



**MONDAY, 20 DECEMBER 2021**  
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**25°C/17°C**

**EA OPENS NATURE RESERVES FOR INVESTMENT**  
**GO TO PAGE 03 NATION**

## How one COVID-19 patient infected 46

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

Healthcare workers, especially those on the frontline, are among those most at risk of contracting COVID-19. A study has revealed how one patient infected with the virus in a high dependency unit in The Royal Hospital spread the disease among 46 people - 26 nurses, 12 patients, seven doctors and one paramedical personnel.

In July 2020, an epidemiological investigation was conducted when a patient was diagnosed with COVID-19 infection. The patient had stayed in an open high dependency unit (HDU) cubicle at The Royal Hospital with four other patients for 48 to 72 hours, including 48 hours of non-invasive ventilation (NIV), before COVID-19 diagnosis and implementation of contact and airborne isolation precautions. NIV is the use of breathing support administered through a face mask, nasal mask or a helmet.

According to the study, published in *Oman Medical Journal*, a total of 22 healthcare workers (HCWs) were assigned to the



**60 NEW CASES**

The number of cases is increasing again with 60 new COVID-19 cases reported in the last three days. Health authorities have urged the public to be cautious and follow precautionary measures. No deaths have been reported.

"The total number of cases in Oman has reached 304,843, while the number of deaths stands at 4,113. There are nine patients admitted in health care institutions including two in ICUs," MoH stated on Sunday.

HDU but were unaware of the patient's COVID-19 status at the time of contact and, as a result, were only wearing surgical masks as per hospital policy. All exposed cases were screened by SARS-CoV-2 real-time polymerase chain reaction. A total of 38

HCWs and 28 patients were screened after exposure to the index case, and 46 (69.7 per cent) tested positive for SARS-CoV-2.

"Twenty-two HCWs and four patients (over half of those who tested positive - 56.5 per cent) were in the same cubicle as the

index case and were identified as close contacts with significant exposure. An additional seven patients and 13 HCWs were exposed indirectly through contact with other HCWs or patients in the same ward. Out of the 12 exposed patients, three died from their original disease (two had advanced malignancies and one had terminal cardiomyopathy), while none of the HCWs required hospitalisation," the study found.

The study concluded that knowledge gaps on the potential role of NIV in airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2 may result in serious outbreaks among HCWs if appropriate protective measures are not taken, and could deprive patients of lifesaving procedures due to safety concerns among HCWs. "Following this incident, the hospital issued more regulations to prevent similar ways of contracting COVID-19, including wearing N95 masks when dealing with patients on NIV regardless of their COVID-19 status, restricting NIV use to pre-determined areas, and screening all patients requiring NIV for SARS-CoV-2."

## EDO unveils new brand identity, corporate vision

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

Energy Development Oman (EDO) - the newly established state-owned energy firm to fund the expansion of the Petroleum Development Oman operated Block 6 concession area and the sultanate's energy offerings, including renewables - has launched its new brand identity by unveiling its corporate vision and logo.

EDO was set up in Muscat in December 2020 to take over the government's 60 per cent stake in Petroleum Development Oman's (PDO) Block 6 oil and associated gas, and 100 per cent in its Block 6 non-associated gas and condensate. PDO continues to operate Block 6, and EDO, through PDO, is responsible for the bulk of Oman's hydrocarbon output.

EDO said its vision - 'To be a world-class partner for growth, driving a sustainable energy future' - will guide the business towards achieving its objectives. The company's objectives include: Creating a vehicle for growth, enhancing efficiencies and governance in Oman's oil, gas and new energies sector; alleviating the government's Block



Haifa al Khaifi



6 funding requirements; and unlocking the value through diversification and value chain integration.

In a statement, EDO's interim CEO Haifa al Khaifi said, "EDO's ambitious vision is inspired by Oman Vision 2040 of transitioning to renewables, leveraging world-class development opportunities and maximising value for Oman. The new logo, which was designed by PDO's concept and design adviser Mohammed al Mahrazy, also reflects our approach to energy and sustainabil-

ity, as well as EDO's values of driving forward the energy transition agenda."

Following its establishment through Royal Decree 128/2020, the transfer of the Block 6 oil concession (Royal Decree 21/2021) and the granting of a new Block 6 gas concession (Royal Decree 43/2021), EDO has made substantial progress on its journey to become the country's energy champion and to support the sultanate's economic diversification.

In August 2021, EDO secured US\$2.5bn of financing at competitive rates to meet the funding requirements for Block 6.

New interim appointments to the EDO team have also been announced, including Saif al Harthi as chief financial officer, Aiman al Shukaili as chief strategy and commercial officer, Kahlan al Nabhani as chief corporate planning and services officer, and Dr Qassim al Riyami as chief reserves officer.

Haifa, who has over 25 years of experience in the energy sector and is the first female CEO of a GCC national energy company, said, "These robustly qualified and experienced interim appointees will further energise EDO's progressive journey during this transitional phase."

### NEWS BRIEFS

**UAE ENDS CINEMA CENSORSHIP, INTRODUCES 21+ RATING**

Dubai, UAE - The United Arab Emirates announced on Sunday it will no longer censor cinematic releases, introducing a 21 and above age rating for films it classifies for mature audiences.

The country's Media Regulatory Office said on Twitter that it had introduced a 21+ age category to its motion picture content rating system.

"According to this classification, the international version of movies will be shown in cinemas, with an emphasis on the strict following of age classification standards for audience entry," it added.

**04**



**IMF forecasts GCC economy to grow by 2.5% in 2021**

**10**



**Christmas lockdown in the Netherlands**

## Habsi presents FIFA Arab Cup, citizens hail honour



**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

Oman international goalkeeper Ali al Habsi presented the trophy in the final match of the 2021 FIFA Arab Cup which was held in Qatar on Saturday.

Habsi described the honour given to him to present the Arab Cup as a "gesture of appreciation to me and my country from the International Football Association in this majestic Arab sports event".

The 2021 FIFA Arab Cup was the tenth edition of the Arab world's national team football tournament. It was the first edition under FIFA's jurisdiction. It took place between November 30 and December 18, as a prelude to the 2022 FIFA World Cup which will be held in Qatar.

The tournament phase involved 16 teams, of which seven came through the qualifying round. All 23 teams competing were under the auspices of either the Asian Football Confederation or the Confederation of African Football.

Citizens hailed the honour given to Habsi.

Sayyed Khalid Hamad al Bussaidi, former chairman of Oman Football Association, said, "Ali al Habsi is the pride of Oman and represented Arabs in European stadiums. We thank the organising committee that chose Habsi in appreciation of Oman and his foray in international football. He represented Arabs well throughout his career."

According to Dr Jassem al Shukaili, Habsi deserved the honour. "He has achieved many feats in the field of football at the English, European and Asian levels."

Citizen Ahmed al Balushi thanked Qatar for choosing Habsi to present the cup representing Oman in the first Arab championship under the supervision of FIFA. "We are proud of Habsi; he made us proud in European football."

In the final match on Saturday, Algeria beat Tunisia to win the 2021 FIFA Arab Cup and Qatar beat Egypt in the third-place playoff.

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# SHORTER OR LONGER?

Should Oman consider a shorter workweek like the UAE? Will it help the economy?

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**Naser al Hosni**  
Government employee

It will be a good move for businesses because internationally Sundays are off. The move will benefit us and in the long run, it will improve the economic situation. Some may argue about Friday prayer timings but we can perform the prayers and get back to work or else the timings can be extended to 1.30pm.



**Muna Basheer al Zadjali**  
Private sector employee

We should also consider shortening the standard workweek and if it is handled properly, a move towards a shorter working week will improve social and economic equality, easing our dependence on debt-fuelled growth. Depending on the company and the industry, I'd prefer everyone working Monday to Thursday with a Friday off as it is our religious day.



**Reema Bhatia**  
Teacher

Implementation of this decision depends on the social and economic effects and outcomes. If the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, then a decision can be taken. But this decision cannot be applied to all jobs and commercial activities.



**Nandini Nandakumar**  
Psychotherapist

From my personal opinion, the decision cannot be applied to all jobs and commercial activities, but it can be optional for institutions and companies in the private sector. I do not expect the decision to be implemented in Oman, because the state is keen on the social and religious situation of its citizens and residents.



**Vinod Raghavan**  
Private sector employee

On the contrary, Oman's workforce should put in extra hours rather than think of a shorter workweek. After lockdowns and a slowdown of the economy due to COVID-19, its time to give back to society by working hard. Businesses, especially in places like Ruwi, should be kept open in the afternoon with a short lunch break.



**Mohan Anandan**  
Banking sector employee

Introduction in Oman of a short workweek like the UAE will help in aligning the financial market with the western world. It will add synergy and sync economic activities with the rest of the world, creating more coherence and flexibility, which is bound to attract more investment and more economic activities.



**? NEXT ON YOUR SAY**

**How can Oman make good use of the winter season to improve winter tourism?**

The views stated here are those of the respondents and not endorsed by Muscat Daily. If you feel strongly about the issues discussed here, you can email your comments to muscatdaily@apexmedia.co.om Log on to our Facebook page or tweet us your comments on the issue

# ‘Oman working to determine best ways to help Afghanistan’

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

An exclusive session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to discuss the simmering humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan was held in Pakistan's capital Islamabad on Sunday.

The sultanate participated in the 17th Extraordinary Session of the Ministerial Council of the Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

The delegation of the sultanate was headed by H E Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali bin Issa al Harthy, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry.

The meeting was convened against the backdrop of the aggravating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan.

H E Harthy affirmed in a speech that the Afghan people deserve the world to stand with them at this delicate stage.

He added, "The sultanate is



*Oman is working with the countries of the GCC to determine the best ways to help Afghanistan, and it supports all efforts undertaken by the OIC in this regard*

H E SHEIKH KHALIFA AL HARTHY

working with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council to determine the best ways to help Afghanistan, and it supports all efforts undertaken by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in this regard."

The economic collapse of

Afghanistan, already teetering dangerously on the edge, would have a 'horrendous' impact on the region and the world, successive speakers warned on Sunday at the summit of foreign ministers from dozens of Islamic countries.

The hastily called meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation brought together dozens of foreign ministers with special representatives for Afghanistan of major powers, including China, the US and Russia.

The gathering also included the United Nations undersecretary general on humanitarian affairs, as well as Muhammad Sulaiman al Jasser, president of the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), who offered several concrete financing proposals.

He said IDB can manage trusts that could be used to move money into Afghanistan, jumpstart businesses and help salvage the deeply troubled economy.



## 27 films to be shown at OSFT film festival

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

Twenty-seven films from Oman competed at the first ever short film festival since the outbreak of the pandemic. Organised by Oman Society for Films and Theatre (OSFT) at its premises on Saturday, the event will go on until December 23. All the films will be showcased during the week-long celebration at the society from 7pm to 9pm.

Among the selected films are 11 full length feature films, ten documentaries and many shorts and animation features. The films range from three minutes to as long as 50 minutes.

Sami Sarang, a film-maker

based in Muscat whose film *Shukran Qaboos* has been selected for screening, said, "I am so happy to have my film selected for this prestigious festival. My film speaks about the Late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said and his immense contribution in the development of the country."

Dr Saif Nasser al Maawali, director of the festival said, "The responses have been great and seeing the number of entries we can say that the films sector in Oman is growing at a fast pace."

The festival was inaugurated by H E Ali bin Khalfan al Jabri, Undersecretary for Information in the Ministry of Information.

## RNO CONCLUDES EXERCISE WITH PAKISTAN



The Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) concluded a joint naval exercise (Al Thamar Al Tayeb) with the naval forces of Pakistan, which was carried out from December 13 to 18. The participation of RNO in the exercise was part of the annual training plans and exchange of experiences with friendly countries to sustain the level of readiness of the Omani fleet and its personnel (ONA)

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

## Tangible strategy for tourism sector

Winter tourism is booming in Oman and this is an indication of the promising future of this sector. Recently, 2,100 tourists aboard an international ship were welcomed in Musandam governorate, and Salalah port witnessed the arrival of a ship carrying 1,000 tourists from various nations. This is in addition to the international flights that arrived in Salalah airport last month.

This continuous stream of tourists will revive and move business and the economy forward as they are going to inject and spend money for different services such as hotels, transport, leisure activities and shopping in addition to the government fees.

What we must stress on is developing our tourism services and natural sites to make them even more attractive for visitors and locals alike. We need the concerned authorities to look more

attentively at our public parks, expand their services and provide more entertainment and leisure activities with acceptable standards. For an example, public services during the khareef season are not as they should be, which has made tourists complain repeatedly about the issue. There is need to develop our beaches, water springs and deserts such as Sharqiyah Sands and Rub al Khali.

Oman has great opportunities for investment to boost the national economy. But, the question is - what is the tangible strategy for this sector?

Oman's winter tourism season is a big draw for tourists from around the world and we need to make good use of the situation so as to attract more tourists in large numbers during winter.

Ahmed Barham  
Entrepreneur

# EA opens nature reserves for investment



**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

Environment Authority (EA) is offering three nature reserves for investment with the objective of attracting tourists and supporting eco-tourism projects.

Offering scenic nature, camping facilities and diving sites to enjoy coral reefs and other underwater treasures, nature reserves in Oman are a major tourist attraction.

An EA official said, “As part of its efforts to support the national economy and benefit from nature reserves, the authority has offered a tender for investment in three reserves.”

The three reserves opened for investment are Khor al Dhariz, Khor al Qurm al Kabeer Reserve and Khor Sawli Reserve in the wilayat of Salalah, Dhofar. The authority has called on those interested in investing to submit an action plan for the development

of the three reserves.

“The investor’s plan must comply with the rules of the Environment Authority and the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism. The plan must include details of how the project will be managed, how visitors will be attracted to the three reserves, and credential documents of the investor.”

The EA official informed that the deadline for submission of bids is January 26, 2022.

*A total of 359, 225 people visited the sultanate’s nature reserves in 2019, compared to 305,405 at the end of 2018, marking an increase of 15 per cent*

Regarding EA’s efforts to develop reserves, he said the authority is conducting studies on how best to provide tourism and

entertainment facilities for guests inside nature reserves. “We have over 20 nature reserves through which we aim to preserve biological diversity and promote the sultanate in the world of ecotourism.”

Last month, EA announced a plan to develop a wetland reserve in the wilayat of Mahut, Al Wusta. It aims to achieve environmental sustainability and attract investments for tourism in the reserve through a development plan, which is expected to be completed in 2022.

Earlier in August, EA announced a proposal to convert

Umm A’Tair Island into a nature reserve and name it Musandam National Park.

“Efforts are on to support ecotourism in the sultanate’s nature reserves in a sustainable manner,” the EA official said.

A total of 359, 225 people visited Oman’s nature reserves in 2019, compared to 305,405 at the end of 2018, marking an increase of 15 per cent, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information.



## 27.8% increase in SMEs till October

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

The total number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) registered with the Authority for SME Development till the end of October 2021 stood at 61,340, compared to 47,220 in the same period of 2020, an increase of 27.8 per cent, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

Among the governorates, Muscat topped the list with an increase of 29.2 per cent till the

end of October, followed by North Batinah with 27.5 per cent increase, Dakhliyah 23.8 per cent and Dhofar 29.1 per cent.

The number of SMEs registered in Muscat was 20,422, followed by North Batinah with 9,508, Dakhliyah 7,382, Dhofar 5,088, South Batinah 4,613, North Sharqiyah 3,973 South Sharqiyah 3,624, Dhahirah 3,348 and Buraimi 2,282.

The number of SMEs registered in the governorate of Al Wusta was 801 and 299 in Musandam.

### H E YOUSEF MEETS WORLD BANK OFFICIAL

H E Qais bin Mohammed bin Moosa al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, met Dr Merza Hasan, executive director and dean of board of directors of the World Bank, and several World Bank officials on Sunday.

‘During the meeting, they discussed the challenges posed to the business environment, overcoming these to attract investments and promoting the growth of the SMEs sector,’ a ministry statement said

(Supplied photo)



## New guidelines issued for travel from UAE to Oman

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has issued new guidelines for travel between Oman and the UAE to all airline operators.

A statement issued by the CAA said, ‘Citizens of Oman and

the UAE will register in <https://covic19.emushrif.om/> and upload the COVID-19 vaccination certificate as approved in the sultanate and a negative PCR test result conducted within 14 days of the scheduled time of arrival in Oman.’ Airlines are instructed to verify passengers’ documents before travelling to

Oman and ensure they meet all requirements. ‘Air operators will notify passengers, prior to arrival, to prepare their documents for verification by immigration staff and upon request by airport staff. Operators will be fined in the event of carrying a passenger who does not meet the travel requirements to Oman.’

For vaccinated passengers, documents to be verified by airlines prior to travel to the sultanate include registration in <https://covic19.emushrif.om/>, vaccination certificate, a negative result of PCR test or reservation for PCR test upon arrival.

For unvaccinated passengers, the CAA Circular 20/2021 stipu-

lates registration in <https://covic19.emushrif.om/>, a negative result of PCR test or reservation for PCR test upon arrival in Oman, reservation confirmation for institutional quarantine for all except for Omani citizens and other categories excluded from institutional quarantine.

## Initiative launched to support farmers affected by Cyclone Shaheen

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

With the aim of supporting Omani farmers affected by Cyclone Shaheen, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources launched a new initiative to distribute date palm offshoots.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources distributed a number of date palm offshoots to farmers in the wilayats of Ibri, Yanqul and Dhank in Dhahirah governorate.

*The ministry has made great efforts to support farmers following the tropical cyclone and determined the damages caused in the agricultural, livestock and fisheries sectors*

SALEM AL OMRANI

Salem bin Ali al Omrani, Director General of Agricultural Wealth and Water Resources in Dhahirah governorate, said, “The ministry has made great

efforts to support the agricultural sector. It supported farmers following the cyclone and determined the damages caused in the agricultural, live-

stock and fisheries sectors.

“The specialists in the ministry identified the affected farms and distributed date palm offshoots to support the farmers. The specialists also held workshops to educate farmers and guided them on the optimal ways of farming to achieve the best production.”

Cyclone Shaheen made its landfall in between Musannah and Suwaiq affecting the governorates of North and South Batinah, Buraimi and Dakhliyah on October 3.



**MARKET WATCH**

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| MSX30 | 4,043.10 |
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**FOREX RATES**  
(RO1 equals)

|                  |        |
|------------------|--------|
| Indian Rs        | 196.25 |
| Pakistani Rs     | 463.28 |
| Bangladeshi Taka | 223.17 |
| Philippine Peso  | 128.78 |
| Sri Lankan Rs    | 525.16 |

\*Rates as on December 19  
Source: xe.com

**BRIEFS**

**ECB lowers 2022 growth forecast to 4.2%**

The European Central Bank (ECB) has lowered its growth forecast for eurozone economic growth in 2022 to 4.2 per cent from 4.6 per cent previously, as supply bottlenecks hamper the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

The ECB now expects the eurozone to grow 5.1 per cent this year, up from 5 per cent in the previous forecast, president Christine Lagarde said. Growth in 2023 would be 2.9 per cent, up from the previous forecast of 2.1 per cent, after which the pace would fall to 1.6 per cent in 2024. The ECB is 'very unlikely' to raise interest rates in 2022, Lagarde reiterated, after other central banks moved to combat soaring inflation through rate hikes.

"It is very unlikely that we will raise interest rates in the year 2022," Lagarde said, confirming that the ECB plans to gradually wind down its stimulus bond-purchasing schemes first before moving on rates. Earlier, the Bank of England surprised markets with an unexpected rate hike.

## IMF forecasts GCC economy to grow by 2.5% in 2021

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has projected an overall real GDP growth of 2.5 per cent for the GCC economy for 2021, mainly due to a rebound in non-oil GDP growth this year.

Non-oil GDP in the GCC is expected to grow by 3.8 per cent in 2021, IMF said in a new report released last week.

'A gradual economic recovery is underway. Vaccine-driven normalization and supportive policies have contributed to a partial rebound in non-oil sectors alongside an easing of containment measures,' IMF said.

Non-oil GDP is projected to grow by highest 4.7 per cent in Saudi Arabia in 2021 and by around 3 per cent in Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE.

Non-oil growth is projected to be 1.5 per cent in Oman and 2 per cent in Qatar, according to IMF.

GCC countries' real oil GDP growth, on the other hand, is recovering on the heels of higher global oil demand and agreement at the July OPEC+ meeting to gradually increase monthly oil production starting in August this year, the fund said.

'As a result, real oil GDP for the region is expected to grow by 0.3 per cent in 2021 before increasing to 5.3 per cent in 2022,' it added.

IMF expects Oman's real GDP to grow by 2.5 per cent in



*According to the IMF, Oman's real GDP is expected to grow by 2.5 per cent in 2021 and 2.9 per cent in 2022*

2021 and 2.9 per cent in 2022.

GCC policymakers, IMF said, moved quickly to mitigate the health and economic impacts of twin COVID-19 and oil price shocks. 'Infection rates have declined across the GCC to well below previous peaks, though countries have experienced successive waves of the virus, and economic recoveries have begun

to take hold.'

Despite experiencing successive waves of the virus, IMF noted, infection rates across the GCC have declined to well below previous peaks and the number of fatalities has remained comparatively low.

'Combined announced fiscal measures (averaging 2.3 per cent of GDP) and a range of macro-financial support measures provided relief to hard hit sectors, businesses, and financial systems.

While there are variations in the size, fiscal measures across GCC countries have proven to be significant in easing the burden on households and firms,' IMF said.

The IMF recognized that the

number of COVID-19 cases in the GCC is currently relatively low compared to other regions, despite recent waves of infections.

The COVID-19 pandemic was quickly contained in the GCC through swift policy measures that helped sharply reduce the number of cases by mid-2020,' it added.

The fund warned that there could be long-lasting effects from the COVID-19 crisis on potential GDP and medium-term growth prospects in the region. 'In line with projections for many other emerging economies, growth in GCC countries is expected to remain some 4 per cent below pre-pandemic trends in the medium term, though with

significant variation across countries and the expected rebound in growth is faster in some countries than in others,' the fund said.

Inflation is likely to increase

The IMF said that inflationary pressures have remained contained in the GCC countries but could begin to rise with higher global inflation.

Inflation in the GCC is expected to be contained below 3 per cent on average this year (ranging from Kuwait at 3.2 per cent to Bahrain at 1.0 per cent) and moderate to 2.0-2.5 per cent in 2022.

'Despite the notable increases in import prices this year, headline inflation has so far remained moderate, mainly reflecting lower non-tradable inflation, as demand for non-tradable generally appears subdued in the region,' IMF said.

Oman's consumer price inflation, as per IMF forecasts, is expected to average 3.0 per cent in 2021 and 2.7 per cent in 2022.

The fund expects fiscal balances of GCC nations to improve with higher oil prices. It expects Oman's fiscal deficit to drop to 2.6 per cent of GDP in 2021 and return to surplus of 1.1 per cent of GDP in 2022.

The combination of higher oil prices, economic recovery, and more targeted fiscal support in some countries will improve the GCC overall fiscal deficit to 1.8 per cent of GDP in 2021, reaching balance by 2023, the IMF added.



## Tawoos Industrial wins RO9mn contract

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

Renaissance Services Company on Sunday announced that its 100-per cent subsidiary Tawoos Industrial Services Company (TISCO) has been awarded an over RO9mn worth of contract by Muscat Electricity Distribution Company (MEDC).

'Renaissance Services Company would like to disclose that MEDC has awarded a new three-year contract, starting from January 2022, to Tawoos Industrial Services Company,' Renaissance Services said in a disclosure to the Muscat Stock Exchange.

'The scope of the contract includes the rollout of more than 400,000 smart meters across all three zones of the Muscat Governorate, at a project value of RO9.3mn,' Renaissance Services said.

The contract was signed on Thursday, the company expects reasonable returns from this contract, Renaissance Services added.

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## Global debt reaches record \$226tn in 2020 amid COVID-19

Washington, US - Global debt rose to US\$226tn in 2020 after seeing its biggest yearly increase since World War II, with richer nations doing most of the borrowing, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said.

Global debt now stands at 256 per cent of GDP, a high level that countries across the world will have to consider as they seek to revitalize their economies from the COVID-19 downturn while dealing with new variants such as Omicron.

"The large increase in debt was justified by the need to protect people's lives, preserve jobs and avoid a wave of bankruptcies. If governments had not taken action, the social and economic consequences would have been devastating," IMF officials wrote in a blog outlining the latest update to the Washington-based crisis lender's Global Debt Database.

"But the debt surge amplifies vulnerabilities, especially as financing conditions tighten. High debt levels constrain, in most

cases, the ability of governments to support the recovery and the capacity of the private sector to invest in the medium term."

The global public debt ratio hit a record high of 99 per cent of GDP, and borrowing by governments accounted for more than half of last year's overall increase, while household debt also posted its own record, the IMF said.

Public debt has now reached its highest share of total global debt since the mid-1960s, which the IMF attributed to the policy responses against both the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the 2008 global financial crisis. Wealthier nations made up 90 per cent of last year's debt increase, according to the data, with both public debt and private debt increasing in those countries. Nations with fewer means such as emerging markets and low-income developing countries took on much smaller amounts of about US\$1tn in debt each.

AFP

## MSX rises 0.3% on improved volumes

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) gained 0.31 per cent on Sunday to close at 4,043.11 points. Trading activity at the bourse improved compared to the previous session.

The gains in the MSX30 index were supported by all the sectoral indices.

While Financial index rose 0.18 per cent, Industrial and Services indices inched up 0.01 per cent and 0.16 per cent, respectively.

MSX Sharia index also increased 0.06 per cent to close at 530.43 points.

Total trading volume grew by more than 32 per cent to 24.34mn shares on Sunday compared with 18.37mn shares on Thursday.

Market turnover, however, decreased 21.7 per cent to RO4.75mn against RO6.07mn recorded in the previous trading session.

Market breadth of the MSX remained positive with 11 advancing stocks to nine decliners.

As many as 20 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Among top gainers of the day were Galfar Engineering and Contracting Company (2.74 per cent), Phoenix Power (2.13 per cent), Al Suwadi Power (2.08 per cent), and Ooredoo Oman (1.72 per cent).

Top losers were Al Madina Investment (-9.43 per cent), Dhofar Generating Company (-2.63 per cent), Al Maha Ceramics (-2.04 per cent) and Muscat Finance (-1.82 per cent).

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# Young Arabs swipe to fintech as saving, investing take off

Dubai, US – Being raised in the Middle East with a lack of savings and investment culture, many young Arabs are turning to online banking services to help track their spending and budget.

When Mayar Akrameh was growing up in Lebanon, financial advice was simple: work long, work hard and aim for a high-paying job.

Now the 29-year-old management consultant is one of a growing number of young Arabs who are turning to financial technology, or 'fintech', to help them save and invest, often a neglected practice in the Middle East.

"We're taught that if you're working and making enough money, even if you hate your job, you're good," she told AFP. "Or they think we're good."

Akrameh moved to the United Arab Emirates in 2019 at the start of Lebanon's financial crisis, which would later see the local currency plunge to all-time lows, with many people denied free access to their savings by stringent banking controls.

The region's economic instability, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, has spurred many to turn to online banking and financial tools.

Akrameh, who did not know how to invest and save money when she started generating income, now uses an app to track her spending.

"It's not just about retiring; it's about living better, having dreams, having time to breathe and reflect," she said.

S&P Global said in a 2019 report that indicators showed Gulf



Arab countries appeared the most ready for fintech adoption, with the key driver being demand and a preference by clients for digital banking.

The fintech sector across the Middle East is already growing, according to the Milken Institute think tank.

It estimates that 465 companies will raise more than US\$2bn by 2022 compared with the 30 fintech firms that raised around US\$80mn in 2017.

**'Tough path to wealth'**

In addition to having some of the world's youngest populations and highest unemployment rates, many countries in the Middle East and North Africa rank among the lowest for long-term savers and investors.

Only seven per cent of adults in the region save for retirement, according to the World Bank's

2016 'Saving for Old Age' report – the lowest across global economies.

"Arabs, we took the really tough path to wealth," said Mark Chahwan, the CEO of Sarwa, a Dubai-based automated financial consultancy firm.

"We think our income is what's going to make us rich instead of our capital," he told AFP.

Most oil-rich Gulf Arab states, including top crude exporter Saudi Arabia, have long provided their citizens with government-sponsored pensions.

But Saudi officials have warned the system is unsustainable, according to Bloomberg, as Riyadh tries to diversify its economy away from oil.

Also, such pensions exclude foreigners, many of whom provide cheap labour and make up a large proportion of the population in many Gulf states.

Chahwan said he has noticed a shift in financial behaviour in the past year, in large part due to the pandemic, which devastated many industries and saw many people lose their jobs.

He said there was an 80 per cent increase in new Sarwa accounts since the first quarter of 2020, with up to 45,000 portfolios of people between the ages of 25 and 45.

**Small-ticket investors**

Chahwan said the average user was new to the idea of long-term investment, with many Arabs still hesitant about having to wait for benefits later rather than make quick profits.

"We don't have education that revolves around long-term investing," he said, adding that the obstacle remains convincing eager investors of the benefits of delayed gratification.

Another issue is the region's

investment landscape, which is mostly limited to so-called high-net-worth individuals, usually defined as people with at least US\$1mn in liquid assets.

"If someone wanted to invest US\$1,000 or US\$10,000, there was not much available," said Haitham Juma, an investment solutions manager at the UAE-based National Bank of Fujairah.

He said smaller-ticket investors need wealth management options with more transparency, accessibility and liquidity that will help build the region's investment market.

"We are still at the early stages of it," said Juma, as local banks and firms seek to create online platforms that educate users and simplify investing.

Making the process easier – or even fun – is key to attracting new investors, as outlined by Lune, a UAE-based finance platform that launched in July.

"It doesn't matter their age, their income or their experience," Alexandre Soued, the app's co-founder, told AFP.

He added that the platform's focus is on the initial steps of managing, saving and then investing, and encouraging them to use simple online tools.

Lune allows its nearly 1,000 users to instantly visualise their spending, swipe to optimise savings, and soon, Soued said, they will be able to compare their savings to others their age.

"People are starting to want to be more independent from younger ages," he told AFP.

"And your financial situation is attached to that."

AFP



## Europe's car industry faces worse year than 2020

Paris, France – Europe's automobile industry is facing a worse year than the Covid-battered 2020 with sales falling a fifth straight month amid a global shortage of electronic chips used in new models.

European sales fell back 20.5 per cent year-on-year to 713,346 units, the worst slump since 1993, the European automobile manufacturers association (ACEA) said on Friday.

Although economic activity bounced back relatively strongly in the first 11 months of the year compared with last year, car sales on the continent stagnated, falling 0.04 per cent.

"The impact of the microchip shortage on vehicle output dragged the EU's year-to-date sales performance into negative territory despite 2020's record low base for comparison," the ACEA said in a statement.

Several major markets also saw double-digit falls in November sales – German registrations dived 31.7 per cent, Italian and Polish sales were off by a quarter and Spain and Belgium were down 12.3 and 17.1 per cent while France limited the fall to 3.2 per cent.

Bulgaria, Ireland and Slovenia saw small gains, by contrast.

Taken January-November, three of the four largest EU markets posted gains, even so on 2020, Italy rising 8.6 per cent, Spain 3.8 per cent and France 2.5 per cent.

But Germany saw a fall of 8.1 per cent compared with 2020.

European market leader Volkswagen saw January-November sales drop back 1.6 per cent to 2.2mn with Skoda suffering in particular although strong showings from Seat and Porsche compensated.

Multinational Stellantis, which grew out of the merger earlier this year of PSA and Fiat Chrysler, saw sales for the year to date rise 0.4 per cent to close on two million units.

France's Renault saw sales for the year to date dive 9.9 per cent on sales of 922,000 and Mercedes sales were down 11.6 per cent. Korea's Hyundai-Kia in stark contrast posted a 20.4 per cent gain to 763,000 sales on the year to date while Toyota added 12 per cent.

AFP

## World Bank unveils \$93bn funding for poorest nations

Washington, US – The World Bank's fund to help the world's poorest nations got a US\$93bn injection of cash to help scale up aid for pandemic recovery and other programs, the institution announced.

It was the biggest replenishment ever for the International Development Association (IDA), which provides grants for 74 countries, most of which are in Africa, the Washington-based development lender said.

The package includes US\$23.5bn of contributions from 48 high- and middle-income countries as well as financing raised in the capital markets and the World Bank's own contributions, according to a statement.

"Today's generous commitment by our partners is a critical step toward supporting poor countries in their efforts to recover from the Covid-19 crisis," World Bank President David Malpass said.



The IDA fund is replenished every three years, but because of the pandemic, the latest cash injection was pulled forward by a year and will be in place through June 2025.

The World Bank said the funds will help countries better prepare for future crises, including pandemics, financial shocks and natural disasters.

While the funds will support countries globally, resources are increasingly going to Africa, which will receive about 70 per cent of the funding.

AFP

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# Celebrate Christmas, New Year's Eve at Radisson Blu

The most wonderful time of year is here and Radisson Blu Hotel, Muscat is delighted to host the celebrations with an array of offers for Christmas and New Year's Eve. Bring your friends and family to partake in sumptuous fare, laughs and to make merry with year- end festivities that will make this holiday season truly memorable for you and your loved ones.

For Christmas Eve, enjoy a delicious international buffet with live cooking stations at Olivos restaurant and live music to keep you and your loved ones entertained all night. Or celebrate Christmas Eve with our homemade Italian delicacies, festive specials and our seasonal set menu at La Padella. Starting price from RO15 per guest on December 24 from 6pm to 11pm.

Our special Christmas brunch buffet and live music will spread festive cheer to all while Santa pays a special visit to surprise our little guests. Starting price from RO20 per guest. To add exceptional value, children under 6 years dine for free, while kids be-



tween 6 and 12 get a 50 per cent discount on December 25 from 1pm to 5pm.

Say goodbye to 2021 in style at Olivos restaurant and terrace! Enjoy the latest tunes by our resident DJ, drinks, dance under the stars and an extensive selection

of flavourful international dishes and live cooking stations for RO45 per guest on December 31, from 8pm to 1am.

NYE room package: Join the countdown to 2022 with a one-night stay including NYE's access to events at Olivos or O'Malley's

and breakfast. Starting price from RO86.

Guests can enjoy access to an outdoor pool and gym facilities. Splurge on ultimate relaxation with spa treatments available at the Fontana Health Club & Spa.

# Oman Air growth boosted by codeshare agreements

Oman Air, the national airline of the sultanate, will continue to strengthen strategic codeshare partnership agreements to maximise its post-pandemic growth trajectory. The airline's ongoing recovery calls for greater codeshare connectivity to offers passengers better connections and a wider choice of destinations from its hub in Muscat.

Oman Air has built a healthy network throughout the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent, as well as several cities in Europe, South Asia and Africa in recent years and is focused on growing additional connectivity to North and South America and Australia through strategic codeshares with its 18 partner airlines. These include Ethiopian Airlines, Etihad Airways, Garuda Indonesia, Gulf Air, Royal Dutch Airlines KLM, Kenya Airways, Kuwait Airways, Lufthansa, Malaysia Airlines, SalamAir, Bangkok Airways, Qatar Airways, Royal Jordanian Airlines, Saudia, Thai Airways, Turkish Airlines, Sri Lankan Airlines, and Egyptair. Currently, Oman Air operates 46 codeshare sectors and markets an additional 219 codeshare sectors on six continents through its



partners for a total of 265 sectors.

"Providing access to more destinations underpins our business operations and growth strategy as we gradually emerge from the global pandemic and look for new ways to offer our valued guests greater travel convenience and connectivity," said Eng Abdulaziz al Raisi, CEO of Oman Air. "Together with our codeshare partners, we continue to grow our network reach out of Muscat while offering reciprocal connectivity for passengers flying to the sultanate. Strategic

codeshare agreements make sense at a time when airlines around the world are facing tremendous challenges, and Oman Air understands that now, more than ever, seamless connectivity is a deciding factor for passengers when it comes to booking."

To date, Qatar Airways remains Oman Air's biggest codeshare partner. In December 2020, Oman Air and Qatar Airways announced greater cooperation that would allow both airlines to expand commercial operations.

# Jeep Wrangler 4xe and Grand Cherokee named 'Adventure Vehicles of the Year'

Looking for adventure? Look no further than the Jeep brand's new SUVs, which took not one but two 'Adventure Vehicles of the Year' honours. According to GearJunkie, the Jeep Wrangler 4xe is the 'Best 4x4' and the Jeep Grand Cherokee is the 'Best SUV,' in its annual Adventure Vehicle of the Year awards.

The Jeep Wrangler 4xe, which delivers 49 MPGe and 21 miles of all-electric range via its 375-horsepower, 470-lb.-ft. of torque plug-in-hybrid powertrain, impressed GearJunkie editors with its off-road capability, impressive power and quiet, high-torque powertrain.

"This plug-in hybrid is very much a Trail Rated Jeep, and a near-silent and torquey electric drive is a ton of fun off road," said GearJunkie motors editor Bryon Dorr.

The all-new fifth-generation Grand Cherokee lineup, which for the first time ever includes a three-row option with the new



Jeep Grand Cherokee L, wowed GearJunkie editors with its capability and comfort.

"We got behind the wheel of every trim level, drove both the V-6 and V-8, and experienced both the two- and three-row versions of the all-new Grand Cherokee," said Dorr. "We also got a chance to tow with it, drive hard on curvy mountain roads, and even do a little rock crawling. Needless to say, this new

full-size SUV from Jeep is ready for adventure."

"These awards epitomise why our customers love the electrified Wrangler 4xe and all-new fifth-generation Grand Cherokee so much," said Jim Morrison, vice president and head of Jeep Brand North America. "They're both best-in-class 4x4 SUVs that deliver legendary Jeep capability and that unique adventurous spirit that only comes from a Jeep SUV."

# Celebrate with Hormuz Grand Muscat

Christmas is right around the corner and Hormuz Grand Muscat - winner of the Luxury Contemporary Hotel - Global award at the recent World Luxury Hotel Awards 2021 is all about creating memorable festive experiences and elevating guests' enjoyment to new heights. Indulge in festive themed surroundings, with our beautiful Christmas tree and gingerbread house scene in the lobby whilst enjoying our impeccable service and culinary delights.

Relish in seasonal favourites with us from a take-away turkey, Christmas Eve dinner, to Christmas lunch with family and friends and New Year's events. We are here to cater to all your festive needs. Our world-wide awarded restaurants Qureshi Bab-Al-Hind and OMNY are glitzed up for the season with lavish fare for your NY celebrations.

Christmas celebrations officially began with our traditional



gingerbread house decorating competition and the lighting of our Christmas tree on December 6.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are also very popular at the Hormuz Grand Muscat, and this year the hotel will host a Christmas Eve celebration at OMNY offering lavish culinary selections. Enjoy a 4 course menu, specially curated by our executive chef and his team on De-

cember 24, from 7pm onwards. The price starts at RO26 per guest; a reduced a la carte and children's menu option is also available.

On Christmas Day, the annual lunch offers an exceptional spread of traditional treats, live carving stations, grills and a decadent dessert station. Also a special guest pays a visit to surprise and spread cheer.

Price starts at RO28 per guest on December 25, from 12 noon to 4pm.

Usher in 2022 at our New Year's Eve celebration at Hormuz Grand Muscat! Indulge in a special menu inspired by the season with a celebratory drink offered at OMNY. Set menu prices start from RO35 per guest, with options of a reduced a la carte and children's menu.

Dine under the stars at Oasis terrace and try our extensive buffet featuring a selection of salads, main courses and delectable desserts. Price starts from RO28 per guest.

Ring in the New Year with a truly Arabic experience at Zaiba Ballroom. Special performance by Ahmed Sekmani and Nahwand Band. Price starts from RO35 per guest inclusive of buffet and live performance or enjoy the show with our accommodation package and live performance - starting from RO110 for two guests.

On New Year's Day, start 2022 off on a delicious note with the ultimate brunch at Straits along with unlimited selected drinks from 1pm to 5pm. Price starts from RO25 per guest.

There are also some fantastic accommodation packages to choose from. Check out our spacious guest rooms and elegant suites to bring in 2022 in style with exclusive celebration packages.

All rates are subject to 5 per cent VAT and children between 6-12 years enjoy a 50 per cent discount and kids 5 years and below dine for free.

# Hyundai launches multi-purpose vehicle STARIA in Middle East

Hyundai Motor Company officially launched STARIA, the brand's new multi-purpose vehicle (MPV) line-up in the Middle East and Africa markets via a digital premiere.

The STARIA name combines 'star' and 'ria', in reference to the vehicle's future-oriented product values and streamlined design characteristics defined by one curve gesture silhouettes as well as clean and pure body volume.

STARIA offers a strikingly futuristic and mysterious exterior, resembling a spaceship. The front is highlighted by a long, horizontal daytime running light and headlamps positioned underneath.

STARIA is equipped with various driver-centric features and futuristic design elements that deliver new experiences for drivers and passengers that make time in transit more productive and worthwhile.

Bang Sun Jeong, head of Hyundai Motor Company Middle East & Africa HQs, said, "We are excited to be launching the STARIA Premium in what will be another excellent addition to our portfolio of

vehicles in the region."

"It is characterised by a futuristic exterior design that really makes it look unlike anything else on the road and will provide a completely new experience for customers."

STARIA Premium elevates mobility to the next level with upgraded features and variant-exclusive finishes for a more luxurious look and feel. It features a variant-exclusive tinted brass chrome treatment, applied to the Hyundai emblem, grille, headlamp bezels, front and rear bumpers, wheels, side mirrors and door handles to emphasise the vehicle's premium and modern look.

Lowered beltlines and panoramic side windows improve overall visibility and create a feeling of openness. This sense of spaciousness - inspired by traditional Korean 'hanok' architecture - allows passengers to feel as if the outside scenes are an extension of the vehicle interior.

The driver's seat has a futuristic high-tech look with an advanced 10.25-inch front display screen with the digital cluster located on top of the dashboard,



providing an unobstructed view for the driver and giving the driver space superb operability and practicality.

STARIA Premium models receive Hyundai's unique Parametric Pixel lamp design and garnish on top. The design theme carries over to the rear, featuring a wide window framed by elongated vertical tail lamps. The rear bumper is lowered so passengers can quickly

load and unload cargo.

The 7-seat Premium model is equipped with Premium Relaxation Seats in the second row that recline electronically and have sliding capabilities for easy reach or maximising cargo space. The 9-seat Premium model's individual seats in the second row can swivel 180 degrees to face passengers in the third row.

The flexible seating configura-

tion makes STARIA Premium ideal for corporate vehicles or mobile offices as passengers can turn their seats around and conduct face-to-face meetings. Families will also find these swivelling seats convenient as rear-facing passengers will have easy access to those seated in the third row.

Jeong added, "Designed for both families and businesses, STARIA provides next-level mo-

bility solutions that make time in transit more accommodating, productive and worthwhile."

"It is a step forward in connecting us in a way where we can do more for ourselves in transit and get the most out of our everyday lives."

A 64-colour ambient mood lamp, available in all STARIA Premium variants, provides a lush interior atmosphere. The harmonious direct and indirect lighting can selectively illuminate the cockpit, console, doors and cargo areas. The Bose sound system further enhances the premium feel.

STARIA has a wheelbase of 3,273mm with an overall length of 5,253mm and a width of 1,997 mm, allowing for its innovative interior space utilisation. Its overall height of 1,990mm is optimised for passengers to enter and exit the vehicle conveniently. The cargo space availability varies depending on how the seating configurations are arranged.

STARIA offers powertrain options of a diesel-powered 2.2ltr VGT engine and a petrol-powered Smartstream G6DIII

3.5ltr MPI engine.

The diesel engine is newly improved and mated with either a six-speed manual or eight-speed automatic transmission, delivering an estimated power output of 177 PS and 44 kgf-m of torque. With its high efficiency, the air-cooled turbocharger has an improved compressor and turbine wheel performance for better low speed torque performance.

The petrol-powered G6DIII 3.5-L MPI is mated to an eight-speed automatic transmission, delivering an estimated power output of 272 PS and 33.8 kgf-m of torque. Its integrated thermal management system improves fuel efficiency by optimising coolant temperature control according to vehicle operating conditions.

Standard safety equipment includes 3-point seatbelts, headrests, and the latest airbag technologies to keep everyone aboard well-protected. Safety in the STARIA is further bolstered by smart features such as Forward Collision Avoidance Assist, Blind-Spot Collision-Avoidance Assist, Safe Exit Assist and Smart Cruise Control.

# From simple ideas to successful national brands, talabat celebrates Omani SMEs

As the number of local driven brands is increasing, it's no secret that Omani entrepreneurs are shaking up Oman's F&B ecosystem. They are leading the way with trends and providing the market with new and exciting experiences. From simple ideas, several have become beloved national brands like Dice, Mint and Coco, Amazing Burger, and Ajeen, with many even expanding to include physical outlets.

In Oman, talabat continues to shine the light on these aspirational examples and renew its commitment to help other budding entrepreneurs unlock their full potential. Utilising its wide-reaching platform, it helps them overcome various challenges they could face while also enabling them to expand their online presence and therefore reach as many people as possible.

Mohamed Zourob, managing director of talabat Oman be-



lieves that SMEs are the core of talabat's food delivery service, representing a vital part of the food delivery ecosystem as well as the overall growth and development of the local economy. "Whether it is by providing economic opportunities or addressing the gaps in the market, talabat is always ready to lend a hand to local businesses wherever we can. Beginning our journey as an SME ourselves, we are extremely proud to be part of this community and will continue to look for ways to work collabora-

tively with local businesses, helping them turn their visions into reality," said Zourob.

Hudhaifa al Maimani, CEO of Dice, realised that his best bet to conveniently deliver his business to the market was to operate through talabat's cloud kitchen offering in Oman.

"In 2018, I had a vision to open up my own business, to deliver a unique product to the market and not repeat what was already available. I'm very happy to say that since partnering with talabat, Dice has expanded into three dark kitchens and three physical stores across Oman," added Maimani.

Another celebrated SME is Mint & Coco, which was founded by Loaya al Maamari in 2018. Featuring global cuisine with a twist of Omani flavours, the award-winning business has now opened a second outlet called The Courtyard, a true example of success.

Loaya said, "The advice I would give aspiring entrepreneurs in the food and beverage industry is to do plenty of research! Connect with restaurant owners and experts in other countries and learn from their successes - mistakes as well."

"Always aim to find the right business partners to work with like talabat," she added.

Mohamed al Araimi, founder of Amazing Burger, said, "COVID-19 has been a huge learning curve. During the lockdown period, there was massive demand for takeaways and we did not have enough delivery personnel to accommodate that surge in demand. I had to roll up my sleeves, drive from Sur to Muscat and purchase the ingredients the restaurant required."

Talabat plays a major role in Oman's F&B ecosystem, while leveraging its global expertise to provide an environment of growth.

## Towell Group organises blood donation camp

In coordination with the Central Blood Bank of the Ministry of Health, Towell Group organised a blood donation campaign, at the headquarters of the main office, last Thursday.

The campaign was organised with the aim of promoting the role of private organisations and employees in the humanitarian and community responsibility represented in saving the lives of others.

The event witnessed a noticeable success and turnout from Towell Group's employees, whereby each person donated 450ml of blood.

Regarding this campaign, Hani al Khusaibi, group head of



human resources, said, "This campaign comes within the social responsibility programmes approved by the management of Towell Group, and it is organised by the group's employees on an annual basis. We as a Group, always make sure to involve our employees to give back to the community. And Blood Donations are one of those great opportunities. There is a hope of life to someone in your blood donation".

## Ericsson, NYAS give Omani youth glimpse of new tech

Ericsson in cooperation with the New York Academy of Sciences (NYAS) and in coordination with the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation jointly run an exclusive programme to offer local youth from Oman a glimpse into the world of the Internet of Things (IoT) and new technologies, targeting about 200 students by the end of 2023.

Students will have the opportunity to develop research and innovation skills and compete to find solutions to some of the virtual challenges in the field of the IoT that are fundamentally related to building smart cities, including energy efficiency, health, transportation, and data security.

Each year, 100 Omani youth between the ages of 13 and 17 are given the opportunity to receive hands-on training and participate in the IoT challenge for virtual innovation designed specifically for Oman.

Abdullah al Balushi, country



manager of Ericsson Oman said, "This exclusive programme encourages the youth to explore, deepens their knowledge and enables them to take action to solve real-world problems using scientific grounds and technology, as well as developing vital research, innovation, and networking skills."

The duration of the programme will be for one academic

semester with free and flexible hours system. Students will be divided into groups and assigned an academic supervisor to each group to help them complete their research and submit scientific materials through the NYAS platform.

Students can apply for the programme through the Center of Excellence for Advanced Communications Technologies and Internet of Things website <https://coe.ipm.om>.

Go to the 'Digital Skills Program' page, choose 'Junior Academy' from among the available programmes and then fill in the registration form. After filling out the form, the student will receive an e-mail containing important details on how to complete the registration procedures via the academy's link and referral code 'Ericsson'. The student must mention the correct referral code when completing the registration procedures in the special form for the programme on the NYAS website.

## Black Badge Ghost debuts in Muscat

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars Oman, the authorised Rolls-Royce Motor Cars dealer in the sultanate, unveiled the new Black Badge Ghost extending the marque's roster of the world's most refined motor car collection. Bolder in expression, bolder in performance, bolder in attitude, Black Badge Ghost was revealed at the Kempinski Hotel Muscat, as day turned to night.

Black Badge, the highly successful alter ego of Rolls-Royce, now represents more than 27 per cent of commissions worldwide and is codified by the mathematical symbol that represents a potential infinity, which is found within the motor car's interior. This graphic, also known as the Lemniscate, was applied to Sir Malcolm Campbell's record-breaking Rolls-Royce-powered Blue Bird K3 hydroplane and the marque's designers nominated this hallmark for Black Badge motor cars to reflect their own unrelenting pursuit of power.

Rolls-Royce debuted Black Badge with Wraith and Ghost in 2016, followed by Dawn in 2017 then Cullinan in 2019. Today, a new, Post Opulent expression of Black Badge joins the family. The purest and most technologically advanced Black Badge motor car yet, Black Badge Ghost.

Conceived in response to a group of clients who requested a Rolls-Royce that was agile, discreet, highly connected and free of any superfluous design, the new Ghost is not just the most technologically advanced Rolls-



Royce yet, but also the most aesthetically pure. I

**Exterior**

Clients are free to select any of the marque's 44,000 'ready-to-wear' colours or create their own entirely unique Bespoke hue. However, the overwhelming majority of women and men who requested this darker expression of Ghost have selected the signature Black. To create what is the motor car industry's darkest black, 100lbs of paint is atomised and applied to an electrostatically charged body in white before being oven dried. The motor car then receives two layers of clear coat before being hand-polished by a team of four craftsmen to produce the marque's signature high-gloss piano finish.

**Interior**

Advanced luxury materials have been meticulously created and crafted for a unique ambience in the interior suite. While recalling the dramatic mechanical intent of Black Badge Ghost, the materials are true to Ghost's Post Opulent design philosophy – one defined by authenticity and material substance rather than overt statement. In this spirit, a complex but subtle weave that incorporates a deep diamond pattern rendered in carbon and metallic fibres has been created by the marque's craftspeople. Multiple wood layers are pressed onto the interior component substrates, using black Bolivar veneer for the uppermost base layer. This forms a dark foundation for the Technical Fibre layers that fol-

low. Leaves woven from resin-coated carbon and contrasting metal-coated thread laid in a diamond pattern are applied by hand to the components in perfect alignment, creating a three-dimensional effect. To secure this extraordinary veneer, each component is cured for one hour under pressure at 100°C. This is then sand-blasted to create a keyed surface for six layers of lacquer, which is hand-sanded and polished before being incorporated into the motor car.

If specified in the client's commission, the Technical Fibre 'Waterfall' section of the individual rear seats receives the Black Badge family motif: The mathematical symbol that represents potential infinity known as a Lemniscate.

## SNC-Lavalin awarded contract by Royal Commission for Riyadh City

SNC-Lavalin has been awarded programme management office (PMO) consultancy services contract by The Royal Commission for Riyadh City (RCRC) in Saudi Arabia to support its Architectural Projects Program (APP) Department. The programme will play a key role in the transformation of iconic architectural, landscape and urban planning projects that will benefit the wider society and help position Riyadh as one of the top 100 cities in the world.

As part of the two-year contract, SNC-Lavalin will provide programme and project management services integrated with digital solutions. This will cover the entire project management cycle from project study and planning stages, followed by tender management until a successful implementation of the project. It also covers the design and development of a digital solution to manage a portfolio of projects related to the Riyadh City. The scope of work will be implemented in three phases, including assessment and design of the PMO, the development and implementation of the Enter-

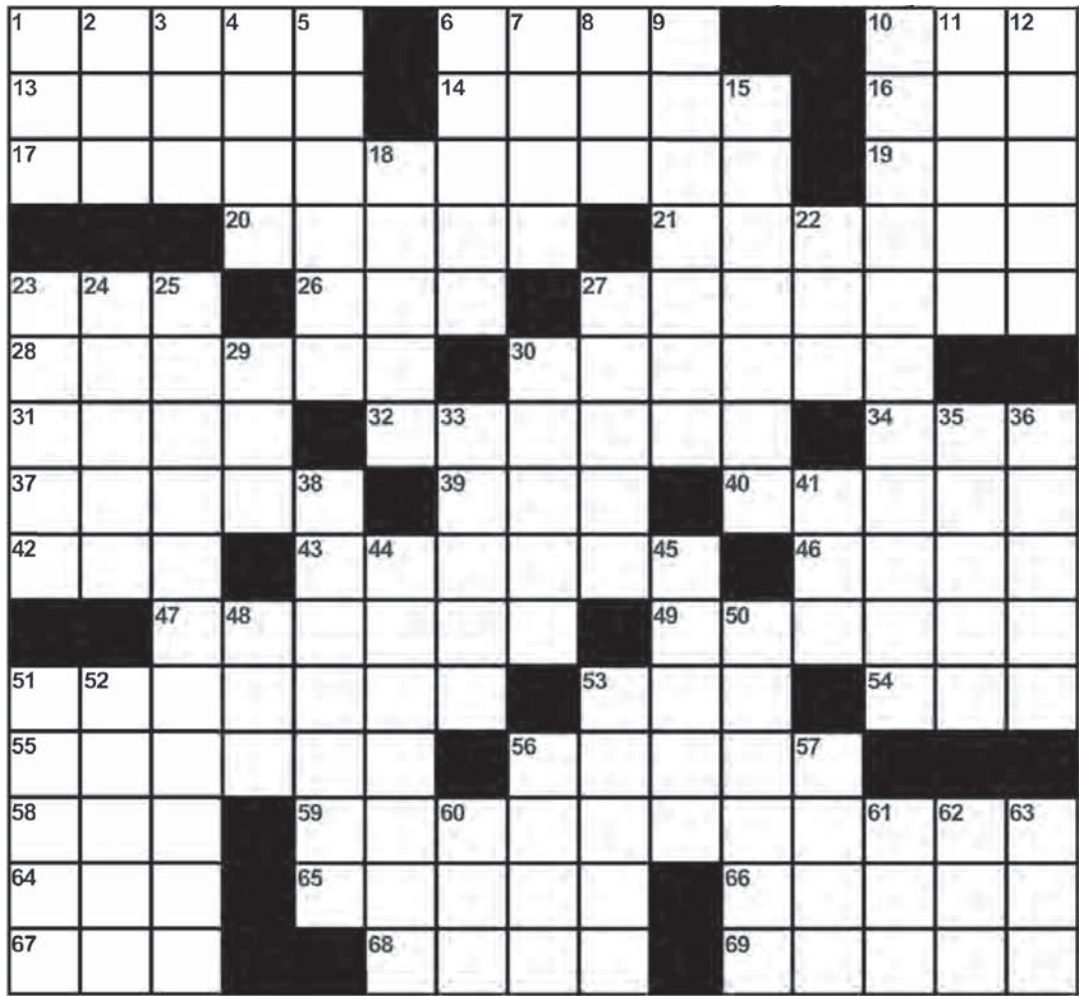


prise Performance Management (EPM) solution, and project management services.

"We are proud to support The Royal Commission for Riyadh City on this significant project that will transform the art and culture scene in Riyadh and enhance the life of its citizens as part of Saudi Vision 2030 goals," said Mohamed Youssef, senior vice-president, Middle East and North Africa, Infrastructure, SNC-Lavalin. "By providing our programme and project management expertise combined with digital solutions, The Architectural Projects Program will feature state-of-the-art innovative applications that will accelerate efficiency and elevate quality in project delivery."

As part of Saudi Vision 2030, The RCRC are launching several projects in Riyadh to enhance the life of its citizens. The APP Department oversees Riyadh Art, King Salman Science Oasis, The Islamic Museum, and River of Light projects to name a few. Riyadh Art is the first and largest national public art initiative in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Within the project, more than 1000 artworks and landmarks, created by local and international artists, will be installed across the city of Riyadh as per a 10-programme plan that covers residential neighbourhoods, gardens, parks, squares, metro and bus stations, and city entrances.

DAILY CROSSWORD



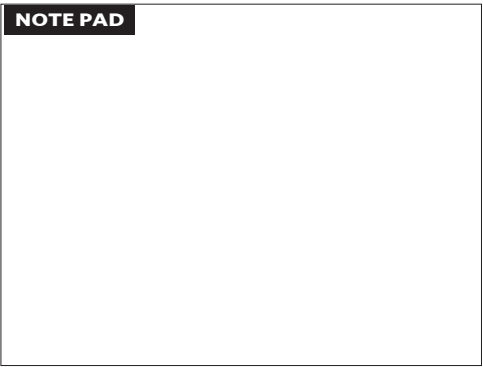
- ACROSS**
- 1) Wide open
  - 6) Housebroken
  - 10) Canary's bill
  - 13) Boston airport
  - 14) Semester finals
  - 16) Phrase of commitment
  - 17) Feature of serious roller coasters
  - 19) Classic introduction?
  - 20) Mountain ridge
  - 21) Italian from Florence
  - 23) "NCIS" network
  - 26) Cosmetics queen Mary Kay
  - 27) Ventilation opening
  - 28) Summarises, as the news
  - 30) Name derived from a person
  - 31) Blacksmith's metal
  - 32) Weasel type
  - 34) Tire-pressure letters
  - 37) Cowboy's conquest
  - 39) Dr. J played in it
  - 40) Alex Haley block-buster
  - 42) Maple syrup base
  - 43) Like some requests
  - 46) Georgetown mascot

- 47) Damaging encroachment
  - 49) Bustling activity
  - 51) Some large envelopes
  - 53) Barbecue munchie
  - 54) "Hold on a..."
  - 55) Fished or schemed
  - 56) Some museum sculptures
  - 58) 2016 Olympics city
  - 59) Lively festivities
  - 64) Ostrich cousin
  - 65) Balloon used in atmospheric probes
  - 66) Do some waiting?
  - 67) 6-1, in tennis
  - 68) "No news is\_ news!"
  - 69) Rosemary's baby-daddy
- DOWN**
- 1) More than most
  - 2) Baby's first word, sometimes
  - 3) Long time follower?
  - 4) Hemingway's moniker
  - 5) Lure into danger
  - 6) Subject of dentistry
  - 7) Bridge toll unit
  - 8) Longtime Chinese

- chairman
- 9) Android's lack
- 10) Fools or simpletons
- 11) Perfection standard
- 12) Kentucky explorer Daniel
- 15) Scornful one
- 18) "Siddhartha" author
- 22) Not outgoing
- 23) Baby berths
- 24) Yankee legend Yogi
- 25) Working a ladle
- 27) Concerning bees
- 29) Cape\_, Mass.
- 30) Fix firmly in place
- 33) Hindu music selections
- 35) Do a salon job
- 36) "I, Robot" author Asimov
- 38) Large migratory shorebirds
- 41) "Now I see!"
- 44) Driver who's tough to pass
- 45) Show place?
- 48) Common soccer score
- 50) Be preoccupied with
- 51) Colts' moms
- 52) Japanese cartoon

- style
- 53) Caught, as a dogie
- 56) List type
- 57) Brain flash
- 60) Lennon's wife

- 61) Dinner table dropping
- 62) Lab eggs
- 63) John McCain is one, briefly



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

**ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

If you get the chance for a one-on-one meeting with your boss or you're asked to give an impromptu talk, jump on it. You can further your personal agenda with ease at the moment, and you'll look great doing it. Your powers of communication are on fire, and you're able to be simultaneously forceful and charming, a winning combination, indeed. It's a very good time to go after what you want.

**LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Expect the unexpected, and expect it to come in a rather obscure way. A project you thought was going to be a real dud could take on interesting new dimensions, motivating you anew to do some great work. Or a co-worker might come through with a hidden talent that's exactly what your collaboration needs. Even your romantic life could take a sudden and perhaps scenic detour from the current path.

**SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Mundane responsibilities might be the last thing you want to deal with right now. You've got bigger things on your mind and in your heart. However, your boss or partner doubtless has a different take on what your priorities ought to entail. Meanwhile, your attitude is likely to be along the 'my way or the highway' axis. You really can deal with this if you try to be a little bit obliging. It might be a good idea to give it a whirl.

**TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

You have a real knack for interpersonal relationships at the moment. The ability to form a practically seamless connection with a friend, sweetheart, or potential romantic interest comes to you like magic, and suddenly you two are completing each other's sentences, laughing, and making some great new plans. The bonus is that you're also thinking practically, and that's making you able to see how this all fits into the fabric of your life.

**VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Your first response to an opinion or a piece of news from someone close to you might be a strong one, but you'll want to avoid a knee-jerk reaction if at all possible. Give it a chance to settle in, and you might be able to regard it in a more philosophical light. Whether you asked for this information or not, a better opportunity to express your feelings about it will present itself, and you'll be more thoughtful and coherent.

**CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You're taking care of business in your usual conscientious, disciplined manner, and you're exceedingly pragmatic and grounded right now. So grounded, in fact, that with your nose to the grindstone like that you might just miss some very enjoyable socializing of the romantic variety. Get your nose out of your work and your projects every so often to check out the human element around you, and one human in particular.

**GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

Your enthusiasm will get you noticed in a positive way, but don't overdo it or else you might start getting a very bad type of attention. There's a fine line between being entertaining and being obnoxious, and you need to understand the difference. If you feel like gushing or venting about something, save it for your inner circle. These folks know you well and embrace your more extreme emotions. Letting down your guard is safe with them.

**LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

It's definitely time to take it easy, so look for a calm companion amid all the hubbub. A little mellow rest and relaxation with someone you're comfortable with, such as an old friend or a sweetheart, can restore your tranquillity in a very valuable way. A quiet cafe might be a fine idea, or even home, sweet home. When the silences are just as nice as the talk and the laughter, you know you're in the right place with the right person.

**AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Being independent is all well and good, but sometimes you want the coziness and comfort of being in a group of like-minded independent types. Luckily, you've got a bunch of eccentric kindred spirits you can convene when you're a little bored and desire a little company. Telling funny stories about years past, adding to the joy that is the present, and looking together to the fun of the future sounds just about right.

**CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

Your ability to think innovatively and come up with good solutions is more important than following directions at the moment, though while the person giving the directions is around, you might want to fake it. As your project evolves, however, your knack for being original will get you lots of positive attention, and others will be mighty receptive to your next big idea, and the bigger, the better.

**SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

The people around you are full of energy today, and just this once you might be lagging a bit behind the crowd. To catch up, grab on to someone's coattails (with their permission, of course) and pull yourself along until you can muster up the energy to maintain your momentum on your own. Everyone is in this together, and they want you with them, so no one is going to mind if you need help catching up right now.

**PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Whatever inhibitions you usually harbour when it comes to talking about your feelings are being cast to the four winds, because you're ready to communicate, communicate, communicate. Perhaps particularly when it comes to romantic matters, you really want to tell all. The trick is to carefully consider whose listening ears are going to get the earful. Employ your intuition about who the right audience is.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- 1. The Olympic Flame symbolises
  - a. unity among various nations of the world
  - b. speed, perfection and strength
  - c. sports as a means for securing harmony among nations
  - d. continuity between the ancient and modern games
- 2. The reaction which converts sugar solution into alcohol is an example of
  - a. saponification
  - b. hydrogenation
  - c. fermentation
  - d. hydrolysis
- 3. The Scottish bacteriologist who discovered penicillin was
  - a. Alexander Fleming
  - b. Albert Einstein
  - c. Archimeder
  - d. Aryabhatta

Answers: 1. d 2. c 3. a

**KIDS COLOURING**

**BOGGLER**

|   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| L | O | O | G |
| A | N | T | L |
| V | A | D | T |
| S | D | S | A |

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

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

**DO YOU SUDOKU?**

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

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

**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**

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

# Israel arrests 4 Palestinians for ‘killing settler’

The suspects behind Thursday’s attack were transferred to the security forces for further investigation

Jerusalem - Israel’s army said on Sunday they had arrested four Palestinian men suspected of shooting dead a Jewish settler and wounding two others in an attack in the occupied West Bank days before.

‘The four attackers who carried out the shooting attack last Thursday were caught,’ the Israeli army said in a statement.

‘The suspects has been transferred to the security forces for further investigation, and the weapon of the suspect who carried out the shooting has been captured.’

The four are suspected of firing at least ten bullets at a car, killing 25-year-old religious student Yehuda Dimentman and injuring two fellow students as they drove out of Homesh, an illegal outpost in the northern West Bank.

The army said the suspects were caught in the village of Silat al-Harithiyah, in the Jenin governorate in the northern West Bank.

Israel captured the West Bank in 1967 from Jordan.

Nearly 500,000 Israelis have moved into settlements in the



Palestinians chant slogans during a demonstration in the east Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah, on Friday (AFP)

territory, which much of the international community regards as illegal.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett praised the army, police

and the Shin Bet security agency for the arrests.

‘Every attacker will know that Israel will bring him to justice,’ Bennett wrote on Twitter.

‘The pain is enormous, but violence will not win and will not move us from our place,’ he added, in a message to Dimentman’s family.

## ‘Alarmed’ at violence

Dimentman, a married father, was studying at a religious school in Homesh, which had been evacuated by Israeli forces

*Every attacker will know that Israel will bring him to justice. The pain is enormous, but violence will not win and will not move us from our place*

NAFTALI BENNETT

in 2005 but where settlers nevertheless continued to operate the yeshiva centre.

About 2,000 people attended his funeral.

Army spokesman Brigadier General Ran Kochav said he suspected the attack was the result of sophisticated coordination.

‘I believe we are talking about a violent organisation,’ Kochav told Israeli public radio.

Multiple Palestinian groups had praised the attack, though none claimed responsibility.

The arrests follow a tense weekend. On Saturday, Israeli border police arrested a 65-year-old Palestinian woman in Hebron after she allegedly stabbed and injured an Israeli settler.

On Friday, Jewish settlers raided the northern West Bank village of Burqah, near where Dimentman had been killed the night before.

An AFP reporter observed Israeli assailants hurling stones through the windows of homes and firing weapons.

Further south in the village of Qaryut, a Palestinian man was hospitalised after settlers assaulted him at home, the official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported.

It was the latest violence over the past month, which has seen Palestinian attacks on Israelis and the killing of Palestinians by Israeli troops during clashes.

On Friday, United Nations Middle East peace envoy Tor Wennesland said he was ‘alarmed by the escalating violence in the occupied West Bank, which is claiming the lives of Israelis and Palestinians’.

AFP

## Baghdad’s Green Zone hit by two Katyusha rockets

Baghdad, Iraq - Two rockets targeted Baghdad’s ultra-secure Green Zone that houses the US Embassy early on Sunday, Iraq’s security forces said in a statement.

‘The Green Zone in Baghdad was the target of two Katyusha rockets. The first was shot down in the air by C-RAM defence batteries, the second fell in a square, damaging two vehicles,’ the statement said.

A security source said that the shot down rocket fell near the US embassy, while the second came down roughly 500m away.

Previously, the source told AFP that two rockets had been shot down near the US Embassy. No one claimed responsibility for the attack.

In recent months, dozens of rocket assaults or drone bomb attacks have targeted US troops and interests in Iraq.

The attacks are rarely claimed but are routinely pinned on pro-Iran factions in Iraq.

The latest rocket salvo comes after the country this week announced the end of the ‘combat mission’ on its territory of the coalition led by Washington.



Security guards wearing Santa Claus hats stand in front of a touristic facility, opposite the Green Zone in the capital Baghdad on Sunday (AFP)

But roughly 2,500 American soldiers and 1,000 coalition soldiers deployed in Iraq will remain in the nation to pursue a role of training, advice and assistance.

Pro-Iran factions in Iraq are calling for the departure of all US forces stationed in the country.

The attack also coincides with the 10th anniversary of the departure of US troops from Iraq on December 18, 2011, after the invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Washington then deployed its troops to the country to fight the

Islamic State (IS) group, which had captured large swathes of the nation in a lightning offensive.

At the beginning of November, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi escaped unharmed from an unclaimed drone bomb attack, which targeted his official residence in the Green Zone.

In September, an ‘armed drone’ attack targeted Erbil international airport in Iraqi Kurdistan, where there is a base hosting coalition troops.

AFP

## Azerbaijan releases 10 more Armenian soldiers

Baku, Azerbaijan - Azerbaijan said on Sunday it had freed ten more Armenian soldiers captured last month during fighting between the Caucasus arch foes.

‘Azerbaijan, with mediation of the European Union, handed over ten soldiers of Armenian origin’ who had been captured on November 16, the Azeri committee in charge of prisoners of war said in a statement.

Baku said that the move was a result of a meeting between Azeri President Ilham Aliyev, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and European Council chief Charles Michel in Brussels on September 14.

‘Warmly welcome Baku’s release of 10 Armenian detainees in follow up to discussions with @azpresident and @Nikol-Pashinyan,’ Michel wrote in a tweet on Sunday. ‘An important humanitarian gesture showing mutual will to strengthen confidence as discussed in Brussels.’

Azerbaijan had already handed over ten prisoners to Yerevan on December 4, following Russia-mediated talks, in the first concrete sign of a decrease in tensions since last month’s fighting, which killed 13 people.



This file photo shows an Azerbaijani soldier fixing a national flag on a lamppost in the town of Lachin, in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, on December 1, 2020 (AFP)

Those were the worst clashes along the shared border since a six-week war last year over Nagorno-Karabakh that claimed more than 6,500 lives.

At the end of that war, Arme-

nia was forced to sign a humiliating Russian-brokered accord with Azerbaijan that saw it cede three districts around Karabakh that it had captured in the 1990s.

Ethnic Armenian separatists

in Nagorno-Karabakh broke away from Azerbaijan as the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and around 30,000 people died in the ensuing conflict.

AFP

## Sudan police fire tear gas at anniversary rally, several wounded

Khartoum, Sudan - Tens of thousands of Sudanese protesters rallied on Sunday for a civilian-led transition to democracy, three years since the start of mass demonstrations that led to the ouster of veteran strongman Omar al Bashir.

Security forces fired tear gas canisters - leaving several wounded, witnesses said - as activists at the presidential palace in Khartoum chanted slogans against military chief General Abdel Fattah al Burhan, who led a coup on October 25.

‘The people want the downfall of Burhan,’ the protesters shouted as additional security forces were deployed to surround the swelling crowd.

Sudan’s generals in the post-Bashir transition government launched their coup almost two months ago and held civilian leader Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok under effective house arrest for weeks but reinstated

him on November 21.

The move alienated many of Hamdok’s pro-democracy supporters, who dismissed it as providing a cloak of legitimacy for Burhan’s coup.

‘Any coup, even after the reinstatement of Hamdok, is unacceptable,’ a protester aged in his twenties said as thousands waving Sudanese flags marched past him. ‘Our glorious December revolution is seeking civil institutions, not particular individuals.’

### ‘Slide toward abyss’

Hamdok, who has argued he wants to avoid further bloodshed, warned late on Saturday of ‘the country’s slide toward the abyss’, urging restraint from the protesters.

‘We’re facing today a sizeable regression in the path of our revolution that threatens the security of the nation, its unity and its stability,’ the Prime Minister said. Protest organisers have how-



Sudanese demonstrators raise national flags and banners as they rally against the military chief who launched an October 25 coup in the northern part of the capital Khartoum, on Sunday (AFP)

ever vowed, in a key slogan, that they want ‘no negotiation, no partnership and no legitimacy’ for the current leadership.

Another demonstrator, in his early thirties and also draped in a Sudanese flag, said, ‘I came out

today in complete refusal of the political agreement!’

‘This deal doesn’t represent the people. We have one demand and that’s a civilian government, not one that ends up being under military control.’

Previous protests against the military takeover have been forcibly dispersed.

Nationwide, at least 45 people have been killed and scores more wounded, according to the independent Doctors’ Committee.

On Sunday, authorities shut off bridges linking the capital with its twin city Omdurman, but large crowds still gathered.

‘The numbers are huge and security forces can’t control them,’ said one man who witnessed the protests in Omdurman.

### ‘All scenarios on the table’

The date December 19 has a particular resonance in Sudanese history. Not only was it the day in 2018 when thousands launched mass protests that months later ended Bashir’s three decades in power, it was also the day in 1955 when Sudanese lawmakers declared independence from British colonial rule.

Following Bashir’s ouster, a joint military-civilian transitional government took power but the troubled alliance was shattered by Burhan’s power grab.

‘The coup has put obstacles

in the way of the democratic transition and has given the military complete control over politics and the economy,’ Ashraf Abdel-Aziz, chief editor of the independent *Al-Jarida* newspaper, told AFP.

Sudan’s military dominates lucrative companies in sectors from agriculture to infrastructure.

The Prime Minister said last year that 80 per cent of the state’s resources were ‘outside the finance ministry’s control’.

‘The security apparatus has won out over political institutions,’ Abdel-Aziz said.

Khaled Omer, a minister in the ousted government, said the coup was a ‘catastrophe’ but also ‘an opportunity to rectify the deficiencies’ of the previous political arrangement with the army.

He warned that anything could happen over the next few months with the military still firmly in power.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

# Xmas lockdown in Netherlands as Europe fights rising cases

The Hague, Netherlands - The Netherlands announced a Christmas lockdown and London declared a 'major incident' as Europe tries to rein in rising COVID-19 case numbers and the highly mutated Omicron strain takes hold.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen has warned that the Omicron variant could be dominant in Europe by mid-January.

Many countries are reimposing travel restrictions and other measures weeks after the variant was first detected in South Africa.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte announced that all non-essential shops, cultural and entertainment venues must shut until January 14, while schools will close until at least January 9.

The Dutch also face stricter limits on the number of guests allowed in their homes, though officials made an exception for Christmas Day.

"To sum it up in one sentence, the Netherlands will go back into lockdown from tomorrow," Rutte told a press conference.

In London, mayor Sadiq Khan declared a 'major incident' in the British capital, calling the case surge 'hugely concerning'.

Britain registered record case numbers for three days in a row during the week, prompting new regulations and reports that an-



A protester holds a banner reading 'Vaccination passport equals Apartheid', in The Hague on Saturday (AFP)

other lockdown is being considered. Most of the new cases recorded in London are of the Omicron variant.

Germany's health agency meanwhile, announced it had put Britain on a list of high-risk COVID countries, which will mean tighter restrictions for travellers.

The change, which comes into effect on Sunday midnight, means arrivals from Britain will have to observe a two-week quarantine regardless of whether they are vaccinated.

## Jabbing youngsters

Germany has already designated France and Denmark as high-risk zones, imposing quarantines on unvaccinated travellers.

In France, a scientific panel urged the government to impose 'significant restrictions' on new year festivities, and the capital Paris announced 'with regret' that it was cancelling all events on the Champs Elysees.

Elsewhere in Europe, edgy governments are bringing back restrictions to fight the pan-

demic, which has killed at least 5,335,968 people since the outbreak emerged in China in December 2019.

Ireland is ordering bars and restaurants to close at 8:00 pm, Denmark is shutting cinemas and other venues.

European countries are also pushing hard to dole out booster jabs and widen vaccination programmes to include children.

Portugal said tens of thousands of children under 12 years were set to receive their first jab this weekend.

French Health Minister Olivier Veran said its rollout to children would begin on Wednesday.

"If all goes well, we will start vaccination of children on the afternoon of December 22 in specially adapted centres," he said.

## 'Disgraceful for humanity'

The United States was the first large country to take the plunge and has so far vaccinated more than five million under-12s.

In Denmark, one of the first European countries to start jabbing children, youngsters were putting on a brave face as they waited for their vaccines.

"Everybody in the family was vaccinated, I was the last one to get vaccinated," youngster Camelia told AFP. "I'm happy I did it because now, if I get corona, I won't feel anything."

However, the EU's health agency has warned that relying on vaccines alone will not work.

Mask-wearing, working from home and avoiding crowds were essential to reduce the burden on health systems in the short term, the ECDC has said.

And the global picture continues to be a major cause of concern, with an AFP count based on official figures suggesting the number of new infections in Africa has shot up by 57 per cent in the past week.

AFP

# Iran ambassador flies out of Yemen for treatment

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Iran's Ambassador flew out of the rebel-held Yemeni capital to receive COVID-19 treatment on Saturday in a rare exemption from an air blockade enforced by a Saudi-led coalition, Saudi and Iranian officials said.

"The Ambassador Hassan Eyrlo left on an Iraqi aircraft and is probably now in Baghdad," a senior Saudi official familiar with Yemeni affairs told AFP.

He said the flight was organised at the request of Yemen's Huthi rebels and agreed by Saudi authorities following mediation by Iraq and Oman.

Iraq has hosted several exploratory meetings between Iranian and Saudi officials seeking a thaw in relations after years of proxy wars around the region.

Oman is the only Gulf Arab state that has remained neutral in the Yemen conflict and has frequently mediated with the rebels.

In Tehran, a foreign ministry spokesman said that the ambassador had been suffering from COVID-19 for several days and that arrangements had been made for his evacuation.

In Sanaa, rebel spokesman Mohammed Abdul Salam tweeted that an understanding between Iran and Saudi Arabia brokered by Iraq had allowed the Ambassador's evacuation



Iran Ambassador Hassan Eyrlo

on health grounds.

Tehran is the only government that recognises the rebel administration in Sanaa, and in October last year it sent Hassan Eyrlo there as Ambassador.

It gave no details on how he had reached the city despite the blockade.

The Saudi-led coalition which has fought alongside forces loyal to Yemen's government since 2015 has repeatedly accused Iran of arming the rebels, a charge it has consistently denied.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Friday that the Huthi request for a flight out for the ambassador was being seen by Saudi officials as a 'sign of strains between Tehran and the militant group'.

But a second Saudi official confirmed that the Ambassador's departure had been a medical evacuation.

AFP

# Germany adds UK to list of high-risk countries; tightens travel restrictions

Berlin, Germany - Germany's health authority announced late on Saturday that Britain had been added to its list of COVID-19 high-risk countries, which will mean tighter travel restrictions.

The decision is a response to the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, which forced London's mayor Sadiq Khan to declare a 'major incident' on Saturday in the British capital.

The change, which takes effect at the end of the day Sunday at midnight, means arrivals from Britain will have to observe a two-week quarantine regardless of whether they are vaccinated, said the country's health



Medical staff assist a COVID-19 patient in the University hospital in Bochum, western Germany (AFP)

agency, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI).

The United Kingdom is now considered a 'variant zone' of COVID-19, a category reserved for nations where the risk is the highest.

'The United Kingdom and Northern Ireland are very strongly affected by COVID-19. A new variant, very contagious, has also been found,' the Germany Ministry of Foreign Affairs said on its website.

More than 65,000 new COVID-19 cases were confirmed in London over the past seven days, with 26,418 cases reported in the last 24 hours -

the highest number since the start of the pandemic.

That is why these territories, including the Isle of Wight and the Channel Islands, have been placed for 14 days in the category of areas at very high risk, it said.

In addition to the quarantine measure, only German nationals or foreigners residing in Germany will be allowed to come to the country from Britain.

The rule applies to all means of transport and a PCR test will be required for all persons travelling to Germany.

Berlin's new health minister Karl Lauterbach has already

sounded the alarm in the face of the risk of a new wave that could soon sweep over the country, hard hit since the beginning of the autumn.

"The more we can push back... the better," he said on Saturday.

Several other European countries, including France, have already taken steps to limit the entry of travellers from the United Kingdom.

Meanwhile, German authorities have placed France and Denmark among the 'high risk' contamination zones, a level below the UK.

AFP

# Pentagon documents reveal 'deeply flawed' US air war in Middle East

Washington, US - Newly obtained Pentagon documents show that the US air wars in the Middle East have been marked by 'deeply flawed intelligence' and resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, including many children, *The New York Times* reported on Saturday.

It said a trove of confidential documents covering more than 1,300 reports of civilian casualties undercuts the government's portrayal of a war fought with precision bombs.

Pledges of transparency and accountability, it said, had regularly fallen short.

'Not a single record provided includes a finding of wrongdoing or disciplinary action,' the paper reported in what it said was the first of a two-part series.

While several of the cases mentioned by *The NY Times* have been previously reported, it said its investigation showed that the number of civilian deaths had been 'drastically undercounted', by at least several hundred.

## Surveillance flaws

Among three cases cited was a July 19, 2016 bombing by US



A bombing by US special forces on what believed to be an IS group, killed 120 farmers and other villagers in northern Syria on July 19, 2016 (AFP)

special forces of what were believed to be three Islamic State group staging areas in northern Syria. Initial reports were of 85 fighters killed. Instead, the dead were 120 farmers and other villagers.

Another example was a November 2015 attack in Ramadi,

Iraq after a man was seen dragging 'an unknown heavy object' into an Islamic State position. The 'object', a review found, was a child, who died in the strike.

Poor or inadequate surveillance footage often contributed to deadly targeting failures, the report said.

More recently, the United States had to retract its claim that a vehicle destroyed by a drone on a Kabul street in August had contained bombs. Victims of the strike, it turned out, were ten members of a family, including children.

Many civilian survivors of US

attacks, the report says, were left with disabilities requiring expensive treatment, but condolence payments numbered fewer than a dozen.

Asked for comment, Captain Bill Urban, spokesman for the US Central Command, told *The NY Times* that 'even with the best

technology in the world, mistakes do happen, whether based on incomplete information or misinterpretation of the information available. And we try to learn from those mistakes'.

'We work diligently to avoid such harm. We investigate each credible instance. And we regret each loss of innocent life.'

## Unseen from the air

The US air campaign in the Middle East grew rapidly in the final years of former president Barack Obama's administration, as public support waned for the seemingly endless ground wars.

Obama said the new approach, often using unmanned aircraft controlled from far away, represented 'the most precise air campaign in history', able to minimize civilian deaths.

The new technology made it possible to destroy a part of a house filled with enemy fighters while leaving the rest of the structure standing, the Pentagon said.

But over a five-year period, US forces executed more than 50,000 airstrikes in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, the report said, with much less than the adver-

tised precision.

In compiling its report, *The NY Times* said its reporters had 'visited more than 100 casualty sites and interviewed scores of surviving residents and current and former American officials'.

The paper obtained the Pentagon documents through Freedom of Information requests beginning in March 2017 and lawsuits filed against the Defence Department and the Central Command. A new suit seeks records from Afghanistan.

Before launching airstrikes, the military must navigate elaborate protocols to estimate and minimise civilian deaths.

But there are several ways available intelligence can mislead, fall short, or at times lead to disastrous errors.

For example, *The NY Times* said, video shot from the air does not show people in buildings, under foliage or under tarpaulins or aluminium covers.

And available data can be misinterpreted, as when people running to a fresh bombing site are assumed to be attackers, not would-be rescuers.

AFP

# Pakistan warns of 'grave consequences' from Afghanistan's economic meltdown

Islamabad, Pakistan - Pakistan warned on Sunday of 'grave consequences' for the international community if Afghanistan's economic meltdown continued, and urged the world leaders to find ways to engage with the Taliban to help prevent a humanitarian catastrophe.

Speaking at the opening of a special meeting of the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Islamabad, Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said the deepening crisis could bring mass hunger, a flood of refugees and a rise in extremism.

"We cannot ignore the danger of complete economic meltdown," he told the gathering, which also included Taliban foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi alongside delegates from the United States, China, Russia, the European Union and UN.

The meeting is the biggest conference on Afghanistan since the US-backed government fell in August and the Taliban returned to power.

Since then, billions of dollars in aid and assets have been frozen by the international community, and the nation is in the



Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi (left) and Saudi Arabia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Faisal bin Farhan al Saud attend the opening session of a special meeting of the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Cooperation on Afghanistan, in Islamabad on Sunday (AFP)

middle of a bitter winter.

The United Nations has repeatedly warned that Afghanistan is on the brink of the world's worst humanitarian emergency with a combined food, fuel and cash crisis.

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan said the world needed to

separate the Taliban from ordinary Afghans.

"I speak to the United States specifically that they must delink the Afghanistan government from the 40mn Afghan citizens," he said, "even if they have been in conflict with the Taliban for 20 years."

## No recognition

He also urged caution in linking recognition of the new government to Western ideals of human rights.

"Every country is different... every society's idea of human rights is different," he said.

No nation has yet formally

recognised the Taliban government and diplomats face the delicate task of channelling aid to the stricken Afghan economy without propping up the hardline groups.

Nearly all the opening speakers made mention of the Taliban's need to protect the rights

*We cannot ignore the danger of complete economic meltdown. The deepening crisis could bring mass hunger, a flood of refugees and a rise in extremism*

SHAH MAHMOOD QURESHI

of the minorities and allow women and girls access to work and education.

Although the Taliban have promised a lighter version of the hardline rule that characterised their first stint in power from 1996 to 2001, women are largely excluded from government employment, and secondary schools for girls have mostly remained shuttered.

The OIC meeting was not expected to give the new Taliban government the formal international recognition it desperately craves.

Taliban foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi said his government 'has the right to be officially

recognised'.

"The current Afghanistan government is cooperating with every foreign organisation," he told reporters, adding that sanctions 'must be removed'.

In a speech to delegates, he said the US freezing of assets 'is a clear violation of the human rights of Afghans, and can be interpreted as enmity with an entire nation'.

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were the only three countries to recognise the previous Taliban government. Qureshi said the OIC was being asked to consider a six-point plan to help Afghanistan that would engage with Taliban authorities to help ease pressure on the country.

It would include coordinating aid, increasing investment, helping rebuild Afghan institutions and providing technical experts to manage the economy.

The meeting is being held under tight security, with Islamabad on lockdown, ring-fenced with barbed wire barriers and shipping-container roadblocks where police and soldiers are standing guard.

AFP



This file photo shows Brexit minister David Frost (left) and Prime Minister Boris Johnson, at 10 Downing Street in 2020 (AFP)

## British PM left reeling after minister quits

London, UK - British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was left reeling on Sunday after his Brexit minister resigned, ending a difficult week during which his Conservative party suffered a humiliating defeat in a local by-election and his own MPs rebelled over new coronavirus curbs.

David Frost, a trusted ally of the Prime Minister and former Brexit negotiator, sent his resignation letter late on Saturday following reports that he was to leave his Cabinet post in January.

"It is disappointing that this plan has become public this evening and in the circumstances I think it is right for me to write to step down with immediate effect," he said in the letter, published by Johnson's Downing Street office.

Frost told Johnson he had 'concerns about the current direction of travel' regarding coronavirus regulations and tax rises.

Johnson responded that he was 'very sorry' to receive the resignation, 'given everything you have achieved and contributed to this government'.

The *Mail* on Sunday had reported that Frost handed in his resignation a week ago, but had been persuaded to stay on until the New Year.

Johnson is already reeling from a rebellion by 100 of his

MPs in a parliamentary vote over coronavirus measures and the stunning loss of a 23,000-majority seat in a by-election.

That was partly blamed on a slew of reports that his staff and aides had held parties last Christmas despite virus restrictions in place at the time.

## 'Running out of time'

The by-election loss for Johnson's Conservatives intensified speculation of a leadership challenge.

Frost recently came second in a poll of most popular ministers held by ConservativeHome, an influential blog read by the grassroot Tories who could end up deciding Johnson's replacement.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid told Sky News on Sunday that Frost was 'an outstanding public servant', adding that "I do understand his reasons, he's a principled man, you know, principled people do resign from the government."

The deputy leader of the main opposition Labour party Angela Rayner said the resignation demonstrated 'a government in total chaos'.

'@BorisJohnson isn't up to the job. We deserve better than this buffoonery,' she tweeted.

AFP

# Philippines typhoon death toll crosses 100

Manila, Philippines - More than 100 people have been killed in the strongest typhoon to hit the Philippines this year, official tallies showed on Sunday, as efforts to deliver water and food to devastated islands ramped up.

More than 300,000 people fled their homes and beachfront resorts as Typhoon Rai ravaged the southern and central regions of the archipelago.

The storm knocked out communications and electricity in many areas, ripped off roofs, damaged hospitals, toppled concrete power poles and flooded villages.

Arthur Yap, governor of the popular tourist destination Bohol, said on his official Facebook page that mayors on the devastated island had so far reported 72 deaths in their towns.

Ten people also died on the Dinagat Islands, provincial information officer Jeffrey Crisostomo told AFP.

That took the overall number of reported deaths to 108, ac-



Residents stand next to a destroyed market building in General Luna town, Siargao island (AFP)

cording to the latest official figures, making it one of the deadliest typhoons to hit the country in years.

But the toll was likely to rise as various disaster agencies assessed the full extent of the storm's aftermath across the vast archipelago.

Rai smashed into the country

Thursday as a super typhoon packing wind speeds of 195km per hour.

Thousands of military, police, coast guard and fire personnel are being deployed to assist in search and rescue efforts in the worst-affected areas.

Coast guard and naval vessels carrying food, water and medical

supplies are being dispatched, while heavy machinery - like backhoes and front-end loaders - are being sent to help clear roads blocked by fallen power poles and trees.

"It's going to be a long, tough road for people to rebuild and get their lives back on track," said Alberto Bocanegra, head of the In-

ternational Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the Philippines.

The organisation appealed for 20mn Swiss francs (US\$21.6mn approx) to fund urgent relief and recovery efforts.

An aerial survey of damage to parts of Bohol - known for its beaches, rolling 'Chocolate Hills', and tiny tarsier primates - showed 'our people have suffered greatly', Yap said.

## 'Reminiscent' of Haiyan

There has also been widespread destruction on Siargao, Dinagat and Mindanao islands, which bore the brunt of Rai when it slammed into the Philippines.

Aerial photos shared by the military showed severe damage in the Siargao town of General Luna, where many surfers and holidaymakers had flocked ahead of Christmas, with buildings stripped of roofs and debris littering the ground.

AFP

# Hong Kong elites pick new 'patriots only' legislature

Hong Kong, China - Hong Kongers began casting ballots for city lawmakers on Sunday under Beijing's new 'patriots only' rules which drastically reduce the number of directly elected seats and control who can run for office, with turnout muted at the midway point.

It is the first legislature poll under the new political blueprint China imposed on Hong Kong in response to massive and often violent pro-democracy protests two years ago.

All candidates have been vetted for their patriotism and political loyalty to China and only 20 of the 90 legislature seats will be directly elected.

The largest chunk of seats - 40 - will be picked by a committee of 1,500 staunch Beijing loyalists.

The remaining 30 will be chosen by reliably pro-Beijing committees that represent special-interest and industry groups.

At 3.30pm (0730 GMT) -



A voter leaves a polling station during the Legislative Council election in Hong Kong's Choi Hung area on Sunday (AFP)

halfway through the 14 hour voting period - just under 19 per cent of the 4.5mn-strong electorate had cast votes, the lowest midway turnout rate since the city's 1997 handover to China.

In 2016, 27 per cent had cast votes by the same point.

## 'Genuine suffrage'

Daniel So, a 65-year-old man who works in technology, was among the first to queue up at a polling centre in the wealthy Mid-Levels district.

"Young people are not so interested in this election because they are misled by foreign politi-

cians and media," he told AFP. "China is doing so great now."

As Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam arrived to cast her vote, three protesters from the pro-democracy League of Social Democrats party chanted: "I want genuine universal suffrage."

"(Lam) said this was an improvement of the electoral system, but in reality, it stripped Hong Kongers of their right to vote," activist Chan Po-ying told reporters.

The government bought up newspaper front pages and billboards, sent flyers to every household, pinged mobile phones with reminders to vote and made public transport free for the day.

Despite the publicity blitz, the latest polls showed only 48 per cent of respondents said they would vote - a record low - and 52 per cent said they found no candidate worthy of support.

Starry Lee, chair of the biggest pro-Beijing party, the DAB, urged people to participate.

"The polling stations' feedback showed that not many people are voting," she told reporters.

An accountant in her 20s, who gave her name as Loy, said she had no plans to use her ballot this time. "My vote won't mean anything because ultimately it's Beijing's people winning," she said.

In North Point, a district known for pro-government support, a 74-year-old man who gave his surname Lo said he did not know most of the 'new faces' on the candidate list but still voted.

"I picked those who would voice opposition, not the yes-men," he told AFP.

Lam has sought to manage expectations, telling state media last week that a low turnout could indicate 'the government is doing well and its credibility is high'.

Independent polling places her public approval rating at around 36 per cent.

AFP

# Tunisia struggle to tackle mountains of waste

Recycling is almost non-existent in the country which produces 2.6mn tonnes of waste every year

Mghira, Tunisia - "When I see plastic, I see money," says Tarek Masmoudi, owner of one of the few recycling companies in Tunisia, where a waste crisis is threatening widespread social unrest.

Recycling is almost non-existent in the North African country, which produces 2.6mn tonnes of waste each year.

Some 85 per cent of that ends up in landfills, while much of the rest winds up in informal dumps, says Tunisian waste management expert Walim Merdaci.

But with many facilities close to overflowing and neighbouring communities up in arms, the crisis is already stoking tensions.

In November, a man died as security forces fired tear gas to disperse protesters demanding the closure of a stinking landfill they say has spread deadly diseases and health problems to their town of Agareb, near second city Sfax.

That could be a worrying sign of things to come as, according to expert Wassim Chaabane, most of the country's 11 official dumping grounds are due to close by the end of 2022.

That has authorities scrambling to find new sites.

In the capital Tunis, home to about 2.7mn people, the situation is particularly urgent.

The Bordj Chakir dump, Tunisia's biggest, receives more than 3,000 tonnes of rubbish a day and is close to overflowing.

## From waste to wealth

But where others see a crisis, Masmoudi sees an opportunity.

Every day, a steady stream of minivans and small trucks bring to his facility in Mghira, near Tunis, bales of plastic waste to



Employees of AFREC African Recycling unload bags of plastic waste at the recycling facility in the industrial zone of Mghira, near the Tunisian capital Tunis (AFP)



Recyclers transport bags of plastic waste to a facility in Mghira, near the Tunisian capital Tunis (AFP)

be weighed, sorted and cut into fine chips for industrial use.

Much is collected by hand from the streets and bins of the capital by 'barbechas', informal waste pickers.

Masmoudi's firm African Recycling deals with 6,000 tonnes of waste a year.

The 42-year-old directly employs around 60 people, many of them women, and indirectly provides work to roughly 200 people - no small achievement in a country suffering 18 per cent unemployment.

Between four and seven per

cent of Tunisia's waste is recycled, according to official figures.

But Masmoudi, standing by his sleek white four-wheel-drive, said the waste market was growing fast. "Recycling is a sector where a lot remains to be done, but which could create jobs and wealth in Tunisia."

The situation is similar in neighbouring Algeria, where experts say as much as 60 percent of household waste from the country's 43mn population goes to unregulated dumps.

Samira Hamidi, a member of Algeria's semi-independent ad-

visory body CNESE, says 'less than seven per cent of waste is recycled'.

Just 5,000 people are employed in Algeria's recycling sector, according to official figures.

In Tunisia, after a decade of political paralysis since a 2011 revolution, Masmoudi says the waste management system reflects a lack of strategy and vision. Firms like his are blocked from collecting trash directly, as 'municipalities own the rubbish', he says. "The state pays 150-200 dinars (US\$52-US\$70) per tonne of waste that goes to land-

fill. We're paying money to bury something that's worth a fortune."

But implementing a system of sorting could take years, according to Chaabane.

"Tunisia's waste management system is hopeless at all levels, but especially when it comes to collection of waste."

The national waste management agency recently admitted that it lacks the resources.

## Running out of time

Merdaci, the other expert, says Tunisian authorities want to bring in a combination of mechanical and biological methods to treat waste, compacting and composting it whilst collecting methane, gas which can be used as fuel.

But initial projects will take two years to get off the ground.

"Time is running out," he says.

Merdaci called for 'a tax to pay for waste management and to make everyone pay for what waste they produce' as a means for municipalities to deal with waste.

Each Tunisia produces on average 365kg of waste per year, yet taxpayers are charged no more than 28 cents for its management.

Chaabane says urgent solutions are needed, and adds that incineration was 'the best option for cities' if clean energy is used.

But that option would not come cheaply, with incinerators costing some US\$280mn each.

To Merdaci, the outlook is grim. "We've had ten years of political instability, a decade without any decisions, problems with those living near dumps, and a lack of money. Success is nil."

AFP

# Firm transforms waste as Morocco faces trash 'time bomb'

Meknes, Morocco - Recycling in Morocco may be in its infancy, but the North African kingdom is making steady progress, helped by a Swiss firm that specialises in processing organic waste.

"Nothing's thrown away here: Everything is transformed," says Mohamed El Kabous proudly, crumbling a fistful of compost produced by Elephant Vert (EV - Green Elephant) in the central city of Meknes. Established in 2012 as EV's largest such plant on the African continent, the factory has an annual turnover of 40,000 tonnes of compost and organic fertiliser.

Mountains of sawdust, pallets and fruit tree branches cover a storage platform as trucks rumble past loaded with manure, and excavators aerate piles of compost.

EV production manager Kabous said no household organic waste is processed at the factory because 'it's too costly'.

The pre-sorting of residential waste is 'almost non-existent',



A front loader transports organic waste in the Elephant Vert factory in the 'Agropolis' industrial zone in Morocco's northern city of Meknes (AFP)

he told AFP.

Instead, the waste comes from nearby farms and factories that work with wood, or cooperatives producing essential oils.

"After the carbon-rich organic matter and nitrogen-rich manure from non-industrial

livestock breeding is mixed, nature then takes over," Kabous said. Wood is absorbent, so no stench emanates from the open-air fermentation area, where it takes about a period of four months to produce the compost.

The odour is actually of fresh earth. Kabous joked that it even smelt like 'zammitta', a traditional Moroccan cake made with flour, almonds and sesame seeds.

The EV plant also produces fertiliser by adding potash or

phosphorus to the compost.

## 'Time bomb'

EV's output is sold mainly on the local market to organic farms and large enterprises whose soil has lost nutrients through the over-use of chemical fertilisers.

Agriculture remains a pillar of the Moroccan economy.

"There's increasing demand from farmers keen to make sure their land is sustainable, and who know they need to opt for healthy and sustainable agriculture," Kabous said.

Meknes is also home to other organic recycling initiatives, including a waste treatment and recovery plant operated by French giant Suez.

But nationwide, it's a different story.

In 2015, official figures supplied to AFP showed that just six percent of household waste was recycled - 420,000 tonnes out of seven million - while the rest was buried. Instead, up to 12 percent of industrial waste was recycled - mainly plastic, paper, metal and electrical and electronic equipment.

Morocco's official recycling target is 20 per cent of waste by 2022, a date now pushed back to 2030.

Mustapha Brakez, an expert in urban recycling, was scathing

of government efforts to boost the practice.

"These strategies the bureaucrats in (the capital) Rabat have come up with lead nowhere as they are based on models from Europe, which are opposite to Moroccan habits," he said.

Nearly 80 per cent of household waste in Morocco is organic, he noted, while in Europe the figure is less than 30 per cent. The kingdom has just 26 landfill and sorting centres, while official data shows that 66 illegal rubbish dumps have been regularised or closed.

"Every effort is focused on treatment, without coming up with solutions for collection [of the waste]," Brakez said.

He called waste management in Morocco 'a time bomb'. "We will just create even more landfills, without taking care of the problem at source," he said.

"It is essential to come up with a system that starts with sorting at the household level."

AFP

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After collecting dust for nearly two years, the 228 rooms at Bethlehem's Ararat Hotel were scrubbed last month in anticipation of a post-lockdown Christmas boom, hopes that have again been dashed by the coronavirus.

A large Christmas tree and decorations did little to brighten a deserted lobby.

Like other hotels in Bethlehem, the Ararat has no guests, with the tree offering cheer to no one but the seven out of 105 employees who have not been fired.

"We were expecting 70 per cent occupancy for Christmas but all overseas reservations have been cancelled," said Augustine Shomali, a manager at the hotel.

The people of Bethlehem - a Palestinian city in the Israeli-occupied West Bank where Christians believe Jesus was born - are used to welcoming an influx of tourists each December.

After a near-total pandemic lockdown last year, Bethlehem began to hope for a joyous Christmas when Israel, which controls all access points to the city, announced in October that it would reopen to foreign tourists on November 1.

But less than a month later, just as hotels were getting a makeover and businesses were replenishing their stocks in anticipation of the holiday season, Israel closed again after a case of the highly transmissible Omicron variant of the virus was discovered.

Now, Shomali said the hotel is relying on the domestic market, with only a dozen rooms booked for a Christmas weekend that is normally fully occupied.

"We are trying to find any point of hope," he said. "Things are harder now."

Shomali said he closely followed news about Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport in the hope of a reopening to tourists, but Israeli media have reported that with the spread of Omicron the government is considering tightening restrictions, not loosening them.

This year, like last year, midnight mass in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve will be reserved for a small circle of people by invitation only.

**One customer**

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 3mn people visited Bethlehem on average each year.

More than a fifth of the city's population is employed in tourism, and the jobless rate has risen from 23 per cent to 35 per cent through the pandemic, said

# A RUINED HOPE FOR CHRISTMAS BOOM



Empty restaurants during the otherwise traditionally high tourist season less than ten days before Christmas, in the biblical West Bank city of Bethlehem on December 15 (AFP)



Two women walk in the empty Manger Square outside the Church of the Nativity, traditionally believed to be the birthplace of Christ, in the biblical city of Bethlehem on December 15 (AFP)



A view of the almost empty Manger Square by the Mosque of Omar ibn al-Khattab (left) in Bethlehem, ahead of Christmas due to the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic in December (AFP)

More than a fifth of the city's population is employed in tourism, and the jobless rate has risen from 23 per cent to 35 per cent through the pandemic

Carmen Ghattas

Carmen Ghattas, spokeswoman for the municipality.

From her office overlooking Manger Square, where a life-sized Nativity scene has been installed at the foot of a towering tree, Ghattas laments she has no control over whether tourists can enter the city, even as other nations keep their borders open to vaccinated visitors.

"Here, tourists were not given this option. Tourists were just forbidden to enter and this affects our economy so badly," she said.

The Palestinian Authority, the civil authority in parts of the West Bank, is mired in an economic crisis and has only offered affected workers in Bethlehem's hard-hit tourism sector a one-time stipend of 700 shekels (US\$224 approx).

Israeli hotels and workers, by contrast, have been compensated by the Jewish state.

"There is no work," said Afram Shaheen, sitting outside his Armenian ceramics shop next to the Church of the Nativity, built on the site where the faithful believe Christ was born in a manger.

"I open the shop, drink a cup of coffee, and go home," he told AFP, smoking a cigarette.

Shaheen said that since Bethlehem became the first Palestinian city to go into lockdown in March 2020, he has had just one customer, a French woman who bought US\$23 worth of ceramics - his total sales revenue so far during the pandemic.

Like many shop-owners catering to tourists in Bethlehem, Shaheen is selling old merchandise.

"I didn't order anything new; there is no market, no demand."

Next door, Nadia Hazboun sold olive wood icons and said the city's workshops have ground to a halt.

"Many people sold their businesses," she said, adding that in the absence of any government assistance, owners and employees were facing debt and lawsuits.

"This lockdown is a disaster," she added, recalling days when she closed her store late at night.

Bethlehem has survived past crises, notably waves of unrest during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that have also dampened tourism, and Shomali said residents were surviving on hope.

Asked if he believed next Christmas would be better, Shomali answered, "Next Christmas? I have hope for Easter."

AFP

## FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

# Chelsea held by Wolves as Man City top charts

## ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

London, UK - COVID-hit Chelsea were held to a goalless draw by Wolves on Sunday after the Premier League rejected their request to postpone the game as Manchester City put struggling Newcastle to the sword.

Just four games were left on the schedule this weekend out of the original 10 as Britain's worsening coronavirus crisis took its toll on the English top flight.

Clubs will meet on Monday to discuss what action to take, with growing questions over the integrity of the competition as the busy festive period looms.

Stumbling Chelsea, who have struggled with illness and injuries in recent weeks, were only able to name four outfield players on the bench for their match at Molineux.

The visitors, who have now won just two of their past six league games, enjoyed the bulk of possession but mustered just one shot on target and are now six points behind leaders City.

Thomas Tuchel was without Romelu Lukaku, Timo Werner and Callum Hudson-Odoi, who have all tested positive for COVID-19. Jorginho, Kai Havertz and Ruben Loftus-Cheek were also not in the squad.

Chelsea earlier confirmed that their request to have the game called off been turned down.

The European champions' appeal is understood to have been rejected because the Blues were deemed to have had enough players to fulfil the fixture.

"I gave my opinion and you can do with it what you want," a frustrated Tuchel told the BBC after the match.

"I can't compare to other games, it is just our situation.

"It is not safe. We talk about protecting players and a safe environment but it is not safe. I



Chelsea defender Reece James (second from left) and Wolverhampton midfielder Adama Traore (left) during the match on Sunday (AFP)



Chelsea players Mason Mount (right) and Reece James react after the match at the Molineux stadium, in Wolverhampton on Sunday (AFP)

would not be surprised if the next test shows up and we have more positives. "How should it stop if we sit in the bus and have dinners and just stay together like nothing happened?"

## Newcastle calamity

Defending champions City crushed Newcastle 4-0 to confirm their position at the top of the table at Christmas.

Eddie Howe's side shot themselves in the foot in just the fifth minute, when calamitous defending handed City the lead after goalkeeper Martin Dubravka had carelessly conceded a corner.

The defence only half-cleared and Joao Cancelo hooked the ball back into the six-yard box. Newcastle appeared to be in lit-

tle danger but Ciaran Clark inexplicably chose not to make a simple headed clearance and Ruben Dias headed the loose ball into the net.

The home side rallied and Joelinton went close to equalising with a stinging shot from distance that flew just wide of Ederson's right-hand post.

But City silenced the passionate crowd at St James' Park shortly before the half-hour, when Cancelo jinked his way past Joe Willock and Isaac Hayden before smashing a right-footed shot past the helpless Dubravka from the edge of the area. City maintained their firm grip on the match in the second half too and scripted the win.

AFP



Freiburg forward Kevin Schade (centre) celebrates after scoring his team's second goal, in Freiburg on Sunday (AFP)

## Freiburg win at Leverkusen to go 3rd in Germany

## BUNDESLIGA

Berlin, Germany - Kevin Schade poached a late winning goal on Sunday as Freiburg finished 2021 third in the Bundesliga table after a 2-1 home win over Bayer Leverkusen.

The 20-year-old Schade came off the bench and stole a march on Leverkusen goalkeeper Lukas Hradecky at a corner to tap the winner into the net six minutes from time.

Freiburg took the lead at their Europa Park Stadium in Germany's Black Forest when Italy forward Vincenzo Grifo chipped in a first-half penalty.

Leverkusen equalised just before the break when Germany defender Jonathan Tah hooked a pass to Charles Aranguiz who headed past the Freiburg goalkeeper.

However, with time running out Schade ghosted in front of Hradecky and flicked the ball into the net to the despair of the Leverkusen goal-

keeper.

Freiburg's defence has conceded a club-record low of 16 league goals in the first half of the season.

The hosts' defence worked tirelessly to contain Leverkusen striker Patrik Schick who scored eight goals in his previous three Bundesliga games.

Freiburg's win saw them leap-frog Leverkusen into third spot, 14 points behind Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich.

The Bavarian giants are on course to win a tenth straight Bundesliga title and start the two-week winter break nine points clear at the top of the table after Friday's 4-0 thrashing of Wolfsburg.

Second-placed Borussia Dortmund blew the chance to trim Bayern's huge lead on Saturday when they slumped to a 3-2 defeat at Hertha Berlin.

AFP

## Barca guns deliver late win, Atletico undone by Sevilla

## LA LIGA

Madrid, Spain - Barcelona are in sight of La Liga's top four again after 19-year-old Nico Gonzalez scored a late winner to seal a much-needed victory over Elche before Atletico Madrid were beaten by Sevilla.

Nico's strike came after the 22-year-old Ferran Jutgla, making his full debut, and the 17-year-old Gavi had earlier given Barca a two-goal lead at Camp Nou.

But Elche scored twice in 96 seconds shortly after the hour as Tete Morente and Pere Milla pulled the visitors level, only for Nico to drag Barcelona to a 3-2 victory.

And the result got even better for Barca's top-four chase after Atletico lost 2-1 away at Sevilla, Lucas Ocampos smashing home in the 88th minute at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan to consign Atleti to a third consecutive league defeat.

"It's a difficult moment but I'm calm," said Diego Simeone. "I trust in the squad we have."

Barcelona are now seventh, two points behind Atletico and three behind Rayo Vallecano in fourth, yet having played one game fewer than Rayo.

Sevilla are second, five points behind Real Madrid, who play at home to Cadiz on Sunday.

Gavi's goal made him Barcelona's third youngest ever scorer in La Liga at 17 years and



Barcelona's midfielder Nico Gonzalez (centre) is challenged by Elche's Pere Milla (left) and Josema during their match on Saturday (AFP)

135 days, younger even than Lionel Messi when he opened his account aged 17 years and 331 days.

Jutgla also registered his first professional goal, after coming off the bench last weekend against Osasuna and then scoring against Boca Juniors on Tuesday in the Maradona Cup, an exhibition match held in honour of Diego Maradona.

Nico's goal completed another exciting night for Barca's young guns, less than a week after Xavi said his veterans needed to do more, insisting they could not rely on the next gener-

ation to deliver every week.

"Gavi, Nico, Abde, (Ronald) Araujo, (Alex) Balde, they are the future of the club," Xavi said.

"I played here when I was 18 and I was scared but they let their personality show."

## Impressive Gavi

Gavi, though, was particularly impressive, the teenager scoring a superb individual goal in the first half, before then assisting Nico's winner late in the second.

"What's surprising is his age, he's 17 and look how he competes," said Xavi.

AFP



Cruzeiro Esporte club president Sergio Santos Rodrigues (left) and former Brazil striker Ronaldo (right) (AFP)

## Ronaldo says he is buying first club Cruzeiro

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - Former Brazil striker Ronaldo said on Saturday that he was buying Cruzeiro, the club where he made his professional debut, but which has been languishing in Brazil's Serie B for two seasons.

"I am very happy to have concluded this deal," the 45-year-old said in a video posted on social media by club president Sergio Santos Rodrigues.

"I have a lot to give back to Cruzeiro, to take Cruzeiro where it deserves to be," Ronaldo added holding a club shirt with the No.9 and his nickname 'Fenomeno' on the back.

"We have a lot of work ahead of us. I ask the fans to get connected to the club again, to go to the stadium, because we will need a lot of strength and unity. We have a lot of work and ambition to make Cruzeiro great again," Ronaldo added.

AFP

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# England on brink of defeat as Root falls in final over



Australia's Mitchell Starc (third from left) celebrates with teammates after dismissing England batsman Joe Root (right) on the fourth day of the second Test, in Adelaide on Sunday (AFP)

THE ASHES

Adelaide, Australia - Joe Root fell in the final over of the fourth day on Sunday to leave England in deep trouble at 82 for four chasing a massive 468 to win the second Ashes Test and needing a history-making miracle to avoid slumping 2-0 down in the series. No team has ever posted such a big score in a fourth innings to win in the history of Test cricket - with the West Indies' 418 for seven in beating Steve Waugh's Australia at St John's in 2003 the highest.

It is an even harder task at the Adelaide Oval, where Australia's 315 for six to defeat England in 1902 remains the best fourth-innings run chase.

England's problems stem from losing seven wickets for 86 runs as they collapsed to 236 all out on Saturday in reply to Australia's 473 for nine declared.

They reached the close with ailing skipper Root out in the last over of the day, leaving Ben Stokes unbeaten on three.

England are still 386 runs adrift, facing the near impossi-

ble task of batting three sessions on the final day to salvage a draw with only six wickets left and the world's number one ranked Test batsman, Root, back in the pavilion.

"Any time one of your best players is out the team takes a knock but what you have to understand and believe is that the rest of the guys are going to fight as hard as he would," England bowling coach Jon Lewis said of Root. "They will try to survive the day tomorrow to get ourselves out of this game with a draw. It's a big ask, I know."

The hosts resumed their second innings at 45 for one and declared on 230 for nine before tea, giving their bowlers a crack at England with the pink ball as twilight loomed. They immediately made inroads with Jhye Richardson steaming in to Haseeb Hameed and the ball flying off his glove to wicketkeeper Alex Carey without scoring.

Malan trapped

Then Dawid Malan, who hit 80 in the first innings, was trapped

| SCOREBOARD                                                                                                                                      |                           |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|----|
| Australia 1 <sup>st</sup> Innings 473/9d                                                                                                        |                           |    |
| England 1 <sup>st</sup> Innings 236                                                                                                             |                           |    |
| AUSTRALIA 2 <sup>nd</sup> INNINGS                                                                                                               |                           |    |
| D Warner                                                                                                                                        | run out                   | 13 |
| M Harris                                                                                                                                        | c Buttler b Broad         | 23 |
| M Neser                                                                                                                                         | b Anderson                | 3  |
| M Labuschagne                                                                                                                                   | c Stokes b Malan          | 51 |
| S Smith                                                                                                                                         | c Buttler b Robinson      | 6  |
| T Head                                                                                                                                          | c Stokes b Robinson       | 51 |
| C Green                                                                                                                                         | not out                   | 33 |
| A Carey                                                                                                                                         | b Root                    | 6  |
| M Starc                                                                                                                                         | c Pope b Root             | 19 |
| J Richardson                                                                                                                                    | c Buttler b Malan         | 8  |
| Extras                                                                                                                                          | (b 3, lb 8, nb 5, w 1)    | 17 |
| TOTAL:                                                                                                                                          | 230 for nine dec          |    |
| Fall of wickets: 1-41, 2-48, 3-48, 4-55, 5-144, 6-173, 7-180, 8-216, 9-230                                                                      |                           |    |
| Bowling: J Anderson 10-6-8-1, S Broad 10-3-27-1, O Robinson 15-2-54-2, C Woakes 12-3-46-0, J Root 6-1-27-2, B Stokes 2-0-24-0, D Malan 6-0-33-2 |                           |    |
| ENGLAND 2 <sup>nd</sup> INNINGS                                                                                                                 |                           |    |
| R Burns                                                                                                                                         | c Smith b Richardson      | 34 |
| H Hameed                                                                                                                                        | c Carey b Richardson      | 0  |
| D Malan                                                                                                                                         | lbw b Neser               | 20 |
| J Root                                                                                                                                          | c Carey b Starc           | 24 |
| B Stokes                                                                                                                                        | not out                   | 3  |
| Extras                                                                                                                                          | (lb 1)                    | 1  |
| TOTAL:                                                                                                                                          | 82 for four in 43.2 overs |    |
| Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-48, 3-70, 4-82                                                                                                          |                           |    |
| Bowling: M Starc 11.2-4-21-1, J Richardson 8-4-17-2, N Lyon 14-3-28-0, M Neser 5-2-7-1, C Green 5-2-8-0                                         |                           |    |

lbw by Michael Neser for 20. Opener Rory Burns was desperate for a big score after a lean spell and managed 34, but was then beaten by Richardson's

sheer pace, edging to Smith at slip.

Root hurt his abdomen during a warm-up and missed the opening 85 minutes while he went for a scan.

He appeared mostly untroubled while batting but late in the day took a nasty blow in the same, sensitive, area from Mitchell Starc to leave him writhing in agony.

Root gingerly got up, but in a huge blow was out for 24 in the final over, caught by Carey off Starc.

With England crashing by nine wickets in the first Test at Brisbane, their hopes are all but over of going into the Boxing Day Test at Melbourne in a week's time only 1-0 down.

A 2-0 deficit in the five-match series will mean the Ashes are as good as gone. The only instance of a team coming from 2-0 down to win the urn was by Australia in the 1936-37 series. "Fantastic to get out of the night session with four wickets down and a big day tomorrow," said Australia vice-captain Travis Head.

Hero and villain

Buttler Earlier, Marnus Labuschagne and Travis Head both made 51 for Australia, steadying the innings after England took three wickets for seven runs to start the day.

Marcus Harris resumed not out 21 with nightwatchman Neser on two after they lost David Warner to an amateurish run-out the previous evening.

Neser only survived seven balls before Jimmy Anderson rattled his middle stump, and Harris departed to a blinding catch from wicketkeeper Jos Buttler.

Buttler's celebrations were short-lived when he incredibly missed a regulation catch off Smith the very next ball, in a blunder reminiscent of the two sitters he put down from Labuschagne in the first innings. Labuschagne took 96 balls to reach his 50 but also holed out to Stokes, becoming part-time spinner Malan's first Test wicket, ahead of the declaration. AFP



Tiger Woods plays a shot during the PNC Championship at the Ritz Carlton Golf Club Grande Lakes, in Orlando, Florida on Saturday (AFP)

## Woods happy with return at PNC Championship

Miami, US - A smiling Tiger Woods made a successful return to competitive golf on Saturday, teaming up with his son Charlie to card a 10-under-par 62 at the PNC Championship family tournament in Florida.

Woods, playing for the first time since suffering career threatening injuries in a February crash in California, showed flashes of his old brilliance even though he lacked his usual power and length. The 45-year-old golfing icon used a cart to help ferry him around the Ritz Carlton Golf Course's 7,106-yard layout.

He later admitted the physical demands of the round had been challenging; at one point Woods was seen wincing visibly.

"It's frustrating when I don't hit the ball as far as I know that I can and the shots that I see don't come off the way I want," Woods told reporters, saying he hit only 'three good shots' all round.

"I don't have endurance. I haven't played. This is, what, my fourth, fifth round the entire year? I don't have any golf endurance," the 15-time major champion said. "It's tiring out there, so it was

a slow day. If I want to compete out here at the Tour level I'm going to have to get the endurance back and hit thousands upon thousands of golf balls. Just takes time."

Woods, who has declined to put a timetable on his return to fully-fledged PGA Tour-level tournament golf, said his physical conditioning was still a long way from where it would need to be.

"I don't have it. You know that," Woods said of his fitness.

"I don't have the game or the speed or any of that. So I'm just starting to get back into it. Didn't know if I was going to play in this event a couple weeks ago."

"I can still hit short irons and I can still putt. That has not left me. The speed and some of the shots, the longer stuff has.

"I don't practice. You can't practice and after what I've been through this year, it's been a difficult year. So understanding that I'm not in golf shape. I'm not in practice shape. I'm definitely not in tournament shape," said Woods with his son, dressed in matching uniforms.

AFP

## US cricket breaks new ground with Ireland series

Miami, US - Cricket in the United States will break new ground next week when Ireland embark on a landmark five-game tour as moves continue to establish the game in North America.

The two Twenty20 and three one-day, 50-over international matches (ODIs) taking place in Lauderdale, Florida starting on Wednesday will be the first time the US national team has faced a Test-playing nation on home soil.

That in itself will serve as an important moment for American cricket, which has failed to take root in the United States



despite first being played in North America in the 18th century. Yet with firm plans in the works to help establish a T20 professional League within the next two years, which in turn may boost chances of cricket making its Olympic debut in Los

Angeles at the 2028 Games, the timing of Ireland's visit couldn't be better.

Furthermore, this is the first home series since confirmation that the US will co-host the 2024 T20 World Cup with the West Indies.

USA are currently ranked 18th in the world for ODIs, according to the International Cricket Council, the sport's governing body, and although Ireland are currently 12th - for T20 the rankings are 30 and 13 respectively - there is a strong belief that the Americans can upset the form book.

'Sending a message'

"This is the biggest home series we have had," USA captain Monank Patel told AFP.

"This means a lot to the team and this acts as the start for the global qualifiers for the big tournaments coming up," the Gu-

jarat-born wicketkeeper added.

"Playing well against Ireland will send out a big message to the other associate teams we compete with."

US optimism is also based on the emergence of a promising crop of youth players, which includes highly-rated wicketkeeper Rahul Jariwala (17) and 19-year-old left-arm spinner Vatsal Vaghela, who have both earned call-ups for the first time.

Both come from Northern California and impressed recently in a 50-over National Championships.

AFP





Algeria's players celebrate after winning the FIFA Arab Cup 2021 final at the Al-Bayt stadium in the Qatari city of Al-Khor on Saturday (AFP)

# Algeria win Arab Cup in Qatar

Next, the World Cup: After Arab Cup, Qatar faces bigger test

Doha, Qatar - Africa Cup of Nations holders Algeria won the Arab Cup on Saturday, beating Tunisia 2-0 after extra time in Qatar.

Amir Sayoud put Algeria ahead on 99 minutes in front of 60,000 spectators at Al Bayt Stadium, with Yacine Brahimi sealing victory deep into stoppage time.

Algeria will defend their Cup of Nations crown in Cameroon next month, having ended a 29-year wait for the trophy in 2019.

The 16-team Arab Cup, organised by FIFA for the first time in the tournament's history, was a dry run for the 2022 World Cup using six stadiums in Qatar.

The hosts finished third after edging Egypt 5-4 on penalties earlier in the day following a goalless draw after 120 minutes.

Qatar passed their first test with a successful hosting of the

Arab Cup but bigger challenges lie ahead when 1.2mn fans and 32 international teams arrive for the World Cup one year from now.

Algerian rejoicing at Saturday's 2-0 extra-time win over Tunisia in the final - exactly a year before the 2022 World Cup decider, and with FIFA president Gianni Infantino in the stands - will have been accompanied by satisfaction from Qatari officials.

But now comes the hard work as Qatar prepares for the unique task of hosting a World Cup in and around a single city, Doha, with limited hotel accommodation and a transport network that is likely to come under strain.

The wealthy Gulf state will also be bracing for intense scrutiny after coming under fire over the rights of the migrant labourers who have built its infrastructure, including the World Cup stadiums.



Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani (centre) and FIFA president Gianni Infantino (right) present Algeria's captain Rais M'Bolhi the Arab Cup 2021 trophy after the final, in Al-Khor on Saturday (AFP)

And it will be mindful of a cultural gap when fans from around the world arrive in the country with restricted access to alcohol, and where public drunkenness is illegal. More than 600,000 tick-

ets were sold for the 16-team Arab Cup, including a Qatari-record 63,439 crowd when the hosts played fierce rivals the United Arab Emirates in the quarter-finals.

Six of the eight World Cup venues were employed as Qatar took the chance to test its stadiums and training sites, transport, accommodation, volunteers and other areas including security.

A fan ID system was dropped midway through the tournament following reports of long queues and complaints from fans.

Qatar will 'take account of the lessons learned to organise the best World Cup', said Jassim al Jassim, the organising committee's vice-president of operations. The Lusail Stadium, which will host the World Cup final, was notably not used for the tournament. In October, its project manager told AFP that it still needed final checks and tests.

Coaches were impressed by the facilities, with Algeria's Majid Bougherra, a World Cup veteran, saying 'everything is perfect' - apart, perhaps, from the accommodation. "The stadiums are great, the pitches are great. Perhaps one small downside, but it won't be the case at the World Cup, is that we were in the same hotel as everyone else," he said. "We congratulate (Qatar) on this beautiful Arab Cup and I think the World Cup will be exceptional," Bougherra added.

AFP

## 50 arrests in France over celebrations

Paris, France - Over fifty people were arrested in France overnight as fans of Algeria celebrated their Arab Cup final triumph, largely on the Champs Elysees in Paris.

French police said Sunday that in Paris alone 32 were detained and 432 people had been cautioned, mainly for traffic offences as fans celebrated in the city centre.

African champions Algeria beat Tunisia in Qatar on Saturday with a 2-0 extra-time win in the final of the Arab Cup, sending supporters out in droves across France with further incidents in Lyon and Roubaix.

AFP

## FIFA aims to keep alive biennial World Cup plans at global summit

Lausanne, Switzerland - FIFA's controversial project to stage the World Cup every two years instead of the current four-year cycle is back on the table on Monday as world football's governing body holds a virtual global summit with its 211 member federations.

There will be no vote, but FIFA president Gianni Infantino has said the idea is to find a consensus - do national federations really want more regular World Cups, or is the plan promoted by Arsene Wenger doomed?

Former Arsenal manager Wenger, now FIFA's head of global development, championed the idea of having a major international tournament every year, alternating between a World Cup and different continental championships.

"There won't be more matches than before. The idea is about improving the quality of football and competitions. It is not about money," Wenger told French newspaper L'Equipe in September.

It would be a radical change, given the men's World Cup has always taken place every four years since its inception in 1930, and the women's event since



FIFA president Gianni Infantino

*There won't be more matches than before. The idea is about improving the quality of football and competitions. It is not about money*

ARSENE WENGER

1991. It is also a change that not everyone seems keen on.

European governing body UEFA and CONMEBOL, its South American counterpart, have led the opposition.

"I don't see the point," remarked Real Madrid and Croatia star Luka Modric, while clubs in the English Premier League have united in opposition and the head

of global players union FIFPro recently suggested that the project had little chance of succeeding.

"It is probably dead in its tracks," Jonas Baer-Hoffmann, whose organisation is comprised of national member associations from 64 countries, told AFP.

Meanwhile the Confederation of African Football, with its 54 member associations, appears in

favour - last month it gave support to the 'decision of the FIFA Congress to conduct a feasibility study'.

### Tensions

There is plenty of tension, with the current international men's calendar up for renewal in 2024 and many different parties trying to influence how the future of the sport will look.

Holding the World Cup every two years would have consequences for the health of players, with FIFPro already regularly citing concerns about their workload in a crowded calendar.

There would be economic consequences too, and potential issues could arise if clubs are not willing to release players for an international tournament every year.

Wenger's idea is to stage all qualifier in two windows a year, in October and March.

Thereby clubs could actually benefit, rather than losing players to international call-ups on four or five separate occasions each season.

"Too many players do not have enough opportunities to develop," he said in November.

AFP

## Clear-thinking key on road back to top: Murray in Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Andy Murray believes he is playing with more 'clarity' and has a better idea of how he needs to compete against the top players as he approaches the new season with renewed purpose and confidence.

The former world No.1, down to 134 in the rankings, had a positive weekend in Abu Dhabi, where he claimed two victories over Dan Evans and Rafael Nadal before losing to Andrey Rublev in the final of an exhibition tournament. The 34-year-old Murray, who is attempting a comeback no player with a metal hip has ever dared to embark on, struggled to find his best form against the top players last season, but finished 2021 with some promising results, including two top-10 triumphs over Hubert Hurkacz and Jannik Sinner.

"I feel like now I'm a lot clearer in my mind about how I'm going to play and the way I'm going to go about my matches in the next year," Murray told reporters in Abu Dhabi on Saturday.

"Decision-making comes from having a clear mind and clarity about the way you want to play and right now I'm quite sure on that and I believe that will help me in the important moments."

Murray missed last February's



Winner Andrey Rublev (right) and second-place winner Andy Murray with their trophies after the final match of the Mubadala World Tennis Championship, in Abu Dhabi on Saturday (AFP)

Australian Open after contracting COVID-19 and with the current surge in cases in the UK, the Scot is wary of suffering a similar fate ahead of next month's action in Melbourne.

"Obviously it's a concern," he said. "I want to try and stay safe. When I get home, I'm going to do all of my physical training at home in my house and avoid going to the national tennis centre; there's been a number of cases there the last week to 10 days."

Murray is expecting to receive a wildcard into the main draw of the Australian Open - a tournament where he has reached, and

lost, five finals.

The Brit owns a strong 48-13 win-loss record at Melbourne Park but has also experienced so many near-misses Down Under.

"I kind of feel like I maybe deserve to have an Australian Open, but I never got it done in the big matches there," he conceded. "Got close and was in good position a couple of times, but couldn't convert it, so that's something I obviously have to deal with. But my memories from Australia, in terms of how I feel about the place, I love it there."

AFP

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