIUMPHS AT OSCARS



(L-R) Canadian actress Amy Forsyth, US actor Daniel Durant, Mexican actor Eugenio Derbez, British actress Emilia Jones, and US actress Marlee Matlin, winners of best picture for CODA

RED WAS THE STANDOUT COLOUR OF THE NIGHT, SEQUINS WERE PLENTIFUL, AND THE MEN OF TINSELTOWN SHOWED UP WITH SOME DARING COLOUR CHOICES AND ‘STRIKING’ ACTION AT THE 94TH ACADEMY AWARDS AT THE DOLBY THEATRE

The 94th Academy Awards ceremony, presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), honoured the best films released between March 1 and December 31, 2021, at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles yesterday. The ceremony, jointly hosted by Regina Hall, Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes, witnessed some real fervour and fireworks that will go down in Oscar history.

The glittering ceremony, wherein red was the standout colour, also saw the hue reflected in the face of comedian Chris Rock who was slapped onstage by best actor-winner Will Smith for making a joke about his wife.

Seeking to reassert its relevance after a year of silence due to the pandemic, the Academy Awards gala was packed with big musical performances but will enter the history books for the shocking Smith-Rock altercation, which changed the mood of the night before the final prizes were announced.

Deaf family drama *CODA* won best picture honours at the Oscars, the first ever triumph for a streamer. A feel-good indie drama, starring deaf actors in lead roles which had been presumed a longshot for Hollywood's biggest prize until very recently, pulled off a remarkable late surge to emerge triumphant.

The film bagged the historic prize for Apple TV+, a relative newcomer in a streaming market dominated by rivals like Netflix. "Thank you to the Academy for letting our *CODA* make history tonight," said producer Philippe Rousselet.

Taking its title from the acronym for 'child of deaf adult', the movie also won for best adapted screenplay, and best supporting actor for Troy Kotsur, who plays the father of a teenage girl who can hear and wants to pursue a career in music. Kotsur dedicated his golden statuette to the deaf and disabled communities, saying, "This is our moment."

Jessica Chastain won best actress for *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, in which she played a real-life televangelist who became an unlikely champion for the LGBTQ community.

"We're faced with discriminatory and bigoted legislation that is sweeping our country... In times like this, I think of Tammy and I'm inspired by her radical acts of love," she said.

Art imitates life
But Tinseltown's biggest night was dominated



(From left) Jared Bush, Byron Howard, Yvett Merino, and Clark Spencer accept the award for Best animated feature film for *Encanto* onstage



Japanese director Ryusuke Hamaguchi (C) poses with the award for Best International Feature Film for *Drive My Car*, alongside the cast

by a shocking moment in which Smith - who won best actor for his work on *King Richard* slapped Rock on stage, before returning to his seat alongside his wife Jada Pinkett Smith and shouting profanities, forcing the producers to bleep out several seconds of audio from the televised broadcast in the United States.

Rock, presenting the best documentary prize, had compared Jada's tightly cropped hair to Demi Moore's appearance in the film *G.I. Jane*. (Jada suffers from alopecia, a condition causing

hair loss.) The moment left stunned viewers questioning if it had been scripted or genuine.

When he returned to the stage to accept his award, a tearful Smith, however, lamented, 'people disrespecting you' in Hollywood, and apologised to the Academy and 'all my fellow nominees'.

Smith, who plays the father of tennis greats Serena and Venus Williams in *King Richard*, added, "Art imitates life. I look like the crazy father, just like they said about Richard

Williams." Los Angeles police said they were aware of the incident but that Rock had not filed a police report. The Academy tweeted that it does not condone violence of any form.

Diverse characters
Until recently, it had appeared that dark, psychological Western *The Power of the Dog* was set to earn Netflix its much-coveted first best picture statuette. As it turned out, the film won only best director for Jane Campion.

She is only the third woman to do so in Oscars history, just a year after Chloe Zhao became the second (*Nomadland*). Kathryn Bigelow was the first for *The Hurt Locker*.

Kenneth Branagh triumphed for best original screenplay for his childhood-inspired *Belfast* - another presumed best picture frontrunner. Ariana DeBose won best supporting actress for playing Anita in *West Side Story*, and Disney's *Encanto* was named best animated feature.

DeBose, who first made her name on Broadway, celebrated her historic win for 'an openly queer woman of colour, an Afro-Latina'. Yvett Merino, producer of Colombia-set *Encanto*, said she was so proud to be a part of a film that put beautiful, diverse characters in front and center.

Summer of Soul won best documentary for musician Questlove's first movie about the huge Black Woodstock festival that took place in 1969 Harlem.

Japan's *Drive My Car*, a Japanese arthouse film based on a short story of the same name by Haruki Murakami, was named Best International Film.

Powerhouse music
Pop megastar Beyonce began the televised broadcast with her nominated tune from *King Richard*, from the Compton courts where Serena and Venus trained as girls. But the award for best original song went to Billie Eilish for her *James Bond* theme song *No Time to Die*.

In another musical highlight, viral sensation *We Don't Talk About Bruno* was performed live, with Megan Thee Stallion adding an Oscars-themed verse to the *Encanto* hit song.

Hosts Wanda Sykes, Amy Schumer and Regina Hall were in their element inside the Dolby Theatre - where the Oscars returned after a year away due to the pandemic - with an opening skit that poked fun at everything from



Will Smith (R) slaps US actor Chris Rock onstage

sexism in Hollywood to Florida's 'Don't say gay' bill.

"This year, the Academy hired three women to host because it's cheaper than hiring one man," said Schumer.

Sci-fi epic *Dune* ended the night with the most wins, earning six in craft and technical categories - best sound, score, editing, production design, visual effects and cinematography.

No tributes for Indian legends
The annual 'In memoriam' paid tribute to cinematographer Halyna Hutchins, who was shot dead by Alec Baldwin in a tragic accident on the set of Western *Rust* last year. Recently deceased Hollywood greats also honoured in the segment included Sidney Poitier - the first black man to win best actor.

The segment, however, failed to honour the work and memory of two iconic Indian legends who passed away recently - thespian Dilip Kumar and veteran singer Lata Mangeshkar. Kumar had passed away on July 7, 2021 while Mangeshkar died on February 6 this year, both of whom had significantly contributed to Indian cinema with their timeless works of film and music.

The gala, however, held a moment's silence for Ukraine, while presenter Mila Kunis - who was born in the country - said it was 'impossible not to be moved' by the resilience of those facing such devastation. Several attendees were also seen wearing blue ribbons reading #WithRefugees.

AFP

BEST DIRECTOR

BOLD & dutiful



about a mute pianist, which went on to win three Oscars, including best screenplay for Campion.

As well as features, she has branched out into documentaries, producing *Abduction: The Megumi Yokota Story* (2006) about a Japanese student kidnapped by North Korea in 1977.

From the outset, Campion said she wanted to bring 'a feminine vision' to her art, a rarity in the male-dominated industry.

She was also unafraid to call out sexism in the film world, expressing frustration when her 1993 Cannes win did not usher in a new wave of successful women auteurs.

Decades on, directors such as Sarah Gavron (*Brick Lane*) credit Campion with inspiring the belief they too could forge a career in film. Benedict Cumberbatch, a best actor nominee for his role in *The Power of the Dog*, described Campion as a key icon of the women's movement.

"She's a great filmmaker and a very powerful woman in our industry. She handles it all so adeptly, and she's so ridiculously humble about it," he told reporters in Venice last year, where Campion was awarded the Silver Lion for best direction.

Campion sparked controversy this awards season with an offhanded comment she made about tennis legends Venus and Serena Williams in accepting a Critics Choice Award, noting that they don't "play against the guys as I have to." She apologised for her 'thoughtless' comment the next day.

AFP

OSCAR WIN CAPS DIRECTOR JANE CAMPION'S TRIUMPHANT HOLLYWOOD RETURN AFTER A DECADE

After shunning Hollywood for more than a decade, pioneering New Zealand filmmaker Jane Campion has conquered Tinseltown on her own terms by winning the best director Oscar for her sweeping, moody Western *The Power of the Dog*.

The brooding examination of toxic masculinity involving feuding brothers on a 1920s Montana ranch marks a departure for Campion, who is best known for portraying emotionally complex female protagonists.

She is only the third woman to take the golden statuette for best director in the ceremony's more than 90-year history, after Kathryn Bigelow and Chloe Zhao, and is the first to be nominated twice for the honour.

"I love directing because it's a deep dive into story, yet the task of creating a world can be overwhelming," Campion told the audience at the Dolby Theatre.

The Power of the Dog was an immediate hit with critics and snared a total of 12 Academy Award nominations, creating a similar arthouse-turned-mainstream buzz to Campion's breakthrough feature *The Piano* at the 1994 Oscars. However, Campion's win was the film's only one of the night.

The project was a major success for Netflix, and Campion's win marks the second in this category for the streaming giant, after Alfonso Cuarón for *Roma* in 2019.

"Netflix is not what I would have wanted historically, but they're a little like the Medicis of our time," the 67-year-old had told the Los Angeles Times late last year. "The people at the top do love cinema, they want to see good things."

Campion made cinematic history as the first woman to win a Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival in 1993 for *The Piano*. But she walked away from feature films after 2009's *Bright Star*, disillusioned with the gender inequality and lack of creative freedom she said she had experienced in the movie-making world.

Instead, Campion turned to television with *Top of the Lake*, a slice of rural Kiwi Gothic that was a hit with critics and audiences alike.

A very dark time

She was lured back to the big screen by the prospect of

adapting Thomas Savage's 1967 novel *The Power of the Dog*, a tale of repressed homosexuality in the American West of the early 20th century.

"It was such a tight little beast I couldn't stop thinking about it. I was actually haunted by it," she said.

A factor in Campion's return to features was that the #MeToo movement has rendered the film world a far different place than the one she experienced in the 1990s.

"The #MeToo movement changed everything," she said. "I think it was a very dark time in the late 90s up to about 2015... (Now,) I think, women are doing so well. It's no longer charitable to be employing women. That's the big change. We want to be recognised because we are really good!"

Born in Wellington, the second of three children, Campion grew up in a theatrical family in the New Zealand capital.

Despite this early exposure - her mother was a writer and actress, her father a theatre director and producer - Campion did not set out to become a film-maker. Instead, she studied



Jane Campion with her daughter Alice Englert

It's no longer charitable to be employing women. That's the big change. We want to be recognised because we are really good!

JANE CAMPION

for a degree in anthropology in New Zealand before concentrating on art in both, London and Sydney.

Only later did Campion find her calling at the Australian Film Television and Radio School between 1981 and 1984.

Ridiculously humble

Her early career was closely linked to Cannes. She won best short film there with *Peel* in 1986 and gained exposure for first features *Sweetie* and *An Angel at My Table*.

The annual gathering on the French Riviera also provided early recognition for *The Piano*, the New Zealand-set movie

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NORTH MACEDONIA GAME 'MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH', SAYS RONALDO



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo attends a training session at the Dragao stadium in Porto on March 28 on the eve of the World Cup 2022 qualifying final first leg match against North Macedonia.

Porto, Portugal - Portugal's World Cup play-off against North Macedonia on Tuesday is a "matter of life and death", said Cristiano Ronaldo ahead of the game.

Manchester United star Ronaldo is hoping to qualify for a fifth World Cup with Portugal and secure another chance to lift the trophy for the first time at the age of 37.

The winners of the match in Porto will book a spot at this year's finals in Qatar.

"The team is quite confident, I feel all the players are ready," Ronaldo told a press conference on Monday.

From my point of view it's going to be an extremely tough game because if the Macedonians are here it's because they deserve to be

CRISTIANO RONALDO



"For us, this game is a matter of life and death, we are aware of its importance and I take this opportunity to appeal to the supporters to give us incredible support tomorrow."

Portugal would have likely been expecting to face Italy in the play-off final, but the European champions slumped to a shock 1-

0 home defeat by North Macedonia last week.

The Macedonians also claimed a surprise away victory over Germany earlier in the qualifying campaign.

"We're playing North Macedonia and of course people think it's going to be an easier opponent," admitted Ronaldo.

"From my point of view it's going to be an extremely tough game because if the Macedonians are here it's because they deserve to be.

"North Macedonia are a very organised team, but if Portugal are at their best, they beat any team in the world."

Ronaldo, the all-time record goalscorer in international football, will be 41 by the time of the 2026 World Cup in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

But the Portugal captain would not say if Qatar would be his last opportunity to play at football's showpiece event.

"The one who will decide my

future is me," he said.

"If I want to play more, I play, if I don't want to, I don't play. Period."

Portugal coach Fernando Santos has previously hinted that he will step down from the role if his team fail to qualify for the first time since 1998.

"If we think that, theoretically, the Macedonians are weaker, we are on the wrong track, it's the worst possible scenario," said the 67-year-old, who has been Portugal boss since 2014 and led them to Euro 2016 glory. We have to face North Macedonia as we would have faced Italy."

AFF



This combination of pictures shows Poland's Robert Lewandowski (L) and Sweden's forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic

Lewandowski, Ibrahimovic seek World Cup place as Poland, Sweden clash

Chorzów, Poland - Either Robert Lewandowski or Zlatan Ibrahimovic will miss out on the chance to play at the 2022 World Cup when Poland and Sweden clash in Tuesday's play-off. The winners in Chorzow will go into Friday's draw for the World Cup group stage.

It could be the final chance to play at a World Cup for Swedish striker Ibrahimovic, who will be 41, and Poland's Lewandowski, who will be 34, when the finals kick off in Qatar this November.

"A World Cup without Zlatan is not a World Cup," said Ibrahimovic. The veteran has endured an injury-blighted season and last played a full 90 minutes for his club AC Milan in January.

Sweden coach Janne Andersson said that Ibrahimovic "is a weapon for us" as a substitute, but "can't play the whole game".

In contrast, Bayern Munich's Lewandowski is in stellar form having scored 50 goals for club

and country this season.

The Poland captain, a back-to-back winner of FIFA's best men's player award, took part in training Sunday after suffering a knee knock last week and is set to start in Chorzow.

There will be an element of seeking revenge for hosts Poland, who lost 3-2 to Sweden in their final Euro 2020 group game last year. Sweden's winning goal by Viktor Claesson in stoppage time in Saint Petersburg knocked Poland out.

"We won last summer, so they (Poland) will no doubt be hungry for revenge," said Sweden playmaker Emil Forsberg.

"It would be great to give them another slap in the face."

Sweden are unhappy that Poland qualified automatically for the play-off final after being handed a bye when UEFA banned their semi-final opponents Russia.

AFF

Unbeaten German boss Flick welcomes Dutch test in Amsterdam

Berlin, Germany - Germany head coach Hansi Flick is relishing the chance to see his team take on fellow European giants the Netherlands in a friendly on Tuesday.

The four-time World Cup winners are hoping to extend an eight-match winning streak since Flick took over in September, with this year's finals in Qatar coming into focus.

The game in Amsterdam is the first time the Germans will meet a former major tournament winner since losing to England in the last 16 of Euro 2020 last June.

"We have the necessary respect for a (Dutch) team who play really good football and have top players. They have enormous quality and are a yardstick for us. We have good players and want to put in our own good performance," Flick said.

Flick wants his young team to gain "more confidence in our own strengths" eight months before the World Cup kicks off.

An experimental side, with Bayern Munich's Jamal Musiala, 19, starting in midfield, brushed aside Israel 2-0 in a friendly Saturday.



Germany's coach Hans-Dieter

Chelsea forwards Kai Havertz and Timo Werner scored in Sinsheim before Bayern's Thomas Mueller hit the post with a late penalty.

Flick will bolster his starting line-up in Amsterdam, with Manuel Neuer returning in goal and Chelsea defender Antonio Rudiger at centre-back.

Musiala is "definitely a consideration" to start again, said Flick. Bayern midfielder Joshua Kimmich is not an option as he awaits the birth of his child.

"Of course, he's torn, he always wants to play, but this is the best decision," said Flick.

AFF

‘Egypt will defend with 16 players against Senegal’

Johannesburg, South Africa - Egypt coach Carlos Queiroz says his team "will defend with 16 players" when they protect a 1-0 lead over Senegal on Tuesday in the second leg of an African World Cup play-off.

"What I mean by 16 players is that each one must make the effort of two players, not just one player," said the Mozambique-born former Real Madrid manager and twice Manchester United assistant manager.

"We deservedly won the first leg against the best team in Africa and now we are going to Senegal to fight for every metre, every loose ball. Every Egyptian must double his efforts."

A play-off that pits Liverpool



Egypt's coach Carlos Queiroz (R) instructs Mohamed Salah during the 2022 Qatar World Cup African Qualifiers match against Senegal

stars Mohamed Salah of Egypt and Sadio Mane of Senegal against each other is a repeat of the recent Africa Cup of

Nations final, which Senegal won on penalties after a 0-0 draw.

The other second leg

matches on Tuesday that will decide which five African teams go to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar include Senegal v Egypt, Nigeria v Ghana, Algeria v Cameroon, and Morocco v DR Congo.

Senegal coach Aliou Cisse says he does not want to see supporters wearing suits in the recently completed Stade du Senegal near Dakar when they confront Egypt.

"We need more fanaticism when it comes to supporting our national team, like they do in Egypt and other north African countries," he says.

"Those who wear suits to football matches must give their tickets to Senegalese sup-

porters who wear football jerseys. We want to see only green, yellow and red (national flag colours) in the stands."

The outcome could hinge on Egypt snatching an 'away' goal - if they do Senegal will face the mammoth task of scoring at least three times to qualify.

New Ghana coach Otto Addo is optimistic that the Black Stars can reach the World Cup despite being held 0-0 at home by Nigeria in the first leg.

"The pressure if off us and on them," he believes. "It was crucial that we did not concede at home and any score draw in the return match takes us through."

AFF

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Manohar, Tewatia see Titans through in close finish



BRIEF SCORES:

Lucknow Super Giants 158/6 in 20 overs (Deepak Hooda 55 (41) 6 x 4, 2 x 6; Ayush Badoni 54 (41) 4 x 4, 3 x 6; Mohammed Shami 25/3) lost to Gujarat Titans 161/5 in 19.4 overs (Rahul Tewatia 40 (24) 5 x 4, 2 x 6; Abhinav Manohar 15 (7); Dushmantha Chameera 22/2) by 5 wickets

TODAY'S MATCH (6PM)



SUNRISERS HYDERABAD

VS



RAJASTHAN ROYALS

Royals, Sunrisers brace for first test of revamped squads

Mumbai, India - By the time Sunrisers Hyderabad and Rajasthan Royals take the field on Tuesday, all other sides would have had a taste of IPL 2022.

Sunrisers will be without Rashid Khan for the first time since 2017, but unlike a batter, a bowler can have an impact for only 20% of an innings, which might give them some respite. If fit, Washington Sundar could do a holding role with the new ball or after the powerplay and there's the seam trio of Bhuvneshwar Kumar, T Natarajan and Umran Malik who offer 12 very different kind of overs.

Bhuvneshwar will search for swing at the top, Natarajan will aim for the yorkers at the death, and Malik will look to beat batters with his raw pace and trouble them with his short ball. Marco Jansen, the tall, left-arm seamer, could be a potent new-ball partner for Bhuvneshwar. The other option for that final overseas slot could be the de-



Captains Kane Williamson (L) of Sunrise and Sanju Samson of Royals

structive West Indies allrounder Romario Shepherd.

For the last few seasons, Sunrisers opted to load up on a top-heavy batting line-up - often with two heavyweight overseas batters at the top, but this time they're expected to open with domestic batters Rahul Tripathi and Abhishek Sharma. Then there's Kane Williamson as a top-drawer anchor, albeit coming off a long-term injury, Aiden Markram who can bat anywhere

in the top five, and Nicholas Pooran who is expected to bring in the fireworks.

Royals have plenty of positives going into the competition apart perhaps from their death-bowling options. Trent Boult can do a job with the older ball, but he is most potent while swinging the new one into the right-hander. Prasidh Krishna will likely partner Boult in the powerplay, and if they can successfully build early pressure, R Ashwin and

Yuzvendra Chahal could capitalise on it to strangle the opposition in the middle overs. How they choose to approach the death overs could be the deciding factor in whether James Neesham plays as the allrounder or Nathan Coulter-Nile.

As far as the top order is concerned, Royals have as good a unit as a team can hope for after an auction. They retained Yashasvi Jaiswal, Jos Buttler and Sanju Samson, and now have Devdutt Padikkal set to bat at No. 3. Rassie van der Dussen, who has enjoyed a purple patch for South Africa in the last nine months or so, and Shimron Hetmyer, who is especially brutal against spin, are probably vying for one spot in the middle. With Samson likely to bat at No. 4, Royals have a potentially devastating top and middle order. Nos. 6 and 7 don't look nearly as imposing, and a lot of hope resides in Riyan Parag.

Espncricinfo



Injury cloud over Mitchell Marsh for IPL participation

Mumbai, India - An injury to Australia allrounder Mitchell Marsh in Pakistan has added to Delhi Capitals' worries for the availability of their overseas players. Marsh was already going to miss Capitals' first three games because of the ODIs and one-off T20I he was picked for, starting Tuesday in Lahore, but the timing of his injury has put a question mark over his availability for the IPL.

If he is ruled out of the tournament, it will have a significant dent on Capitals' resources.

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Saudi Arabia provides thrills on track and disquiet off it

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - Max Verstappen may have led Charles Leclerc across the line to confirm the identity of Formula One's 'new era' protagonists, but Sunday's thrilling Saudi Arabian Grand Prix posed plenty of questions for the future.

The world champion's victory by half a second in a cat-and-mouse duel with his fellow-24-year-old tyro to finish a close contest between the Red Bull and Ferrari teams kept fans and spectators enthralled.

It left few doubting their credentials as this year's main title contenders.

But it was unable to hide a brooding unrest in the pit lane and paddock after a weekend of high-speed crashes, safety and security concerns following Friday's nearby missile attack and an uneasy disquiet over Saudi Arabia's human rights record.

If the close racing, frequent overtaking and swapping of positions signalled the second 'ground effect' era in F1 was delivering the sought-after entertainment levels on track, it also supplied surprises.

The loss of competitiveness of Mercedes, after eight consecutive championship-winning seasons, undermined seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton's hopes at the floodlit Jeddah Street Track and may wreck his bid for a record eighth driver's title. The 37-year-old Briton, who finished 10th, was one of many drivers who spoke in favour of a boycott during four hours of late-



Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen raises his 1st-place trophy on the podium after the 2022 Saudi Arabia Formula One Grand Prix at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit on March

night talks on Friday following the missile attack.

He remained despondent on Sunday night, admitting: "I am so happy this weekend is done.

"I am so happy that everyone is safe. I am just looking forward

to getting out. I just want to go home...."

'A lot of guarantees'

The missile strike at an oil plant within sight of the circuit intensified feelings on human rights --

most recently brought into focus by the Saudi state's execution of 81 men on March 12.

While many drivers were reluctant to voice their views, Hamilton spoke with careful precision about a need to highlight

the issues raised in the paddock about 'sports-washing' and the perils of racing in Jeddah.

F1 management and team bosses, mindful of the commercial aspects of a race worth a reported \$900 million over 10

years, argued that 'the show goes on' and cited local security guarantees. Verstappen made clear the story was not over when he spoke after his first win of the season following a late retirement in Bahrain's

season-opener.

"We had a lot of guarantees that it would be safe, but after this weekend all the drivers together will speak with F1 and the team bosses to see what happens in the future."

The prompt cancellation of the Russian Grand Prix following Russia's invasion of Ukraine showed that F1 can take action and drew attention to the issues surrounding not only Saudi Arabia's role in the seven-year war in Yemen, but also the inclusion of Bahrain on the race calendar.

I am so happy that everyone is safe. I am just looking forward to getting out.

LEWIS HAMILTON

Other events will be examined carefully.

For the sport, having reinvented itself this year as a high-speed high-tech global media entertainment, there is a need to clarify its position as more race promoters jostle to join the feast in a bloated calendar.

More questions are expected at round three in Melbourne next month when Mercedes will hope to have found an answer to their performance problems in a bid to catch Ferrari and Red Bull before it is too late.

AFP

Fruhvirtova, 16, becomes youngest player in Miami fourth round since 2004

Miami, United States - Czech teenager Linda Fruhvirtova on Sunday became the youngest player to reach the last 16 of the Miami Open since 2004 when former world number one Victoria Azarenka retired from their third round match.

The 16-year-old arrived at the tournament with a world ranking of 279 but she dominated the two-time Australian Open winner, racing into a 6-2, 3-0 lead before the veteran Belarusian quit.

Azarenka, 32, who broke down in tears during her defeat to Elena Rybakina at Indian Wells earlier this month, looked out of sorts throughout against the impressive Fruhvirtova.

"I don't know what happened at the end," Fruhvirtova told AFP.

"She was struggling with some injuries. I don't know but it was an honour to share the court with her.

"You never want to end the match this way but it happens. We shook hands and then she walked off."

It was not immediately clear why Azarenka retired although later in the evening the former world no1, who also deleted her social media accounts in the wake of her problems at Indian Wells, released a statement citing personal issues.

"I shouldn't have gone on the court today. The last few weeks have been extremely stressful in my personal life," she said.

"Last match took so much out of me, but I wanted to play in front of a great audience as they helped me pull through my first match. I wanted to go out



Linda Fruhvirtova of Czech Republic serves to Victoria Azarenka of Belarus during the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium (AFP)

there and try but it was a mistake.

"I hope to take a break and be able to come back. I'm sorry to the fans for what happened as you were great to cheer for me. It was the only reason I decided to step on the court. I always look forward to the challenge and pressure of competition but today it was too much. I have to and will learn from this.

"I would like to congratulate my opponent and wish her best of luck in this tournament and beginning of her professional career."

Czech wildcard Fruhvirtova is playing in her first major WTA event.

She had already scored an upset victory over Belgian 24th seed Elise Mertens in the previous round on Friday and remains full of confidence ahead of her fourth round match with Spanish fifth seed Paula Badosa.

"I am just happy to get through. New players are coming in and it's exciting to see young players playing on the tour," she added.

"These matches definitely help your confidence, especially at big tournaments like this. Do I think I can win it? Of course, that's the mindset.

"I am playing to be the best in the world."

AFP



Go-karting racer finishes overall 3rd

Ten-year-old Shonal clinches runner-up spot in final race of UAE Rotax Max Challenge in Al Ain

Muscat - Oman-based go-karting racer Shonal Kunimal capped his season on a high when he clinched the runner-up spot (Micro Max category) in the ninth and final round of the 2021-2022 UAE Rotax Max Challenge at the Al Ain Raceway International Kart Circuit in Al Ain, UAE, recently.

The runner-up spot also secured the ten-year-old Indian School Ghubra student an overall third place in the championship standings.

The overall podium finish coupled with a second-place result in the concluding race of the highly-competitive season was a creditable performance from Shonal, who has been get-

ting little support from teams or corporate sector.

Having met with success over the past four years, the talented go-karting racer had earlier grabbed a third place in the penultimate eighth round.

With only his aunt, Marsleen Qandeel, to cheer him in the final rounds, Shonal thanked his coach, Sanad al Rawahi, for guiding him through a zoom call.

It was the fourth successive podium finish for Shonal, and sixth in the season, underlining his consistency after the initial hiccups in the early rounds. Out of the six podiums he climbed, two were second-place finishes and rest were third.

Russian racer Maxim Bo-



Shonal with his trophy

breshov and favourite was crowned the overall champion while Greek racer Leonidas Peruzzi, who was involved in a close battle with Shonal, took the overall runner-up place.

After nine rounds, Maxim garnered 870 points while Leonidas secured 772. Shonal concluded the season with a total of 717 points.

In the final round of the season, Shonal started in a spectacular fashion to bag first

place in the qualifying. However, a collision with another driver pushed him to sixth position in the pre-final races.

But, the Muscat-based racer displayed lot of grit and fighting spirit to bounce back from P6 to runner-up spot sending a clear signal that he will be in contention in the coming season for the title.

Speaking after finishing runner-up and overall third, Shonal said, "It was a mixed experience in the final round. After a great qualifying, I had to settle for sixth place in pre-final.

"I was determined to fight hard till the last lap. A pep talk from my aunt Marsleen and coach Sanad helped me achieve the second place in the final race. I am happy to end the season with a good result. It will give me good confidence in the next season where my target will be to win races."



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