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# RO2.7bn Liwa Plastics project opened

## H H Sayyid Asaad presides over launch of Liwa Plastic Industries Complex

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, presided over the launch of OQ's RO2.7bn Liwa Plastic Industries Complex (LPIC) mega project located at Sohar Industrial Port on Monday.

The successful completion of the complex is part of the government's plans to diversify sources of national income and promote downstream manufacturing investment opportunities in the petrochemicals sector aimed at maximising the value of Oman's natural resources.

The official commissioning of LPIC – the flagship project of OQ, the global integrated energy group of Oman – was celebrated at a grand ceremony held under the auspices of Sayyid Asaad.

The launch event, attended by dignitaries from the public and private sectors, was held against the backdrop of the celebrations marking the 51st National Day of the Renaissance.

Talal bin Hamed al Oufi, CEO of OQ Group, delivered a speech in which he welcomed H H Sayyid Asaad as the patron of the event. Noting that the inauguration of the Liwa Plastics project coincides with celebrations marking the 51st National Day of the Renaissance, Oufi congratulated His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and wished him continued good health and a long life.

"This project adds a new dimension to the nation's current economic development as it is one of the most important and largest undertakings in the sultanate's industrial sector with the potential to stimulate investments in downstream industries and SMEs in line with the OQ Group's strategy to drive sustainable development.

"The opening of this project is an illustration of the OQ Group keenness to harness its industrial and investment capabilities in unlocking the full potential of the petrochemicals sector and optimising the utilisation of Oman's oil and gas resources," Oufi said.



Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said presided over the launch of the Liwa Plastic Industries Complex mega project, located at Sohar Industrial Port, on Monday (Syed Fasiuddin/Muscat Daily)

*This project adds a new dimension to the nation's current economic development as it is one of the most important and largest undertakings in the sultanate's industrial sector*

TALAL AL OUFİ

He affirmed the group's determination to move forward in enhancing local value addition and in-country value (ICV) development by supporting downstream manufacturing industries associated with the project, which in-

corporates modern technologies to manufacture high quality polymers.

"OQ has attached the utmost importance in building the capacity of the Omani youth, and enriching their skills in the unique

technical disciplines that are introduced through this project for the first time in the sultanate," he said, adding that around 337 qualified young Omanis have been trained and equipped to be part of this complex.

*The Liwa Plastics project is in line with Oman Vision 2040 and it represents a qualitative leap in many development and economic fields. We hope to see more such projects for the country of this size*

H H SAYYID ASAAD

### New industrial landmark

Sayyid Asaad said the Liwa Plastics project is of great importance to the national economy and embodies the economic diversification policies pursued by the government of His Majesty the Sultan. "Liwa Plastics enhances the efforts exerted in the industrial sector to upgrade it, and it has significant contributions to the local added value that has boosted investment in the local market.

"The project is in line with Oman Vision 2040 and it repre-

sents a qualitative leap in many development and economic fields. It is a tributary of manufacturing industries in the sultanate and enhances the efforts exerted in the industrial sector and advancements. We hope to see more such projects for the country of this size," Sayyid Asaad added.

LPIC consists of four key components, of which the second, third and fourth components are currently in commercial operation, with the integrated commercial operation of the first's completion on track to reach full production capacity by the first quarter of 2022 in line with the project delivery schedule.

The ICV generated by the project during its construction phase amounted to approximately RO578mn, which was spent on the procurement of local goods and services, as well as training and support for SMEs.

LPIC aims to strengthen the industrial sector by producing 880,000 tonnes of polyethylene annually and about 300,000 tonnes of polypropylene annually, which will increase Oman's production of the two polymers to 1.4mn tonnes per year, Oufi said. He added that the output from the complex totalled 474,000 tonnes by the end of October 2021.

► NEWS BRIEFS

EU WATCHDOG APPROVES NOVAVAX COVID-19 JAB

The Hague, Netherlands - Europe's medicines watchdog on Monday approved a COVID-19 jab by US-based Novavax, which uses a more conventional technology that the biotech firm hopes will reduce vaccine hesitancy.

The protein-based vaccine of the kind used around the world to protect against many childhood illnesses is the fifth coronavirus shot authorised for use in the European Union.

"EMA has recommended granting a conditional marketing authorisation for Novavax's COVID-19 vaccine Nuvaxovid to prevent COVID-19 in people from 18 years of age," the European Medicines Agency said in a statement.

## Philippines typhoon death toll hits 375

Surigao City, Philippines - The death toll from the strongest typhoon to hit the Philippines this year surged to 375 on Monday, as desperate survivors pleaded for urgent supplies of drinking water and food.

The Philippine Red Cross reported 'complete carnage' in coastal areas after Super Typhoon Rai left homes, hospitals and schools 'ripped to shreds'.

The storm tore off roofs, uprooted trees, toppled power poles, smashed wooden houses to pieces, wiped out crops and flooded villages - sparking comparisons to the damage caused by Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

"Our situation is so desperate," said Ferry Asuncion, a street vendor in the hard-hit seaside city of Surigao, which was devastated by the storm. Residents urgently needed "drinking water and food", he said.

At least 375 people were killed and 56 are missing in the latest



### HM sends condolences to President of the Philippines

**Muscat** - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences and sympathy to the President of the Philippines for the victims of Typhoon Rai that hit several cities in the central and southern parts of the country, resulting in a

number of casualties.

H M the Sultan expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy to the President, the families of the victims and the Filipino people, wishing the injured speedy recovery.

disaster to hit the archipelago, with 500 more injured, the national police said.

More than 380,000 people fled their homes and beachfront resorts as Rai slammed into the country on Thursday.

One of the hardest-hit islands was Bohol - known for its beaches, 'Chocolate Hills' and tiny tarsier primates - where at least 94 people have died, provincial Governor Arthur Yap said on Facebook. Many wooden houses in Bohol's coastal town of Ubay were flattened and small fishing boats destroyed on the island, where a state of calamity has been declared.

A senior official at the national disaster agency said he had not expected as many deaths. "I was proven wrong as it appears now coming from the reports," said Casiano Monilla, deputy administrator for operations.

AFP  
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## Gap for booster dose reduced

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) has reduced the interval for the booster dose of COVID-19 vaccine from six months to three from the date of the second dose starting Tuesday.

The sultanate is currently witnessing an increase in daily infection count with 31 new cases reported in a 24-hour period on Monday. No new deaths have been reported.

Meanwhile, according to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), travellers transiting through airports of the sultanate must take a PCR test 48 hours before their flight take off for Oman and obtain a passenger registration card by registering at emushrif.om

A statement issued by CAA urged travellers to carry a PCR document, vaccine certificate and emushrif.om registration form.

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## Instructors' demands take driving test fees through the roof

Shaddad al Musalmay  
Muscat

Paying driving instructors extra on the day of a test and, in particular, on passing was a common practice. The extra was to compensate for the time the instructor lost waiting for his/her student's turn for the test or, in the case of succeeding, in celebration.

Now, however, instructors are demanding RO35 to RO40 on test days, and up to RO50 from students who pass. Nobody knows who set the system but it's holding learners to ransom.

"I am troubled by how and why they charge RO35 even when you fail a driving test. It is high time the authorities inter-



vened because instructors are taking advantage of the situation. Paying extra after passing or to compensate for the lost hours waiting for their students to give the test is understandable, but RO35-RO40 even when you fail is unacceptable. Who set this

price?" asked Saada al Nu'amani, a businesswoman based in Al Khuwayr.

Earlier, instructors asked for a reasonable amount - RO10 - from students who passed. Now, with RO35-RO40 demanded even after failing a test, the whole

process of getting a driving licence has become an expensive affair.

"I don't see any sense in this system and appeal to the authorities to look into it. Having to pay such a high amount after failing is like paying for the failure," said Saeed al Abri, who is currently taking driving lessons.

"Royal Oman Police only charges RO5 as booking fee for the test but instructors charge a minimum of RO35 just to take their students to the test in their cars for less than ten minutes. When I asked why I need to pay after failing, instructors didn't have a valid reason, claiming it's just how everyone else does it. Something has to be done about this," Abri added.

Saying that he understands the amount being charged is "on the higher side", driving instructor Mishal Salim al Rahbi reasoned it was due to COVID-19. "The pandemic has been tough for all of us. I personally, like many of my colleagues, try to reduce the charges sometimes. However, we also have expenses, mainly petrol price which has gone up. Additionally, there are insurance costs, which are high for us, and frequent car works that need to be done because of daily wear and tear."

Maher al Barwani, another driving instructor, claimed he "would be happy to lower the rates of driving tests, but unfortunately there are so many factors to be considered".

In his estimation, the cost of insurance for driving school vehicles has more than doubled compared to private vehicles. "Also, there are different government fees that we have to pay. And on the day of the test, we spend time waiting for our student's turn to give the test. In doing so, we lose actual instruction time. So, with these issues, I believe RO30-RO40 is reasonable.

"Another issue is that each instructor is allowed only two tests per week. If we are allowed more than that, we would probably reduce the amount knowing that we can earn more as more tests are slotted for us," Barwani said.

He informed that individual instructors fix the amount and that no authority is involved in this.

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(ONA)

## 6th batch of Spring Forward programme graduates

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL), in cooperation with Omani-Qatari Telecommunications Company (Ooredoo Oman), organised a ceremony to celebrate the passing out of 23 trainees of the Spring Forward programme on Monday.

The ceremony was held under the patronage of H E Sayyid Salim Musallam al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Human Resources Development in the ministry. He described the programme as an example of public-private partnership and a step forward in the field of grooming leaders.

He informed that the programme is based on practical projects which increase competitiveness and teamwork, resulting in improved performance and higher quality services.

Ooredoo launched Spring Forward in April 2018 as part of its corporate social responsibility. Its digital entrepreneurship and leadership programme for both men and women, Spring Forward aims to further develop the strengths of its participants by coaching them on how to be more aware, build team working skills, and demonstrate the required leadership competencies to rise to the top.

# Deal inked for first solar-powered biodiesel plant at Khazaen City

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Al Shawamikh Oil Services and Wakud company have signed an agreement to install a solar energy system in Khazaen Economic City in the wilayat of Barka. Implementation of this project will give Wakud the distinction of being the first facility of its type regionally and globally powered by solar energy.

An agreement to this effect was signed by Dr Aflah al Hadhrami, CEO of Al Shawamikh Oil Services, and Maher al Habsi, CEO of Wakud, on Monday.

Oman's first biodiesel plant is set to scale up production and sale of local biodiesel.

Located in Khazaen Economic City, Wakud's plant utilises locally



(Supplied photo)

collected cooking oil turning waste into biodiesel.

"Our company will install the solar energy system for Wakud to produce environmentally friendly biofuel in Khazaen Economic City. The agreement is in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040," Hadhrami said

on the occasion of the agreement signing.

"The sultanate seeks to boost the contribution of renewable energy by 20 per cent by 2030."

He informed that in line with the Paris Climate Agreement, the sultanate has started conducting studies

and implementing plans to achieve optimal energy use and focus on the development of renewable energy projects to support economic diversification plans and promote sustainable energy.

"Our agreement aims to support renewable energy projects in accor-

*The sultanate seeks to boost the contribution of renewable energy by 20 per cent by 2030*

DR AFLAH AL HADHRAMI

dance with Oman Vision 2040. We chose Al Shawamikh Oil Services to implement this solar energy project for the plant because of its pioneering experience in this field and its management's constant endeavour to support new projects in the sultanate," Habsi said.

## Ministry offers three Musandam castles for investment

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) is offering three castles for investment in Musandam governorate.

Forts and castles in the sultanate attract a large number of tourists because of their unique place in the history of the region.

An MHT official said, "As part of its efforts to support the national economy and benefit from the presence of these historical structures in the country, the ministry has floated a tender for investment in three castles."

The three castles open for investment are Bukha castle in the wilayat of Bukha, and Kumzarah castle and Khasab castle in the



(Supplied photo)

wilayat of Khasab.

The ministry launched the tender with the aim of allowing the local community to invest in these tourist sites and called on those interested to submit an action plan for the development of the three castles.

The ministry official informed that the deadline for submission of bids is January 13, 2022.

The ministry is exerting great efforts to restore archaeological and historical monuments such as castles, forts and old houses spread across all governorates.

Elaborating on MHT's efforts to develop forts, he said, the ministry signed an agreement this month with a private company to operate Muttrah Fort and the Grand House in the

wilayat of Muttrah.

"In November, the ministry announced that it is planning to offer Rustaq Fort in South Batinah to investors after its ongoing restoration work is completed. The ministry also began restoration work of Ras al Hadd Fort in the wilayat of Sur in South Sharqiyah governorate in October. The work is scheduled for completion at the end of 2021."

There were 366,360 visitors to castles and forts in Oman in 2018. In 2020, 133,464 people visited castles and forts compared to 426,525 in 2019, a decrease of 68.6 per cent. The ministry is currently working to establish numerous projects to attract tourists to achieve the strategic goals of Oman Vision 2040.

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(Supplied photo)

# Programme launched for women camel milk producers

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) launched a programme for rural women engaged in camel milk production on Monday.

The ministry, in cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), launched the programme at the Sultan Qaboos Youth Complex for Culture and Entertainment in Salalah under the patronage of H E Dr Ahmed Nasser al Bakri, Undersecretary in MAFWR.

An official in the ministry said, "The programme aims to empower women working in camel milk production in the Governorate of Dhofar. This project will be funded by Al Jisr Foundation."

According to the ministry official, "the programme will help rural women play their role effectively and efficiently in the development of society and preservation and development of

duction and processing of camel milk and milk products (cheese) will be established in the wilayat of Rakhyout.

Earlier this June, MAFWR signed an agreement with Al Jisr

(OIA) recently announced that the first commercial camel milk production company in Oman, Al Morooj Dairy will start operations soon.

The project is the first-of-its kind in the Gulf region, too. It will involve collection of milk from breeders in Dhofar, processing it and marketing it across the sultanate.

According to OIA, the project will include three collection centres where fresh milk will be received in the morning and evening.

"Each centre will be equipped with the latest technologies, and also have an integrated outlet for marketing products," an OIA official said. The centres are expected to receive 18,000ltr of milk – both cow and camel milk – per day, and the project will produce 6mn ltr annually.

*A unit for the production and processing of camel milk and milk products (cheese) will be established in the wilayat of Rakhyout*

MUSLIM BIN SALIM RAFEET

cultural heritage, besides encouraging them to work, diversify their income and increase their family income".

Muslim bin Salim Rafeet, acting director general of the Directorate of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in Dhofar informed that a unit for the pro-

Foundation to engage 20 women in Dhofar for cheese production. The project will provide equipment and training to women for the purpose, and also develop managerial and technical skills to enhance productivity in a sustainable way.

Oman Investment Authority

# Sayyid Badr leads Omani delegation in GCC-UK meet to strengthen relations



London, UK - H E Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, met Liz Truss, UK Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, in London on Monday.

Separately, H E Sayyid Badr headed the Omani delegation at a ministerial meeting between the foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council states and the United Kingdom, which was also held on Monday.

The meeting with Secretary Liz touched on the historical ties binding the two countries. The two sides stressed their keenness to continue promoting bilateral relations in various

fields. They also underlined their interest to promote joint cooperation, particularly in the economic and investment areas.

The two ministers exchanged views on various regional and international issues of common concern as they stressed the importance of maintaining security and stability in all parts of the world.

The meeting between the GCC ministers and the UK Secretary discussed topics on the agenda related to the promotion and follow-up of the action plan agreed upon between the GCC states and the UK, especially with regard to a free trade

agreement between the two sides.

In order to strengthen Gulf-British relations, the ministers consulted on a number of projects aimed at deepening the partnership in various fields and to promote common interests and benefits that would lead to further prosperity.

They also exchanged views on a number of regional and international issues and developments of common interest and the ongoing endeavours to address crises through dialogue and political and peaceful means in order to achieve security and stability. ONA

# Exhibition of geological heritage extended



Salalah - The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, extended the exhibition on Geological Heritage of Oman themed 'sustainability and job opportunities' until January 15, 2022.

The exhibition, held in the Museum of the Frankincense

Land, is organised by the ministry in cooperation with Petroleum Development Oman and Geological Society of Oman.

Osama Mohammed al Rowas, director of the Museum of the Frankincense Land, said that the exhibition has witnessed a great turnout of visi-

tors of all categories since its opening on November 15, 2021. The opening ceremony coincided with Oman's celebrations of the 51<sup>st</sup> National Day.

Statistics recorded 3,190 visitors to the exhibition from November 15 to December 15. ONA

# FIRE BREAKS OUT IN CARAVAN IN SEEB

A fire broke out in a caravan in Muscat on Monday. 'Our teams in the governorate doused the fire, and no one was injured,' the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) said in a statement. The caravan was located in one of the companies in the Al Jifnain area of the wilayat of Seeb. The statement advised against the use of easily flammable material in constructing caravans and similar structures (Supplied photo)



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| Sri Lankan Rs    | 525.94 |

\*Rates as on December 20  
Source: xe.com

## BRIEFS

### WEF to defer Davos meeting over Omicron

The World Economic Forum (WEF) said on Monday it 'will defer its annual meeting in Davos... in the light of continued uncertainty over the Omicron' variant of coronavirus.

The high-powered meeting scheduled for January 17-21, which usually draws leading figures from business, politics and diplomacy, will instead be held in 'early summer', the organisers said.

Last year's edition was cancelled because of the pandemic and Swiss authorities have recently stepped up health restrictions sharply to control a fifth virus wave.

'Despite the meeting's stringent health protocols, the transmissibility of Omicron and its impact on travel and mobility have made deferral necessary,' the WEF said.

The body will instead organise online 'State of the World' sessions to get global leaders talking.

Forum chief Klaus Schwab promised "continued digital convening of leaders from business, government and civil society".

# Oman crude prices sink more than 4% on Omicron fears

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Oman crude prices fell by more than four per cent on Monday, as energy demand fears grew over the fast-spreading Omicron variant of coronavirus.

Price of Oman crude contract (for February 2022 delivery) at the Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME) dropped by US\$3.1 or 4.2 per cent to close at US\$70.15 per barrel on Monday.

As per the DME data, average price of Oman crude (for December delivery) has stabilised at US\$81.58 per barrel, which is US\$8.8 per barrel higher compared with the price for November delivery.

Global oil benchmarks - Brent crude and Western Texas Intermediate (WTI) - tumbled by more than five percent as traders fretted over the impact on the world's appetite for energy, which has already taken a heavy blow since the pandemic erupted



early last year.

In morning deals, Brent North Sea crude tumbled 5.1 per cent to US\$69.79 per barrel and New York's West Texas Intermediate oil lost 5.7 per cent to US\$66.84 per barrel.

The rapid spread of Omicron has slammed the oil market - and broader global stock markets - on concerns about eco-

nomie fallout as countries revert back to containment measures.

"For crude oil, it is all about demand concerns right now," ThinkMarkets analyst Fawad Razaqada told AFP.

"Travel restrictions have been tightened across most of Europe and there is the potential for more measures to be announced in the coming days. Traders are

thus left with little choice but to sell oil, as well as energy and travel stocks, with very little appetite for risk-taking," he said.

Since it was first reported in South Africa in November, Omicron has been identified in dozens of countries, prompting many to reimpose travel restrictions and other measures.

(With inputs from AFP)

# MSX inches up amid thin trading

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) inched up 0.17 per cent on Monday to close at 4,050.01 points. Trading activity at the bourse remained weak compared to the previous session.

Gains in the MSX30 index were supported mainly by Financial index which closed 0.42 per cent higher. Industrial and Services indices decreased 0.02 per cent and 0.25 per cent, respectively. MSX Sharia index also decreased 0.13 per cent to close at 529.72 points.

Total trading volume fell by more than 47 per cent to 12.8mn shares on Monday compared with 24.3mn shares

on Sunday. Market turnover also decreased 41.2 per cent to RO2.79mn against RO4.75mn recorded in the previous trading session.

Market breadth of the MSX remained negative with seven advancing stocks to 13 decliners.

As many as 23 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Among top gainers of the day were HSBC Bank Oman (6.25 per cent), SMN Power Holding (2.27 per cent), Ray-sut Cement (1.71 per cent) and National Bank of Oman (1.08 per cent).

Top losers were Oman Fisheries (-3.33 per cent), Global Investment Holding (-3.23 per cent), Oman Investment and Finance (-2.74 per cent) and National Aluminium Products (-2.26 per cent).

# Expo 2020 Dubai visit numbers pass 7mn mark on Monday

Dubai, UAE - Expo 2020 Dubai visit numbers have increased significantly to a total of 7,167,591 visits in the period up to December 20, as organisers continue to maintain robust COVID-19 measures, ensuring a safe and exceptional event for all attending.

The largest major global event to be held since the start of the pandemic, Expo 2020's latest



COVID-19 measures include the expansion of the number of on-site PCR testing facilities to four, and free testing for all Country Pavilion staff.

While all frontline workers and entertainers continue to be tested on a regular basis, some close contact events, such as parades and roving entertainers, have been temporarily suspended as a short-term precau-

tionary measure.

With more than 90 per cent of the UAE population fully vaccinated, Expo 2020 Dubai has required mandatory vaccination and boosters of all Expo and International Participant staff, volunteers, contractors and service providers. Visitors ages 18 and above are required to present proof of any vaccination or a negative PCR test taken within

the previous 72 hours.

Expo 2020's virtual visitation rose to 31.6mn over the same period, mainly driven by the uptake of Live@Expo, which enables visitors to take a bespoke live virtual tour through the site.

Expo 2020 Dubai runs until March 31, 2022, inviting the world to join a global celebration that will help to shape a better, brighter future for everyone.

# OABC elects new board of directors

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Oman American Business Center (AmCham Oman) recently hosted its 2021 biennial general meeting and board elections at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Qurum.

During the event, OABC leadership presented the organization's progress over the past two years and announced the outcome of the 2021 OABC board elections. Guests and attendees included OABC company members, VIPs from the Oman business community, and representatives from the US embassy.

Seven members of OABC were elected to serve on the board. Four members maintained permanent seats including Ali Daud, chairman and founder of OABC; Emmee Haun, co-founder of OABC; Fouad Eid, vice-president of OABC; and Gary Schumann, chief commercial officer at the US Embassy in Muscat.

The seven members elected to the board of directors include reelected members: Marla Valdez, principal at Valdez SPC;



Paul Murphy, general manager of Grand Hyatt Muscat; Shayan Sumar, director at Apex Transgulf Manufacturing; and Talal al Subhi, executive director of Rohn Products International Arabia.

Newly elected members include: Mohab Ali al Hinai, co-founder of Sustainable Investments; Nourah Yousef Mustafa Mehryar, CEO of Nafith Logistics; and Samir Messaoudi, general manager at Sheraton Oman Hotel.

"There are more member companies in the OABC today than there were at our last biennial general meeting in December 2019," Rebecca Olson,

executive director of OABC, said. "This is just one indicator showing that OABC did not merely survive the pandemic as a business organization, but we have grown together as a network committed to enhancing Oman's business environment, connecting business leaders from every sector in Oman, and fostering bilateral trade between Oman and the United States."

As the official affiliate of the US Chamber of Commerce in Oman (AmCham Oman), OABC promotes understanding, partnerships and other matters of mutual economic interest between business communities in

Oman and the United States.

Formed in 2003, the OABC's mission is to foster the development of commercial activity between Oman and the United States.

With more than 30 events annually and over 160 member companies, OABC is Oman's most active business center and networking group.

The Oman American Business Center is known for its advocacy on behalf of Oman's private sector, and for hosting high-level professional networking events and informational sessions for professionals across the sultanate.

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# Turkish lira hits new low after Erdogan defends rate cuts

Istanbul, Turkey – Turkey's troubled lira nosedived on Monday after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan cited Muslim teachings to justify not raising interest rates to stabilise the currency.

Erdogan has pushed the central bank to sharply lower borrowing costs despite the annual rate of inflation soaring to more than 20 per cent.

Economists believe the policy could see consumer price increases reach 30 per cent or higher in the coming months.

But Erdogan said in remarks aired by state television late Sunday that his Muslim faith prevented him from supporting rate hikes.

"They complain we keep decreasing the interest rate. Don't expect anything else from me," he said in the televised comments.

"As a Muslim, I will continue doing what our religion tells us. This is the command."

Islamic teachings forbid Muslims from receiving or charging interest on loaned or borrowed money.

Erdogan has previously cited his religion in explaining why he believes interest rates cause inflation instead of reining it in.

High interest rates are a drag on activity and slow down economic growth.

But central banks raise their policy rates out of necessity when inflation gets out of hand.

The Turkish lira has now lost nearly half its value in the past three months alone.

It was trading down more six per cent against the dollar on



People queue outside a currency exchange shop in Ulus in Ankara on Monday as Turkey's troubled lira nosedived (AFP)

Monday afternoon.

A dollar could buy 7.4 liras on

not attempt full shariah compliant macro(economic) manage-



*They complain we keep decreasing the interest rate. Don't expect anything else from me.*

RECEP TAYYIP ERDOGAN

January 1. It was worth 17.5 liras on Monday.

"You cannot run a modern economy integrated into the global economy on this basis," economist Timothy Ash of Blue-Bay Asset Management said in a note to clients.

"Even Saudi Arabia really does

ment."

Turkey's nominally independent central bank – stacked in the past year with Erdogan's allies and supporters – has used four successive rate cuts to lower its policy rate to 14 per cent from 19 per cent.

Diplomats think the powerful

but increasingly unpopular Turkish leader believes that economic growth at all costs will help him extend his rule into a third decade in an election due by mid-2023. Erdogan last month launched a self-declared "economic war of independence" aimed at breaking Turkey's dependence on foreign investment and the fluctuating cost of imports such as oil and natural gas.

But the policy is meeting increasing resistance from powerful business leaders who had largely rallied around Erdogan during his 19-year rule.

The TUSIAD big business lobby of major exporters issued an unusually firm rebuke of the

president over the weekend.

"The policy choices implemented here are not only creating new economic problems for businesses, but for all of our citizens," the big business lobby said.

"It is urgent that we assess the damage that has been done to the economy, and quickly return to the implementation of established economic principles, within the framework of a free market economy."

Erdogan attacked TUSIAD directly in his televised comments.

"I am calling you out," he said. "You have only one job: to ensure investment, production, employment and growth."

AFP



## EU eyes nuclear, gas as 'green' on its energy list

Brussels, Belgium – The European Commission plans to present its list of 'green' energy sources in January, according to internal market commissioner Thierry Breton, who said he expected it to include nuclear and natural gas.

The list, known as the EU's 'taxonomy', will determine what sources are seen as sustainable and therefore eligible for investment under rules promoting the 27-nation bloc's shift to a carbon-neutral future.

It was meant to have landed before the end of this year, but deep divisions between member states over including nuclear and natural gas have held it up. An EU summit last week failed to bridge the gaps.

"Nuclear power and natural gas will help us achieve our climate goals," Breton told German newspaper *Die Welt* in a weekend interview. "That is why we in the commission are to present a taxonomy that includes nuclear power and natural gas."

He said the commission was "very close to finalising" the act that would introduce the list, with member states then having a couple of weeks to comment on it before it could be presented in mid-January.

If too few countries banded together to block the list, it would become EU law without requiring adoption by the European Parliament.

France has been pushing for nuclear – which provides more than 70 per cent of its energy production – to be included along with around a dozen other countries, but they face opposition from Austria, Germany and Luxembourg.

Austrian Environment Minister Leonore Gewessler, attending a meeting of EU counterparts on Monday, said nuclear energy was not climate-friendly and "has no place in the taxonomy".

She said if it figured in the taxonomy, "we will examine it from a legal point of view and, if necessary, we will take legal steps including legal action" to block it.

But Breton said the European Union needed to double its electricity production over the next three decades and that "is simply not possible without nuclear power". Eastern EU countries reliant on fossil fuels for their power such as Poland want natural gas to be on the list, at least as an interim energy source, even though Europe is dependent on Russian gas supplies.

AFP

## China cuts interest rate for first time in 20 months

Beijing, China – China's central bank cut a key interest rate on Monday for the first time in nearly two years in a bid to kick-start growth in the world's number two economy as it creeps under the impact of a real estate crisis and coronavirus flare-ups.

The People's Bank of China said in a statement that it had lowered the loan prime rate (LPR) to 3.8 per cent from 3.85 per cent in November.

The move marks the first reduction of the rate – which guides how much interest commercial banks charge to corporate borrowers – since April 2020.

It also follows the bank's decision earlier this month to lower the amount of cash that lenders must hold in reserve, which it said would release 1.2tn yuan (US\$188bn) into the economy.

"Today's cut will immediately feed through to outstanding floating rate business loans and should also lead to cheaper loans

for new fixed rate borrowers," said Mark Williams, chief Asia economist at Capital Economics.

"We expect a cut to the five-year LPR before long which will make mortgages slightly cheaper and help official efforts support housing demand," he added.

The reduction comes despite concerns about inflation, with factory gate prices rising at levels last seen in the mid-1990s.

Jeffrey Halley, at OANDA, said China "appears to be blinking in the face of slowing growth next year".

"Far more loans are based on the one-year LPR than the five-year, so the move is a concrete signal that China is moving into supportive monetary policy," he added.

China was the only major economy to expand in 2020 despite the pandemic, but growth has slowed this year owing to headwinds from a festering debt crisis in its property sector and localised COVID outbreaks.

AFP

### INVITATION TO TENDER



|                       |                            |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Tender Ref.</b>    | <b>TAIO 002/2021</b>       |
| <b>Tender Title</b>   | <b>Head Office Fit-Out</b> |
| <b>Tender Fee OMR</b> | <b>RO 100/-</b>            |

Tenderers can request to receive the electronic tender documents from 8:00 AM on Tuesday 20/12/2021 Until 4:00 PM Thursday 23/12/2021. Tenderers to follow the steps below in order to obtain the electronic tender document;

Step 1: interested tenderer should remit the stated tender fees to the bank details listed below:

|                       |                                    |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Account Name</b>   | <b>Takaful Oman Insurance SAOG</b> |
| <b>Account Number</b> | <b>100000000083</b>                |
| <b>Bank Name</b>      | <b>Muzn Islamic Bank</b>           |
| <b>SWIFT</b>          | <b>MUZNOMR1</b>                    |

**Note: bank transfers is the only mode of payment accepted**

Step 2: Tenders to send the following documents: A request for the electronic tender documents, scanned bank transfer receipt to the following email address **Procurement@takafuloman.om**



Takaful Oman Insurance SAOG,  
P.O. BOX 207, Postal Code 134,  
Bareeq Al Shatti, Sultanate of Oman  
Tel.: 00968 22303000, Fax: 00968 24699511

# Meethaq: Changing the banking landscape

Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat is the most popular and largest Islamic banking services provider in Oman, offering a full suite of Sharia'a-compliant retail, corporate banking and wholesale banking products and services. Since its inception nine years ago, Meethaq Islamic Banking has been enjoying phenomenal growth and continues to set new benchmarks. It has been very encouraging to see both retail and corporate customers wholeheartedly adopting innovative Islamic banking and finance solutions, which were previously unavailable in Oman.

In line with its excellent customer-centric vision and full commitment to offer a world-class Islamic banking experience to customers in every corner of the country, Meethaq has established the largest Islamic branch network in Oman consisting of 12 branches in the Governorate of Muscat and 12 branches across other governorates. In addition to its already excellent network of branches, Meethaq has a dedicated network of 41 ATMs/CDMs and also provides free access to more than 740 plus ATMs and CDMs of Bank Muscat across the country for customers to conduct their banking transactions with ease. This has resulted in Meethaq enjoying the tremendous confidence of its extensive base of customers.

Meethaq demonstrated its leadership in the sultanate's Islamic banking sector yet again by growing its assets despite the strong economic headwinds brought about by the ongoing pandemic. It is noteworthy that with close to 30 per cent market share of the total Islamic assets in Oman, Meethaq Islamic banking is significantly bigger than both full-fledged Islamic banks



and other Islamic windows operating in Oman.

## Supporting Oman's economic development

Meethaq has been at the forefront in actively supporting Oman's economic development with its ever-growing suite of Islamic finance products and services catering to the varied and sophisticated needs of its different customer segments. In May 2017, Meethaq attained a notable milestone when it received approval from the Capital Market Authority and the Central Bank of Oman to launch the first sukuk programme in the Sultanate of Oman allowing participation by retail investors. The maiden sukuk issuance was a great success with subscriptions far exceeding the initial target amount. Meethaq exercised its greenshoe option to absorb the excess demand for its sukuk and raised a total of RO44.6mn, which was well above the initial

target of RO25mn. Similarly, Meethaq Sukuk Second Series launched in 2019 was a resounding success with the Islamic banking leader successfully raising an additional RO45.6mn. Building on these successes, Meethaq has played a pivotal role in several sovereign sukuk issuances by the government of Oman. In addition to supporting the sukuk issuances in various capacities which include being mandated as the Sole lead manager, issue manager and book runner, Meethaq has always been the largest Islamic financial institutional investor in all of the government of Oman sukuk issued so far. This reflects Meethaq's commitment to support the sultanate's sustainable economic and development growth over the long term.

Meethaq recognises the immense investment prospects and potential offered by Oman and continues to play an important role in the development of key sectors in the sultanate. In

support of Oman's food security related strategic initiatives, several local food producers such as Gulf International Poultry, Osoul Poultry Company and Al Nama Poultry have been financed by Meethaq. Meethaq has also been instrumental in the development of the country's transport and logistics infrastructure by providing financing facilities to Oman Air and Oman Shipping Company. Hence, Meethaq promotes the sultanate's national goals of achieving strong economic growth, sustainable development and ensuring prosperity for all by financing national initiatives which are vital for the well-being of the country's economy.

## Innovation

Innovation has always been a crucial element of Meethaq's product offerings and has resulted in the launch of numerous innovative corporate and retail products. Meethaq's product suite comprises of several vari-

ants of savings and current accounts customised to meet the needs of different customer segments, financing solutions such as Home Financing, Car Financing, Personal Goods Financing, Travel Finance, Personal Financing, Education Finance, Marriage Finance, Ijarah Financing, Diminishing Musharaka Financing, Wakala Bil Istihmar Financing and Goods Murabaha Financing amongst other structured products and services. With the aim of offering a full range of Islamic financial offerings to cater to the different customer segments, Meethaq also offers credit cards, debit cards, Motor Takaful solutions, Trade Finance solutions and Hafawa Premium Banking services. These are essentially additional products and services recently launched by Meethaq in response to the growing sophistication of its customers. It is also noteworthy that even during multiple periods of enhanced social distancing and lockdowns in the post-COVID-19 phase,

Meethaq continued to innovate and launch new products or upgraded its existing products and services, which have greatly benefitted its customers. These include digital on-boarding of customers for opening savings accounts, domestic helper, travel and SME Takaful offerings in partnership with Takaful Oman, launch of Corporate Purchase Card, co-branded Lulu Credit Card and the opening of fixed deposits through mobile banking.

## Digital payments

Meethaq is strongly committed towards investing in state-of-the-art technology to further increase efficiency and improve customer service. With emphasis on competitive channels and new products to cater to various customer segments, Meethaq is focused on maintaining leadership in hi-tech products and services, including electronic payment and web-based services, in tune with the banking requirements of a young, tech-savvy generation.

Several significant technology upgrades were implemented over the last 15 months, including the Meethaq Wallet, which supports storing both Meethaq and non-Meethaq credit/prepaid/debit card details or even another bank's wallet details. This allows customers with a Meethaq Bank wallet to make digital fund transfers to a third party conveniently. It also allows a registered wallet customer to send or request money from anyone just by entering their mobile number or email address, irrespective of whether the customer is a Meethaq Bank wallet user or not. Naturally, the new product has significantly boosted cashless payments in Oman.

Other technological upgrades involved enabling customers of other banks in Oman to use Bank Muscat and Meethaq CDMs/FFMs to transfer funds to Meethaq or Bank Muscat accounts. Allowing the usage of debit cards issued by other Omani banks at Meethaq and Bank Muscat CDMs has reduced customer visits to Meethaq branches across the Sultanate and helped improve social distancing during the pandemic phase.

## Promoting savings

Meethaq has been playing an active role in promoting savings amongst its customers by launching the Hibati savings account. As part of this, Meethaq organised Hibati prize draws throughout the year, with 5 high-value prizes amounting to RO300,000 to be given away in the upcoming End of Year draw. In total, cash prizes worth more than RO1.5mn are being given away in 2021 to as many as 5,331 winners. Based on the Sharia concept of unrestricted Mudarabah, the cash prizes offered under Hibati's 2021 prize draw scheme are 'Hiba' (gift) from Meethaq to its customers and are paid out of Mudarib's (shareholders') own sources. The cash prizes are in addition to the profit share of Investment Account Holders (IAHs) in the General Mudarabah Pool as per the declared profit rates.

Meethaq's strong commitment to support the strategic national development initiatives in line with Oman's Vision 2040 economic blueprint, continued investment in new technologies and infrastructure to nurture and grow existing and new customer segments, has been well recognised by the global Islamic Finance community.



## Renaissance wins RO9.3mn worth MEDC contract

Renaissance has been awarded Muscat Electricity and Distribution Company's (MEDC) smart meter rollout contract. The RO9.3mn three-year contract commencing January 1, 2022, includes installing 400,000-plus smart meters across all three MEDC zones.

Renaissance bagged the project based on the efficiency of its technical and commercial solutions as well as high KPI achievement in Zone 1 (Muscat, Muttrah, Amerat and Quriyat) where it currently carries out manual meter reading for MEDC. The new contract adds MEDC's Zone 2 (Bausher) and Zone 3 (Seeb) to the project which involves automation, knowledge transfer, efficiency, and upskilling of Omani cadres.

The agreement was signed on December 16 by Salman Ali al Hattali, chief executive officer - acting of MEDC and Stephen R Thomas, CEO of Renaissance.

Thomas said, "This agreement builds on the existing strong relationship with MEDC, a strategically important and valued client partner for Renaissance. The project is much more than automation. By hiring and

upskilling Omani cadres, it also contributes towards capacity-building and Omanisation goals. Renaissance being chosen over other strong and experienced contenders is testimony to its successful track record in executing technical contracts efficiently and sustainably."

Renaissance will deploy 134 Omanis to carry out the work. In addition to 53 of its current staff from Zone 1, the company will welcome 81 more staff for Zones 2 and 3. These staff members will be upskilled from meter reading to smart meter installation and connection and continue to receive further training. They will remain employed by Renaissance, either for similar programmes introduced by other distribution companies or as part of its expanding facilities management and hard services team.

Renaissance's technical partner for the project, Tata Power (India) will provide in-country project management and capability-building expertise along with around 40 technicians to train the Omani team to install, connect and troubleshoot the meters.

## Ahlibank opens new branch in Khabourah

Aimed at enhancing its presence in the sultanate, to provide quality customer service and easy accessibility to its diverse product portfolio, ahlibank has opened its newest branch in the wilayat of Khabourah. The opening comes in line with the bank's strategic expansion roadmap for the year which entails bringing our services and products closer to customers.

Commenting on the launch, Muneer al Balushi, AGM- Head of Retail Distribution, ahlibank, said, "We are delighted to open our new branch in Khabourah, where we seek to provide our comprehensive suite of services for the bank's existing and potential customers.



ahlibank's growing network of branches is fundamental to and complements our ongoing efforts to bring our services closer to the people of Oman both online and offline."

"Given its strategic location, the new branch will be closer to its customers in the wilayat, ensuring fast and easy access to our innovative banking solutions. We are putting in con-

certed efforts in the direction of meeting excellent customer service levels throughout our branch network with the support of our well-trained staff," Balushi added.

The new site can be distinguished by its design and state-of-the-art equipment that reflects the bank's identity and business philosophy. The branch includes highly-qualified human resources, who harness their talents to ensure that the needs of the bank's customers are met, through a fast response mechanism. The branch is also equipped with multiple facilities serving the comfort of customers.

Ahlibank is committed to enhancing the satisfaction of its customers by providing wide-ranging banking services to them, using modern technologies and innovative solutions across its branch network in the sultanate.

## Leading Omani firm Global Business Services goes global

A prominent Omani company, Global Business Services (GBS) has initiated the registration process for the formation of a company in Hungary.

Earlier M/S Global Business Services LLC had signed different MOUs worth US\$450mn in the fields of oil and gas, trading, tourism and manufacturing.

Registration of an Omani company in Hungary will boost commercial, trade and investment promotion between the two countries, said, Sheikh Khamis Salim al Junaibi, chairman of Global Business Services.

The company registration process was signed at the Hungarian Embassy in Oman. Sheikh Khalid Abdullah Said al Hamrasi, Sheikh Khamis Salim al Junaibi - chairman of newly formed Hungary and EU busi-



ness entity - Global Business Services Europe.

It was followed by the official signing of company formation documents on December 16. GBS EU team comprised Jamal Salim al Junaibi - managing di-

rector, Syed Imtiaz Ali Gilani - technical & business development director, Sultan Juma al Sinaidi - international relationship director and from the Hungarian side Miklos Ruzics - managing director and Andras

Kepes - technical director.

In long term to promote trade and commercial cooperation between Pakistan, Oman and Hungary, H E K K Ahsan Wagan, Ambassador of Pakistan to Oman was also invited as a special guest to witness the company registration ceremony.

Global Business Services acknowledges and appreciates the role played by H E Szatmari and his team for the company registration and facilitating trade, commercial and investment promotion between the two sides.

In order to give a practical shape to the business and investment promotion between Oman and Hungary, a business delegation comprising prominent businessmen and investors will visit Hungary from January 22, 2022.

# First ever special course for diplomats from Oman concludes successfully

A group of 25 diplomats from Oman's Foreign Ministry visited India from December 5-18 to attend the '1st ever Special Course for Diplomats from Oman' which was held at the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service (SSIFS), Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi, India.

The special course was organised within the framework of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) between SSIFS and the Diplomatic Institute of Oman which was signed in 2018. Prior to this special course, fifteen diplomats from Oman have also undergone training at SSIFS.

The special course included modules on India's foreign policy, economy, polity, syncretic culture, India-Oman bilateral relations, energy and maritime security, the Arab world and GCC, India's relations with major powers, health diplomacy, climate change, digital empowerment, negotiation and diplomatic communication skills, and sessions on yoga and ayurveda.

Apart from class room lectures, the diplomats interacted with senior officials of the government of India and also visited Rashtrapati Bhavan, Election Commission of India, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi and prominent media houses.

They undertook study tours of historical and cultural monu-



ments, including the National Museum and Humayun's Tomb in Delhi. Outstation tour of Agra and Fatehpur Sikri was also or-

ganised, which gave the participants a first hand exposure to Indian history and architecture.

The Indian Embassy in Mus-

cat congratulates all the diplomats for successful completion of the course and hopes that the course would have enhanced

their understanding of India, its inclusive culture, its democratic politics and its diplomacy. The 1st ever special course reflects

the friendly relations between India and Oman and will contribute to strengthening of relations between the two countries.



## Minimally invasive care for women at KIMSHEALTH

KIMSHEALTH Hospital Oman welcomes Dr Dalya al Hamdan, consultant - obstetrics & gynecology, on a visit to Oman and offer expert care for women.

Dr Dalya is available at KIMSHEALTH Hospital Oman from December 20 to 23.

Dr Dalya has vast experience in the field of obstetrics and gynecology especially in undertaking advanced laparoscopic procedure for the treatment of endometriosis, removal of ovarian tumors myoma and hysterectomy for benign uterine conditions. She is also well adept at operative hysteroscopic procedures for submucosal fibroid and polyps and general and high risk pregnancy care and management.

In terms of early pregnancy care, Dr Dalya is expert in managing ectopic pregnancy, women care and screening programmes, family planning and infertility investigations.

## Christmas and New Year offers at Radisson Blu Hotel, Sohar

It is time for joy and laughter with friends and family in this year's festive season.

The Radisson Blu Hotel, Sohar offers multiple activities from buffet dinners to brunches and theme parties.

Join us this Christmas Eve for a memorable dining experience and enjoy our special dinner buffet at Al Zafaran.

The price starts from RO12,600 per person inclusive of soft drinks.

As for Christmas Day, you can savour a delicious buffet inspired by the season while enjoying the outdoor atmosphere.

In addition, the kids will enjoy some fun activities and a surprise visit by Santa with gifts.

The price starts from RO19



per person inclusive of unlimited soft drinks.

Ring in 2022 with music per-

formed by our resident band and DJ, a gala dinner buffet and drinks. Price starting from RO35 per person. Continue the celebration with our peacock theme party at Aqua until 3am.

Outside guests are welcome to join the party at Aqua with an entrance fee of RO10 inclusive of one complimentary drink.

Special room packages are available for guests who want to book an overnight stay in our stylish, comfortable rooms to enjoy Christmas Eve dinner and Christmas Day brunch from RO89 for two adults.

New Year's Eve room packages are also available, including a Gala dinner and a breakfast buffet. Packages are applicable for two adults starting from RO89.

## National Bank of Oman gives RO300,000 in special Al Kanz Savings Scheme draw

Giving the gift of savings, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has wrapped up its latest Al Kanz Savings Scheme draw at its headquarters in Azaiba, handing out a total of RO290,000 to 63 lucky winners across Oman.

This month, the popular scheme saw three Sadara customers win RO25,000 each and four Mazaya customers win RO10,000 each, in addition to 50 winners receiving RO500 each in the Salary Transfer Draw, and six winners receiving RO25,000 each in the Quarterly Draw.

The bank is now planning for its biggest event of the year, the Mega Draw, with half a million Omani rials up for grabs.

Tariq Atiq, chief retail and dig-



ital banking officer at NBO, said, "2021 has been really exciting for the Al Kanz Savings Scheme and now we're coming to the end of the year, which is a perfect opportunity for customers to start their new year's savings plan. Plus, there is still plenty of time to make sure they're in for the chance to win in our next draw including the RO500,000 Mega

Draw. Either way, it's the perfect opportunity to start saving."

Delighting customers across the country since 1995, the Al Kanz Savings Account rewards customers every month with prizes ranging from RO100 to RO250,000.

Accounts are quick and easy to open and customers are automatically eligible to win by main-

taining an average minimum balance of RO100. Every RO100 provides an extra chance in the draw, so the more money kept in the account, the more the chance of winning.

Meanwhile, customers simply have to transfer their salary to NBO to be in for the chance of winning in the Salary Transfer draw.

## ARA Petroleum signs agreement with Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with ARA Petroleum, one of the group companies of The Zubair Corporation, to establish a digital studio project for Al Amal School for the Deaf. The MoU was signed between H E Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambosaidi, Undersecretary for Administration and Financial Affairs in the Ministry of Education (MoE) on behalf of MoE and Al Zubair Mohammad al Zubair, vice chairman of the board of directors of The Zubair Corporation, representing ARA Petroleum.

As per the agreement, ARA Petroleum will finance the digital educational studio project, from the preparation of designs and special maps to the financing and fully-equipping of the digital educational studio. This will be carried out through an agreement with a specialised company and as per the latest equipment and specifications approved in this field.

Commenting on the signing of the MoU, Zubair said, "The im-



plementation of this project stems from our policy aimed at strengthening partnerships with the public and private sectors to serve the local community. This will be carried out through the implementation of several community initiatives within the cultural, health, sports and economic fields."

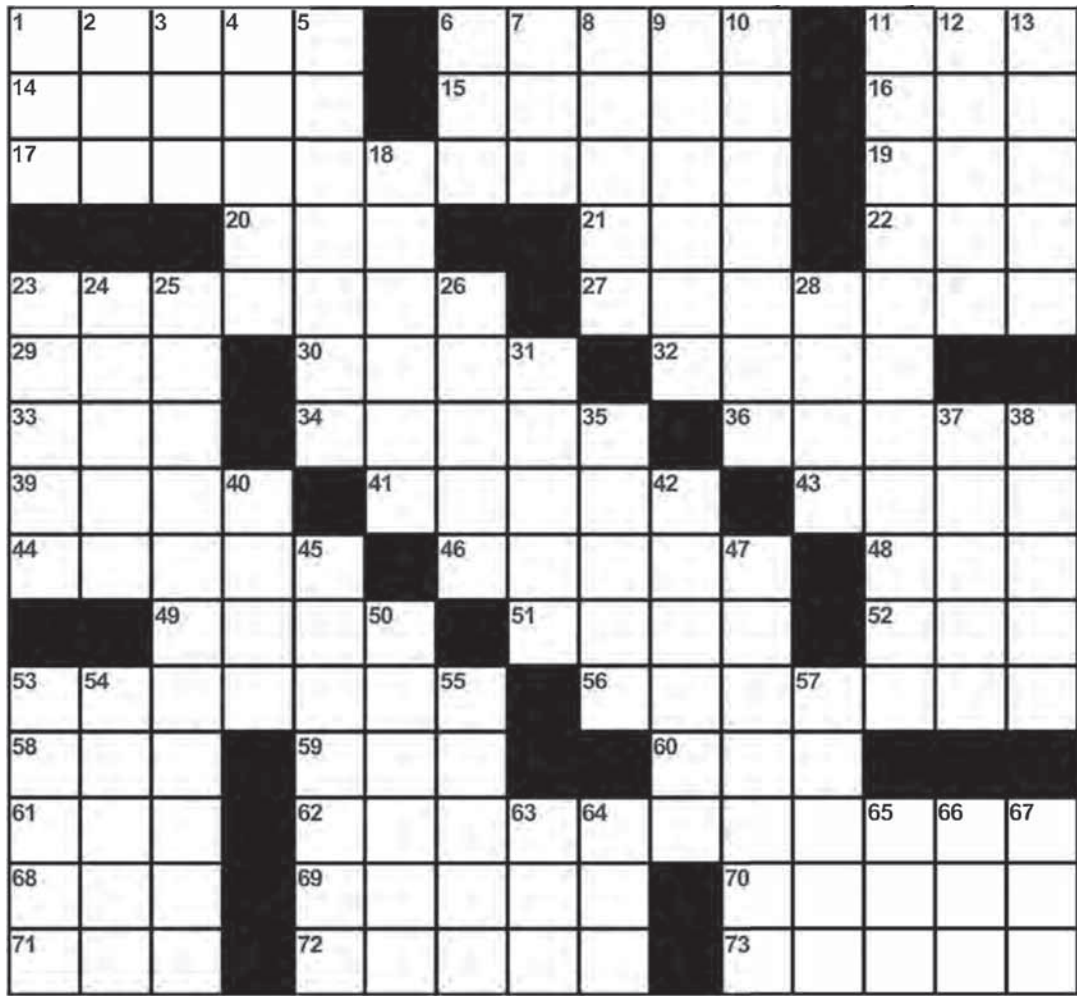
"This joint initiative between ARA Petroleum and the Ministry of Education will provide an attractive environment for education and improve the quality of learning at Al Amal School for the Deaf, by supporting the segment of students with special needs. It will enhance their capabilities and develop them so that they can be an integral part of the community in the future. We hope that this project achieves its goals and visions, including the development and enrichment of the students' mental and educational capabilities, in addition to augmenting the students' means of communication with the people around them."

Dr Fathiya Khalfan al Siddiya,

Director-General of the General Directorate of Special Education and Continuing Education at the Ministry of Education, added, "The digital studio project at Al Amal School for the Deaf will contribute in providing a qualitative leap in the field of visual education for school students, making it easier for them to communicate with teachers and administrators in a way that is easy and enjoyable. In addition, the studio is expected to contribute to providing a huge leap in the field of visual education for school students."

"We hope that efforts towards public interest will continue and that the desired goals will be achieved through this co-operation across all educational aspects, to serve our students in general and especially those with hearing disabilities. I would like to thank ARA Petroleum for its community initiative in financing this project, which will undoubtedly reflect positively on students and staff at Al Amal School for the Deaf."

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

  - 1) Make scholarly revisions
  - 6) Fan part
  - 11) Mongrel
  - 14) San\_ (California city)
  - 15) "Nevermore" speaker
  - 16) Gene material, briefly
  - 17) Testy garden flowers?
  - 19) Wood-shaving tool (var.)
  - 20) Fuss
  - 21) Came in first
  - 22) Feed lines to
  - 23) Inept
  - 27) Followed obsessively
  - 29) "Close Encounters" craft
  - 30) Nevada's second-largest city
  - 32) Keystone State port
  - 33) Chop, as tree limbs
  - 34) Follows recipe directions
  - 36) Guessed wrong, e.g.
  - 39) Artist's apartment
  - 41) Cook, as crabs
  - 43) Not quite closed, doorwise
- 44) Brew, in a teapot
  - 46) Deep sleep
  - 48) Title of respect, abroad
  - 49) Customer come-on
  - 51) Effervescent beverage
  - 52) Shed tears
  - 53) Private's privy
  - 56) Abolishes or cancels
  - 58) Jackie O's spouse
  - 59) Org. quoted on toothpaste tubes
  - 60) "Go team!"
  - 61) Carving mo. in the US
  - 62) Laughing very hard, in slang
  - 68) Docs in a bloc
  - 69) Disclose
  - 70) Commit character assassination?
  - 71) Mineo of old Hollywood
  - 72) More than a third of "Mississippi"
  - 73) Roomy vehicle

**DOWN**

  - 1) Bad \_ , Germany
  - 2) Dog's best friend?
  - 3) Flier's concern, for short
  - 4) Country bordering Tibet
  - 5) Walks unsteadily
  - 6) Grille cover
  - 7) Hang back
  - 8) Declares openly
  - 9) De musical sign?
  - 10) Catch in a trap
  - 11) First-rate
  - 12) Type of influence
  - 13) Brought down the house
  - 18) Red colors used by painters
  - 23) Ships' bottoms
  - 24) Underway, as a game
  - 25) Musical extravaganza
  - 26) Agitated states
  - 28) Italian cash, once
  - 31) Cookies with three parts
  - 35) It's a matter of taste
  - 37) Tidal bore
  - 38) Mule-drawn vehicles
  - 40) Kind of drop
  - 42) Up-to-date
  - 45) Easily bent
  - 47) Wreaks havoc on
  - 50) Provides with a trait
- 53) Turner and Cantrell

54) Free bakery treat?

55) 90-degree headings

57) Midwest airport

63) Little piggie, for one

64) Write-\_ (some vote-getters)

65) \_ about (wander)

66) "Anytown, \_"

67) Midmorning hour
- NOTE PAD**
- 

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

- ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

If any sign is equipped to handle arguments, it's you. You would never admit it, of course, but deep down there's something about the adrenaline rush conjured by conflict that's positively addictive to you. So if quite out of the blue you need to take a stand, whether it's for yourself or a loved one, it definitely won't be a problem. Just warn any innocent bystanders before the chase scene begins.
- LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

It's definitely not like you to prefer staying home to strutting your stuff in public, but at the moment, there's really nothing you'd rather do than snuggle up with your sweetheart and make the world go away. Telling you not to let anyone talk you out of this temporary hibernation just isn't necessary. After all, when did you ever let anyone talk you in or out of anything? Just say no gently.
- SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Here we go. Another day of mixed energies, and it's carrying its own special brand of surprises right along with it. This certainly does mean that a secret you've been jealously guarding might be revealed, much to your chagrin. Just be sure that your dear one isn't caught off guard. You owe it to them to let them know what's going on. Mind games get you nowhere today, because the rules are so complicated that no one knows what's going on.
- TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

You'll be quite busy now, and for all the right reasons: A certain someone will keep you happily occupied, in all departments. You will be quite absorbed with them, not just because of their appeal but also because of their common sense and wit, and you will be quite unable to concentrate on anything else. You're on the precipice of a brand-new chapter of your life.
- VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You have the urge to say exactly what's on your mind thanks to a new friend who's nothing if not strongly opinionated. The more you associate with them, the more you can expect some rather odd and coincidental occurrences over the course of the day. Feeling as you do, it's also a given that what you'll be saying will be a bit over the top, especially to those who aren't used to seeing you in this condition. It's your turn to vent.
- CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Ready for some fireworks? Good, because there's a whole bunch on the way. Today's heavenly menu urges you to make some changes with regard to your goals for the future, and this could mean that you'll feel the need to begin associating with a whole new peer group. If that's the case, try to ease away from the usual suspects gently, or at least offer to take the ones along who'll know how to act.
- GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

Ready for a break in the action? It's about time, and a surprise message will bring you just that happy news. Since you've been out so much lately, you'll actually be in the mood to relax tonight with friends and chatting over the news. In fact, regardless of the plans you've made, you may be much more likely to insist on staying in and either cooking or ordering takeout for a party of two. It's okay. We all like to hide out from time to time.
- LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Today's agenda has got you thinking about how to add a bit more cash to your bank account, and you've got some ideas. One of them is quite good. It involves making money by turning your hobby into a part-time job. The best part is that since the cosmos doesn't mess around, you may eventually end up doing the hobby full-time and your 'job' part-time. Even better, right?
- AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You need change, and you need it badly. Of course, you love change, so that's really nothing new, but today's agenda is making it feel all the more urgent to get the show on the road. This could mean that you're preparing to storm into your boss's office and make some startling demands - but think about that. You know how authority figures react to ultimatums, right? Oh, well. At least they've come to expect this from you.
- CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

You're starting to appreciate the people in your life in a different way and on a much deeper level. This is something to be grateful for, because too many people take their loved ones for granted. But recent events in your life have shown you that the people you care about hold you in high regard, and will always give you the benefit of the doubt. You're moving forward with the right people, and you know it.
- SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

This is going to be interesting. You're feeling restless, and the subterranean shifts you've been surfing for the past several months are starting to come to the surface. It's time to make some serious changes in your life, and you know exactly where to start, don't you? As usual, you'll begin at the bottom and work your way up. Just let your loved ones know the news as gently as possible. They might not be prepared for this.
- PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Your psychic abilities are legendary, so when something seems to be out of whack, it doesn't need to be happening in the same room or house or city or country for you to know about it. You just know, and many times you're the first to know. At the moment, one tiny fact that's out of place is bothering you. Don't hesitate to follow it up. You'll be quite relieved and happy when you discover that what's up this time is a happy surprise.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- The number of already named bones in the human skeleton is
  - 200
  - 206
  - 212
  - 218
- The purpose of United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) is
  - Studying population dynamics
  - Collecting population data
  - Evolving population policies, family planning and related programmes
  - All of the above
- The official working languages recognised by the UNO are
  - Chinese and English
  - French and Russian
  - Spanish and Arabic
  - All of the above

Answers: 1. b 2. d 3. d

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

|   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| N | G | O | I |
| I | R | I | U |
| O | S | O | T |
| D | N | W | S |

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

# Iran executes Kurdish prisoner; rights NGO alleges unfair trial

Paris, France - Iran has executed a Kurdish man for armed rebellion despite international pressure for his life to be spared, activists said on Monday, after a trial that was alleged to be unfair with forced confessions.

Heidar Ghorbani was executed on Sunday morning in Sanandaj prison in western Iran's Kurdistan province, the Oslo-based Iran Human Rights (IHR) NGO said, adding that neither his family nor his lawyer had been given prior warning.

UN human rights activists and experts had in September urged Iran to repeal his death sentence over 'serious concerns' that he did not receive a fair trial and was tortured during pre-trial detention.

Amnesty International had also called for his life to be spared, saying that there had been 'numerous violations' in his trial, which it said was 'grossly unfair'.

Campaign groups say that Ghorbani was convicted and



Heidar Ghorbani (right) was executed on Sunday morning in Sanandaj prison in western Iran's Kurdistan province

sentenced to death in 2020 in connection with the killing in 2016 of three men linked to the pro-government Basij militia.

He had been jailed since October 2016.

He was convicted of providing transport and logistical support for the killings. But the court verdict acknowledged he had never been armed.

Videos posted on social media showed crowds gathering on Sunday for a memorial ceremony for him in his home town of Kamyaran in western Iran, chanting 'martyrs don't die'.

"Heidar Ghorbani was subjected to torture and sentenced to death without due process and any evidence against him," said Iran Human Rights director Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam.

"Heidar's death penalty is unlawful even under the Islamic Republic's own laws."

The group said his case was still under consideration at the Supreme Court and his relatives

had not been warned in advance of the execution and merely pointed towards his grave after it was carried out, it said.

Amnesty International had also previously raised concerns about Ghorbani's appearance after his arrest in a so-called documentary broadcast in 2017 by Iran's state-run English language channel Press-TV about the killings.

Activists have repeatedly complained over Iranian state media's continued practice of broadcasting 'confessions' from convicts under the guise of interviews, expressing apprehensions that they were obtained through torture.

They also fear that disproportionately large numbers of members of Iran's non-Persian ethnic minorities are being executed, particularly Kurds and Arabs in the west and Baluch in the east who largely belong to the Sunni strain of Islam rather than the Shiism dominant in the country.

AFP

## Poll delay 'inevitable' in Libya: Candidates

Tripoli, Libya - A group of candidates in war-torn Libya's presidential election said on Monday that they were expecting the polls to be delayed, despite the lack of an official announcement to that effect.

Scheduled for Friday, the vote is meant to cap a United Nations-led peace process after a decade of conflict.

But it has been beset by deep divisions over its legal basis, who may stand and court challenges against prominent candidates.

On Monday, 17 hopeful candidates issued a joint statement in which they implicitly acknowledged that a delay was inevitable.

The group urged the electoral commission to 'reveal the reasons why there will be no election on the date set', and called on the commission to 'publish a final list of candidates'.

Multiple observers have predicted a delay, but just days ahead of the vote, there has been no official announcement.

AFP



Protesters run after security forces fired tear gas in the Sudanese capital Khartoum on Sunday (AFP)

## One killed in Sudan protests, 125 wounded: medics, ministry

Khartoum, Sudan - A Sudanese protester was shot dead during a 'savagely' crackdown on mass pro-democracy rallies on Sunday, medics said, and 125 others were injured according to the Health Ministry.

Security forces fired tear gas canisters, and live rounds into the air, as hundreds of thousands marched, three years since the start of mass demonstrations that led to the ouster of veteran strongman Omar al-Bashir.

On Monday, the independent Doctors' Committee said 28-year-old Majzoub Mohammad Ahmad was shot and killed with 'a bullet in the chest'.

Nationwide, at least 46 people have been killed and scores wounded in the past two months, according to the Committee.

The health ministry said late on Sunday that '123 people were injured in Khartoum and two in Kassala', a city in the east of Sudan.

Many of the injuries were from inhalation of acrid tear gas, including during clashes between the police and protesters near the presidential palace.

Demonstrators there had

chanted slogans against military chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who led a coup on October 25.

The generals had initially detained civilian leader Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok for weeks under effective house arrest, but reinstated him on November 21 and promised elections for July 2023.

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

The army on Monday insisted it backed 'the democratic choice for the people' and supported 'free and fair elections', a spokesman said in a statement.

Security forces on Monday maintained a barricade of bridges across the Nile river linking Khartoum with the cities of Omdurman and North Khartoum.

The Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) - an umbrella group which spearheaded the protests against Bashir - have urged people to continue to reject military power, calling for more demonstrations on December 25 and 30.

AFP

## Conjoined twin boys separated in Jordan return home

Sanaa, Yemen - Conjoined twin boys from war-torn Yemen who were successfully separated in surgery in Jordan returned to the capital Sanaa this month, the United Nations children's agency said on Monday.

Ahmed and Mohammed were born on December 16 last year, joined at the chest and abdomen, in Sanaa, the country's rebel-held capital, Unicef said.

They were transported to Jordan after urgent calls for their medical evacuation and surgery.

The twins were separated in July at Amman's Speciality Hospital in a nearly eight-hour operation involving 25 surgeons and technical advisers.

The twins were seven months old at the time.



A handout photo by the Unicef shows conjoined twins Mohamed and Ahmed in the hands of their parents after arriving in Sanaa (AFP)

Their father, Yasser al Bukhaity, was all smiles upon returning to Sanaa on a United Nations medical flight.

"I can't express my feelings," the father said, according to the statement, while the agency released pictures of the flight dated

December 2.

"There was a feeling of fear at the beginning, but we had great faith in Allah and in the medical team. Thank God the surgery was a big success.

"I wish for them to be educated like other children, to finish their higher studies, and to be of great benefit for their country in the future."

Yemen has been torn by war since 2014, when the Iran-backed Huthi rebels seized Sanaa from the government, which is supported by a Saudi-led military coalition.

The conflict, which the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis, has devastated health services in the country.

A UN Development Pro-

gramme report last month said the war will have claimed 377,000 lives by the end of the year through both direct and indirect impacts.

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

'This is a welcome happy ending story of one family, but millions of children in Yemen continue to suffer in silence,' Philippe Duamelle, Unicef's representative in Yemen, said in a statement.

'In Yemen, today more than ever, children need our support to realise their fundamental rights to health, nutrition, education, protection, as well as water, sanitation and hygiene.'

AFP

## Over 700,000 flock to Saudi Arabia's top music festival

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Record crowds of over 700,000 revellers flocked to Saudi Arabia's MDLBeast Soundstorm music festival, authorities said on Monday, at the end of the four-day event in the oil-rich desert kingdom.

The electronic music festival comes as Saudi's leaders are pushing efforts to change its conservative image and diversify its economy, only a few years after the country lifted a ban on music and dancing.

International entertainers and musicians - including superstar French DJ David Guetta - performed at the event despite boycott calls over Saudi Arabia's human rights record.

The festival, which ended on Sunday, comes as Saudi Arabia sees a spike in COVID-19 cases amid increased fears over the spread of the omicron variant.

Saudi Arabia has recorded the highest number of COVID-19-related deaths among Arab Gulf countries, with more than 8,860 fatalities.

Over the four days, 732,000 people flocked to the event, 'one of the largest music festivals in the world', said Turki al-Sheikh, head of Saudi's General Entertainment Authority.

The festival has since its launch in 2019 witnessed large crowds, most of them young men and women, who can and dance to western music.



People attend the Soundstorm music festival, organised by MDLBEAST, in Banban on the outskirts of the Saudi capital Riyadh (AFP)

"We've never seen anything like this in Riyadh before - crowds, music, for the kingdom," one Saudi woman, who attended the festival, told AFP.

**'Thirsty for music'**

The rise of Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in 2017 has ushered in a number of reforms.

A social shift in the conservative Gulf state has included the lifting of a ban on women driving and allowing mixed-gender con-

certs and other events.

Critics and rights groups have said the kingdom is using major sports and entertainment events to whitewash its poor human rights record.

Last month, Canadian pop star Justin Bieber was caught in the crosshairs for performing during the Grand Prix in Saudi Arabia, with Human Rights Watch (HRW) saying that the kingdom was using the sports event to 'distract from widespread human rights violations'.

HRW released another state-

ment ahead of the latest festival, saying: "Performers and promoters should use their microphones, stages and screen time to speak out about human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia or refuse to participate in yet another one of Saudi's reputation laundering schemes."

For the young Saudi woman, who spoke on condition of anonymity, such events have been beneficial in offering younger generations an outlet.

"We are thirsty for music, entertainment, movies, laughter and outings. It's like we're redis-

covering our country and that makes us very happy," she said.

Saudi Arabia is seeking to diversify its economy away from oil, investing heavily in recent years in the tourism, entertainment and sports sectors.

While the sweeping social changes have been embraced by many people, some are remain apprehensive.

'How is it possible that these scenes are in the country with two holiest sites,' tweeted one person.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

# Fauci warns of bleak winter with Omicron 'raging through world'

Washington, US - Top US pandemic advisor Anthony Fauci on Sunday warned of a bleak winter ahead as the Omicron coronavirus variant spurs a new wave of infections globally, sparking restrictions and concerns over hospital capacity.

"One thing that's very clear... is (Omicron's) extraordinary capability of spreading," Fauci told NBC News. "It is just... raging through the world."

Since it was first reported in South Africa in November, Omicron has been identified in dozens of countries, prompting many to reimpose travel restrictions and other measures.

Despite indications it is not more severe than the Delta variant - currently still the dominant strain - the heavily mutated Omicron has been shown in early data to have a worrying resistance to vaccines and higher transmissibility.

Fauci also cautioned against too much optimism over Omicron's severity, noting that in South Africa, while the hospitalization-to-case ratio is lower than with Delta, this could be due to underlying immunity from widespread previous infections.

"No matter how you look at it," he said, "when you have so many, many infections, even if it is less severe, that overcomes this slight to moderate diminution in severity."

"Our hospitals, if things look like they're looking now in the



US President Joe Biden speaks during a meeting with the White House COVID-19 Response Team, including National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci (right), in the Roosevelt Room of the White House (AFP)

next week or two, are going to be very stressed," particularly in areas of the country with low levels of vaccination, Fauci said.

On Sunday, US Senators Elizabeth Warren and Cory Booker each said separately on Twitter that they had tested positive for COVID-19 despite being vaccinated and boosted, and were experiencing mild symptoms.

Neither indicated whether they had been infected with Omicron.

Fauci urged unvaccinated Americans to get a shot and the vaccinated to get boosters, which have been shown to re-up protection.

## 'Tough few weeks to months'

The administration of President Joe Biden, who is due to address the nation on pandemic developments on Tuesday, has been campaigning hard for COVID-19 vaccination.

While a little more than 70 per cent of the US population has had at least one shot, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, another 50mn eligible people remain unprotected, Fauci said.

"With Omicron... it is going to be a tough few weeks to months as we get deeper into the winter," he added.

Omicron now accounts for around three percent of cases in the United States, a figure that is

expected to rise rapidly as has been seen in other countries.

On Saturday, New York state announced a record number of daily cases for the second day in a row, with almost 22,000 positive results.

The United States is the nation hit hardest by the pandemic, crossing 800,000 known COVID-19 deaths last week, according to a Johns Hopkins University tracker.

AFP



Paramedics take out a patient from the back of an ambulance parked outside the Royal London hospital in London on Sunday (AFP)

# Boris Johnson faces calls to tighten curbs over Omicron

London, UK - UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Monday faced pressure to tighten coronavirus restrictions to prevent the spread of the Omicron variant, despite opposition to do so before Christmas.

The UK reported 82,886 cases on Sunday as the new variant rages, with the highest number of infections in London.

"We have got 104 hospitalisations at the moment which are Omicron-based, we have had 12 deaths," Justice Secretary Dominic Raab told Sky News.

"There's a time lag in the data and so we don't know quite how severe it will be," he said.

The UK is one of Europe's worst-hit by the virus, with 147,128 deaths in the country.

The government has brought in measures such as health passes and made masks mandatory in various settings and has given more than 28mn people third jabs in a race to outpace the virus.

But after Johnson was forced into introducing curbs on indoor mixing last Christmas, he is facing intense political pressure not to do the same this time round.

Last week, nearly 100 of his own MPs rebelled against tougher measures to stop the spread of Omicron, assessing them to be a step too far and a curb on public freedoms.

There has also been public anger at claims that Johnson

*We have got 104 hospitalisations at the moment which are Omicron-based, and we have had 12 deaths*

DOMINIC RAAB



and his staff broke social-distancing rules in place last year, by holding parties at Downing Street and other government departments.

Unlike in some of Britain's nearest neighbours on the European mainland, there has been no official guidance to restrict socialising yet.

The Daily Telegraph on Monday reported the possibility of tightening the rules had led to 'heated debate' among ministers. The Times said 10 ministers were at loggerheads with scientific advisors who want new restrictions, questioning the accuracy of their modelling.

Health minister Sajid Javid said on Sunday he did not rule out new measures and Raab on Monday said measures were 'always under review'.

But he said that, with vaccines, "we're in a better position to enjoy Christmas with loved ones this year".

AFP

# Dubai airport fully operational for first time since pandemic

Dubai, UAE - Dubai airport, one of the world's busiest travel hubs, is fully operational for the first time since the coronavirus pandemic erupted in March 2020, officials said on Monday.

The opening of sections closed as the COVID-19 crisis took hold comes as the United Arab Emirates records a rise of infections amid fears of the new Omicron variant.

"Following the opening of the final phase... (the) airport is 100 per cent operational with all terminals, concourses, lounges, restaurants, and retail outlets



This file photo shows travellers in Dubai International Airport

now open," said a statement carried by the UAE's official WAM

news agency. Travel via Dubai increases at

the end the year, with foreigners - who make up the majority of the emirate's population - heading home for the holidays, while visitors come to celebrate the New Year.

Last year, Dubai International Airport reported a 70 per cent drop in traffic, from more than 86mn travellers in 2019 to 25.9mn in 2020.

In the first half of this year, 10.6mn people passed through the airport, a 41 per cent drop from pre-pandemic figures.

Tourism is an economic mainstay of Dubai, which wel-

comed 16.7mn visitors in 2019.

The UAE - made up of seven emirates including Dubai - has pushed a comprehensive vaccination campaign for its nearly 10mn population.

But coronavirus infection numbers are again on the rise, with the UAE recording 285 cases on Sunday, compared to just 92 last week.

Dubai is counting on the six-month Expo 2020 trade fair to boost the economy, with more than seven million visits since it opened on October 1.

AFP

# Chile celebrates as leftist Gabriel Boric becomes president-elect

Santiago, Chile - The streets of Santiago erupted in celebration on Sunday after leftist millennial Gabriel Boric became Chile's youngest-ever president-elect with an unexpectedly large victory over his far-right rival in a polarising race.

Boric (35) garnered nearly 56 per cent of the vote compared to 44 per cent for ultra-conservative Jose Antonio Kast, who conceded even before the final result was known.

Tens of thousands of Chileans took to the streets of the capital and other cities after Kast's concession, honking car horns in approval, brandishing pro-Boric placards, and shouting: "Viva Chile!"

Fireworks lit the skies for hours on end.

"I'm thrilled, I am crying with joy. We dealt a blow to fascism!" pharmacy worker Jennie Enriquez (45) told AFP.

"I am happy because there are going to be many changes that will help the people and the working class," added construction worker Luis Astorga (58).

Boric had campaigned on the promise of installing a 'social



Gabriel Boric waves at supporters in Santiago, on Sunday (AFP)

welfare' state, increasing taxes and social spending in a country with one of the world's largest gaps between rich and poor.

Branded a 'communist' by his detractors, he vowed in his first official address on Sunday to 'expand social rights' in Chile, but to do so with 'fiscal responsibility'.

"We will do it protecting our macro-economy, we will do it well... to improve pensions and healthcare," he said.

## 'Great triumph'

Kast congratulated Boric, who leads an alliance that includes



Supporters of Gabriel Boric celebrate following the declaration of election result, in Santiago, on Sunday (AFP)

Chile's Communist Party, 'on his great triumph'.

"From today on, he is the president-elect of Chile and he deserves all our respect and constructive cooperation. Chile always comes first."

Kast is an apologist for brutal dictator Augusto Pinochet and his neo-liberal economic model, credited with Chile's relative

wealth but blamed for its deep-rooted social inequality.

He had initially pledged to close the ministry of women's affairs, a promise he later rowed back on.

According to a projection by Chile's Servel election body, turnout was more than 55 per cent - a record since voting became voluntary in 2012.

Boric won by a margin of nearly a million ballots out of 8.3mn cast by 15mn eligible voters. "Clearly more young people came out, it seems clear... that Gabriel Boric managed to mobilize the segment that is more difficult to mobilize, which is the segment of young people," Claudia Heiss of the University of Chile told AFP.

"All (Kast's) anti-rights, anti-women, I think it helped mobilise that young segment," she added.

The new president will face the difficult task of healing a society reeling from a polarising campaign replete with attacks and fake news onslaughts.

For a country that has voted centrist since the democratic ousting of Pinochet 31 years ago, it was a stark choice between two polar opposite political outsiders. Boric on Sunday reiterated his plans for 'a more humane Chile, a more dignified Chile, a more egalitarian Chile'.

Congratulations poured in from elsewhere in Latin America, from Brazil's ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Cuban leader Miguel Diaz-Canel and Argentina's Alberto Fernandez on the left, to rightwing presidents Ivan Duque of Colombia and Guillermo Lasso of Ecuador.

Boric and Kast had softened their policy proposals in an attempt to appeal to Chileans left without an obvious candidate when they split the centrist vote in the first round, leaving only the two antipodes.

Both represent parties that

have never been in government.

## 'President of all Chileans'

Chile is going through profound change after voting overwhelmingly last year in favour of drawing up a new constitution to replace the one enacted in the Pinochet years.

The 2020 referendum was in response to an anti-inequality social uprising in 2019 that left dozens dead.

The drafting process, in the hands of a largely left-leaning body elected in May, must yield a constitution for approval next year, on the new president's watch.

President Sebastian Pinera, who leaves office with a low approval rating, said on Sunday the country was living in 'an environment of excessive polarisation, confrontation, disputes'.

Pinera urged his successor, before the result was known, to never forget that 'he will be the president of all Chileans, and not just those who support him'.

Boric will be inaugurated in March next year.

AFP

# Philippines typhoon survivors cry for help

‘Complete carnage’ in coastal areas; ‘Happy to be alive’ survivors plead for drinking water and food

Surigao City, Philippines - The death toll from the strongest typhoon to hit the Philippines this year surged to 375 on Monday, as desperate survivors pleaded for urgent supplies of drinking water and food.

With no mobile signal or internet to contact loved ones, typhoon survivors stranded on a devastated Philippine island have written letters to reassure worried relatives they are alive.

Photos of the touching missives were posted on Monday on the Facebook page of Dinagat Islands Governor Arlene Bag-ao, who has been able to get online during trips to the neighbouring island of Mindanao where she is seeking help for her constituents.

‘We are happy to be alive,’ Aimee Antonio-Jimeno wrote in a letter dated December 19 and addressed to ‘my dearest sister’.

‘Our houses are roofless but we are not hopeless! Please let all our families know.’

At least 14 people died in Dinagat Islands when Super Typhoon Rai hit on Thursday, tearing houses to pieces, toppling concrete power poles and smashing fishing boats.

The national death toll from the strongest storm to hit the country this year exceeds 375.

Many of Dinagat’s 128,000 residents sheltered in evacuation centres ahead of the storm and are now homeless. There is also a shortage of drinking water and food, officials said.

After receiving requests for updates on the situation, Bag-ao urged people to write letters to their families outside Dinagat to let them know they were safe.

She posted the epistles to Facebook - the most popular social media platform in the Philippines - titled ‘Letters from Dinagat Islands’.

‘Please stop worrying about me. I’m fine,’ a woman wrote on provincial health office stationery.

‘The house you all wanted me to move out of is one of the houses still standing so sometimes it’s a good thing I’m too lazy to move,’ she said wryly.

But in a sombre note, she added: ‘Twelve deaths and counting, sanitation is a problem’.

Raymond Gonzales wrote briefly: ‘I’m ok here. Let’s just spend Christmas here.’

‘All of us are safe,’ wrote Jane Mayola. ‘Merry Christmas and hope to see you all soon! We love you!!!’



Fallen electric pylons block a road while a sign asking for food (left) is displayed along a road in Surigao City, Surigao del norte province, on Sunday (AFP)



A destroyed government building (left) in San Jose on Sunday; while domestic tourists (right) take shelter outside the airport in Del Carmen town on the Siargao Island, as they await their flight out from the typhoon-hit town (AFP)



*Please stop worrying about me. I'm fine... The house you all wanted me to move out of is one of the houses still standing so sometimes it's a good thing I'm too lazy to move*

#### A SURVIVOR

Provincial information officer Jeff Crisostomo said that Dinagat Islands had been ‘levelled to the ground’ by the typhoon.

‘I saw tables that were heavier than people being blown off from the second floor,’ he said.

‘When we got out I saw the

devastation - the houses were all destroyed.’

#### Most vulnerable

Typhoon Rai hit the Philippines late in the typhoon season, as most cyclones develop between July and October.

Scientists have long warned that typhoons are becoming more powerful and strengthening more rapidly as the world becomes warmer because of human-driven climate change.

The Philippines - ranked among the most vulnerable nations to the impacts of climate change - is hit by an average of 20 storms every year, which typically wipe out harvests, homes and infrastructure in already impoverished areas.

In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan was the strongest storm ever to have made landfall, leaving over 7,300

people dead or missing.

The death toll from Rai is not expected to get anywhere close to that number.

The Philippines has an established disaster management system that provides early warnings of approaching storms and moves vulnerable communities into evacuation centres.

But the storm has dealt a savage blow to the tourism sector, which was already struggling after COVID-19 restrictions decimated visitor numbers.

‘SOS’ has been painted on a road in the tourist town of Gen-



Motorists drive past signage asking for help painted on a road in General Luna town, Siargao Island, Surigao del norte province (AFP)

## ‘Faith is solid’: Devotees pray in typhoon-hit Surigao City

Surigao City, Philippines - Standing at the pulpit of his typhoon-ravaged church in the southern Philippines, Catholic priest Dennis Llogon delivers a sermon by candlelight to the faithful seeking solace after a deadly storm devastated their city.

Hundreds of devotees flocked to the San Nicolas de Tolentino Cathedral for the pre-dawn service on Saturday as part of the traditional Christmas season celebrations - but there was little rejoicing.

Super Typhoon Rai was packing wind speeds of 195km per hour when it slammed into the coastal city of Surigao on the northern tip of Mindanao island on Thursday.

Part of the cathedral’s ceiling was peeled off by the ferocious wind, leaving a gaping hole, and the building lost power.

Despite the devastation brought by the typhoon - the strongest to hit the archipelago this year - Father Llogon used candles to light the cav-

ernous church as he welcomed back believers.

‘We’re in this journey together, we help each other, also inspired by the faith in God,’ Llogon told AFP.

‘There are a lot of questions around why this happened, why this Christmas season. What is important is our faith - I can see their faith is solid,’ he added.

The majority of Filipinos identify as Catholic and December is one of the most important months on the religious calendar, with many attending pre-dawn masses in the nine days leading up to Christmas.

Rico Amolares (19) said he felt the ‘presence of God’ during the sermon.

‘Despite the difficulty, our priest conducted a mass with very few candles,’ Amolares told AFP. ‘There’s still a light we can see from people, giving hope to everyone.’

‘It was unimaginable, I thought all of us would die,’ a woman told AFP.

AFP

eral Luna on Siargao Island, where surfers and holidaymakers had flocked ahead of Christmas, as people struggled to find water and food.

‘There’s no water anymore, there’s a water shortage, on day one there was already looting in our neighbourhood,’ Siargao resort owner Marja O’Donnell told CNN Philippines.

There has also been widespread destruction on Dinagat and Mindanao islands, which along with Siargao bore the brunt of the storm when it hit, packing wind speeds of 195km per hour.

At least 14 people died on the Dinagat Islands.

With electricity knocked out in many areas, there is no signal or internet, hampering efforts to assess the storm’s damage.

Thousands of military, police, coast guard and fire personnel were deployed along with food, water and medical supplies, while heavy machinery - including backhoes and front-end loaders - were sent to clear roads.

President Rodrigo Duterte vowed to ‘look for another’ 2bn pesos (US\$40mn) in aid.

AFP

# Hong Kong leader hails ‘patriots only’ vote despite record low turnout

Hong Kong, China - Hong Kong’s leader on Monday hailed the outcome of a ‘patriots only’ legislature election that saw a record low voter turnout and government loyalists sweep every seat.

The financial hub selected new lawmakers on Sunday under fresh rules imposed by Beijing that dramatically cut directly elected seats and controlled who could stand for office after huge democracy protests convulsed the city two years ago.

Figures showed just 30 per cent of the electorate cast ballots, the lowest rate both of the period since the city’s 1997 handover to China and the British colonial era.

Hong Kong’s chief executive Carrie Lam defended the new system and played down the poor turnout.

‘Hong Kong is now back on the right track of One Country, Two Systems,’ she told reporters, naming the model China uses to give the city some autonomy from the authoritarian mainland.

‘We cannot copy and paste the so-called democratic system or rules of the Western countries,’ she added, arguing the new rules meant ‘anti-China’ elements were now excluded and political calm restored.

When asked why only 1.3mn of the 4.5mn registered voters cast ballots, Lam replied, ‘What is the reason, I can’t analyse. You may need to turn to other opinion leaders.’

Zhao Lijian, China’s foreign ministry spokesman, blamed the low turnout on the pandemic and ‘anti-China elements bent on destroying Hong Kong and the interference of external forces’.

#### Loyalty vetting

Lam will fly to Beijing on Monday to meet Chinese leaders as focus shifts to whether she will get backing for a second term in March when a 1,500-strong committee stacked with Beijing loyalists will pick the city’s next leader.

With her public approval ratings at around 36 per cent, Lam has so far declined to say



Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam speaks during a press conference in Hong Kong on Sunday (AFP)

whether she will seek a second term. Hong Kong has never been a full democracy under either colonial Britain or China, the source of years of protests.

Beijing responded to months of huge and often violent rallies in 2019 with a national security law criminalising much dissent

and political reforms to remove anyone deemed unpatriotic.

Most of the city’s prominent democracy activists - including many former elected lawmakers - are either in jail, have fled overseas or been disqualified.

Alongside screening out ‘anti-China’ activists, directly elected

seats were slashed from half to 22 per cent.

The largest chunk - 40 - were picked by the 1,500-strong Election Committee, which will also choose the city’s next leader. The remaining 30 were chosen by larger pro-Beijing committees that represent special-interest

and industry groups.

Only 11 of the 153 candidates who made it through the vetting process were identified as ‘centrist’ or ‘non-establishment’ by local media, but none won enough votes.

The result is a legislature stacked with government loyalists similar to the Chinese mainland’s rubber stamp law-making bodies.

‘The new Legislative Council, now under the complete control of patriots, will function effectively as the guardian of national security and unity,’ Lau Siu-kai, vice-president of Beijing’s top Hong Kong think tank wrote in the state-run *China Daily*.

Analysts warned the new system could leave the city’s rulers even more out of touch with its residents.

‘The tension between the authorities and the people will remain in place for a long time while the legislators won’t be mediators because they have to toe Beijing’s line,’ said Chung Kim-wah of the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute.

#### Boycott calls

Hong Kong and Chinese officials had called on residents to embrace Sunday’s polls as a vote of confidence in the new political system.

But most Hong Kongers stayed away, taking advantage of free public transport for the day to fill shopping malls, hiking trails and beaches.

Turnout at the last legislature polls in 2016 was 58 per cent, while the 2019 district council elections, when pro-democracy figures won a landslide, saw a record 71 per cent.

The government recently made it illegal to organise or incite voting boycotts but many prominent overseas democracy activists issued such calls online.

In the run-up to Sunday, ten people were arrested under that law.

Authorities also issued arrest warrants for overseas activists and threatened Western publications with prosecution for editorials critical of the new political system.

AFP

# Turks hunt for vanishing drugs in currency crisis

Ankara, Turkey - Fatih Yuksel is one of thousands of Turks rushing from one pharmacy to another in search of imported drugs that are disappearing as quickly as the lira is losing value.

"Sometimes I have periods where I don't have the drugs I need and my illness gets worse. I suffer pains," said the 35-year-old, who has been taking pills to relieve a rare autoimmune disorder known as Behcet's syndrome, for the past nine years.

"It can be hard but I have to work," said the shop attendant.

Turks have been rattled by a currency collapse that accelerated when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan last month launched a self-declared 'economic war of independence' that defies conventional market theory.

The veteran Turkish leader is trying to fight spiralling inflation by bringing down borrowing costs - the exact opposite of what countries usually do in similar situations. The results have been frightening for people such as Yuksel.

The Turkish currency has lost more than 40 per cent of its value since the start of November alone. A lira could buy 13 US cents in January. It was worth less than half that this month.

The crisis has wiped out the value of people's savings and made basic goods prohibitively expensive, plunging swathes of the population below the official poverty line. It has also made a whole gamut of imported drugs for a range of illnesses - from diabetes to cancer, heart disease to flu - nearly impossible to find across the country's 27,000 pharmacies.

## 'Pitiless accusation'

Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca has deflected the blame, accusing drugs manufacturers of 'trying to sell expensive drugs to Turkey'.

"News that 'medicines cannot be found in Turkey' is not based on reality," said Koca.



Turkish pharmacist Gokberk Bulmus (right) serves customers at a pharmacy in the Turkish capital Ankara (AFP)



A customer (left) buys medicines from a pharmacy in the Turkish capital Ankara; while another pharmacist (right) looks for prescribed medicines in the shelf in his outlet (AFP)



Vedat Bulut, the Turkish Medical Association's secretary general, said it was 'pitiless' to accuse companies of trying to sell expensive drugs when the lira had lost so much value.

Medical professionals said a long-term solution involved developing Turkey's health industry to wean it off its dependence on imports.

But today, pharmacists describe receiving heart-rending notes from patients on messaging apps with photographs, pleading to know where they can find their medication.

The Turkish Pharmacists' Association said in November that 645 drugs were affected but as the situation grew worse, pharmacist Berna Yucel Mintas told

AFP around 1,000 medicines were difficult to find.

"The situation deteriorated because of the lira," said Taner Ercanli, head of Ankara Chamber of Pharmacists.

"Imagine it like a fire, and gasoline was poured over it."

## Set exchange rate

Part of the problem stems from

the way Turkey has been procuring medications.

The Health Ministry sets the standard price for drugs every February based on an exchange rate agreed by the government.

It set an exchange rate of 4.57 lira to the euro for this year. But it now takes nearly 20 liras to buy a euro on the market.

That meant drug manufactur-

ers had 'unfortunately' decided against selling medicines to Turkey, Ercanli said, because they made more money in other markets.

Pharmacists want the government to reassess drug prices against the euro at least three times a year.

But there are wider problems. Global supply chain bottle-

*It is pitiless to accuse companies of trying to sell expensive drugs when the lira had lost so much value*

VEDAT BULUT

necks caused by the coronavirus pandemic have resulted in jumps in the price of most raw materials, which make domestically produced medicine more expensive. Turkish drug suppliers are also angry with the government over delayed payments, which are doubly painful as these are settled in liras according to the exchange rate agreed at the time.

Employers' associations warn some companies will be forced to close.

## 'Wretched' situation

Children's syrups have been especially hard to find, as grandfather Emin Durmus discovered while trying to treat his five-year-old grandson's cough.

"They don't have that medicine so I go back and get a new prescription. Then I come to this pharmacy and that drug is also not available," said Durmus (62).

Erkan Ozturk, who manages a private medical centre in Ankara, described similar issues finding drugs to address fever, nausea and stomach aches.

"There are major sourcing issues for drugs used to lower children's temperatures," the centre's chief doctor said.

"We're starting to not be able to find medicines needed to treat diabetes, hypertension, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease," pharmacist Gokberk Bulmus said.

"This is going towards becoming a drugs shortage. Whatever is left in our hands, this is all of our stock because we can't replace it."

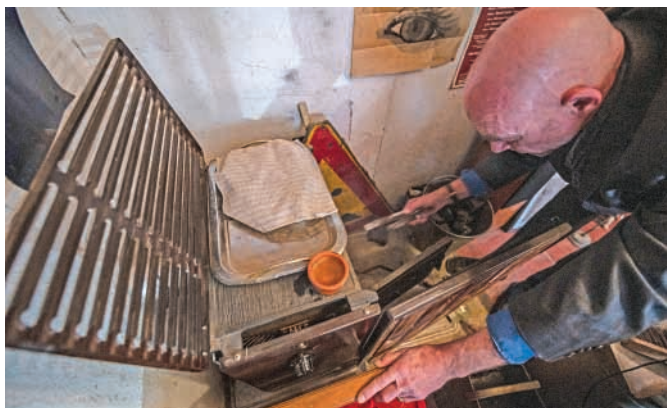
AFP

# Battling climate change: End of an era nears for Berlin's coal stoves

Berlin, Germany - Alban Nikolai Herbst's Berlin apartment is covered in dust, his precious record collection included, thanks to a coal-powered stove he still uses to heat his home like thousands across the city.

Germany's new government is set to extinguish the at-home heat source from a bygone era as part of its ambitious climate plans, as it looks to cut harmful emissions linked to climate change.

But Herbst says he remains



Berlin resident Alban Nikolai Herbst fills his heater with coal in his flat in Berlin, the capital of Germany (AFP)

attached to his coal-powered stove, which he clings to for 'sentimental' reasons.

Arriving in Berlin in the mid-1990s, Herbst discovered an odour that had long disappeared from the streets of western cities, where - unlike in the ex-communist east - domestic coal burning had died out.

The 'heavy heat' emanating from his stove suits his work as a writer too. "I am always at my desk. I work from six o'clock in the morning to 10 at night some-

times," he says.

Hans Engelke Energie supplies much of the coal used in the ovens across Berlin, and estimates between 5,000 to 6,000 homes still rely on the retro heat source. The family-run business is one of the last in Berlin still delivering briquettes of black coal to customers.

It has had to diversify over recent years to survive, and now delivers home heating oil and wood pellets.

"We sell gas and electricity,

too," says company co-head Peter Engelke, adding that the company 'hopes to prosper for a long time'.

Germany's new government, which took office this month, has made the battle against climate change a priority, announcing a target to phase out the use of coal by 2030.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition has pledged to expand renewable energy and decrease reliance on sources such as Russian gas in the long run.

Some Berlin residents have already made the shift at home.

Graphic designer Robert Schumann, who lives in the east of the city, still uses his ceramic stove to heat his home, but has dropped the coal in favour of wood.

"It's more ecological," he says, drawing a comparison with fossil fuels excavated from the earth.

"Less ash, and it's a more sustainable energy source because trees grow back."

AFP

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The three photos above show various parts of training being imparted on a group of volunteers from New Zealand whale rescue charity Project Jonah to save stranded whales, at Scorching Bay in Wellington on December 11 (AFP)



# BATTLE BEACHINGS

A two-tonne rubber whale can take on a life of its own in the frigid shallows of a windswept New Zealand beach, particularly when a bedraggled group of would-be rescuers is trying to wrestle it into a harness.

“Keep the blowhole clear... you’re too close to the tail, one swipe can do a serious injury to yourself and the whale,” an instructor yells as the Wellington rain lashes his pupils.

Despite the discomfort, enthusiasm levels remain high as the group successfully manoeuvre the five-metre long pilot whale replica onto a mat between two inflatable pontoons.

The giant black dummy, and a smaller 200kg version representing a dolphin, are eventually guided to deeper waters by volunteers trained by the New Zealand whale rescue charity Project Jonah.

Filled with water the latex marine mammals help teams prepare for real emergencies - New Zealand has one of the highest whale stranding rates in the world.

Around 300 animals beach themselves annually, according to official figures and it is not unusual for groups of between 20 and 50 pilot whales to run aground.

But numbers can run into the hundreds when a ‘super pod’ is involved - in 2017, there was a mass stranding of almost 700 pilot whales.

“There are always going to be strandings - there was one on Monday, there’ll probably be one next week,” Project Jonah’s communications manager Louisa Hawkes told about 30 trainee whale medics during a course in Wellington.

The wait turns out to be considerably shorter, with a baby pilot whale found stranded Christchurch that same morning.

As the course continues in a community hall, a Project Jonah coordinator paces outside giving advice via mobile phone to wildlife rangers at the opposite end of the country desperately trying to save the animal.

Sadly, their efforts prove futile and the infant is euthanised a few hours later when its pod cannot be located.

## Perfect whale trap

“Strandings are incredibly emotional,” Hawkes tells the volunteers. “If a whale isn’t refloated it can really,

## Giant rubber whale helping Kiwi rescuers learn the art of saving stranded marine mammals



really hurt, particularly if you’ve bonded with it.

“You need to ensure you have the resilience needed to cope with whatever’s going to happen.”

No one knows why whales strand but Hawkes said it sometimes occurred when old, sick or injured animals swam ashore and other pod members followed.

She said one orca, a male named Nobby, had been

rescued on seven separate occasions from North Island beaches after beaching himself chasing stingrays for food.

Most mass strandings in New Zealand involve pilot whales on gently sloping beaches, which confuse their sonar making them think they are in open waters.

Other pod members then beach themselves trying

to respond to the trapped whale’s distress signals.

The South Island’s notorious Farewell Spit, a 26km hook of sand that protrudes into the sea, has been the scene of at least ten pilot whale strandings in the past 15 years.

“It’s what we call a perfect whale trap,” Hawkes said.

Many stranded whales are found to be malnourished because their stomachs are full of plastic pollution, while explosions from undersea mining and naval exercises have also been linked to groundings.

Project Jonah was established in 1974 and is regarded as a world leader in whale rescue, helping train New Zealand’s conservation department and police in what to do when strandings occur.

## Absolute privilege

The charity has a network of 4,000 volunteers it can mobilise during mass strandings, most of them ordinary people who have undergone basic training in becoming marine mammal medics.

“I’m an ocean swimmer and I’ve come across lots of dead whales - I want to know what to do when there’s a situation where there is a chance of rescuing them,” Wellington-based school teacher Leonora Hoke explained when asked why she took the course.

Aside from the emotional toll, Project Jonah warns that whale rescue involves numerous physical risks, including possible injury from the thrashing animals.

The whale’s blowhole expels bacteria and fungi, while the water around the stranded animals is soon contaminated with faeces and blood, the latter of which can attract sharks.

Even dead whales pose a hazard because their bellies fill with gas as they decompose, and can cause the carcasses to explode.

Hawkes, a former youth worker who has been involved with Project Jonah for nine years and lost count of the animals she has saved, said it was worth it to see a stranded whale swimming off into the distance.

“It’s one of the most enriching, rewarding experiences of your life - it’s something that will touch you,” she said.

“To be able to help out these marine mammals at the most stressful moment of their life is an absolute privilege.”

AFP

## FOOTBALL ROUND-UP



Napoli's goalkeeper David Ospina grabs the ball under threat from AC Milan's forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic (right) during their Serie A match at the San Siro stadium, in Milan on Sunday (AFP)

# Napoli squeeze past Milan in title push

Milan, Italy - Napoli got their title challenge back on track on Sunday with a dramatic 1-0 win at rivals AC Milan which moved them up to second in Serie A but was decided by the controversial ruling out of a late equaliser.

Eljif Elmas headed home the decisive goal from Piotr Zielinski's fifth-minute corner at a freezing San Siro to end a mini-crisis for Luciano Spalletti's injury-ravaged side and put them four points behind champions Inter Milan, who are now guaranteed to be top at Christmas with one midweek round of fixtures left before the winter break.

Former league leaders Napoli largely looked assured despite missing a host of starters including star striker Victor Osimhen, defensive lynchpin Kalidou Koulibaly and Italy forward Lorenzo Insigne and are back on track after two home defeats at the hands of Atalanta and Empoli.

"We had the game in hand pretty well for most of the match, apart from a few moments when Milan's physical play didn't allow us to settle," said Spalletti.

However Milan thought they had snatched a point in the final minute after a wave of late pressure when Franck Kessie lashed home from close range, only for the strike to be disallowed for offside following a pitchside video check by referee Davide Massa.

Olivier Giroud challenged for the ball with Juan Jesus before

Kjaer who is out for the season.

"I know that they'll say that they correctly followed the rules, but how can a player who's on the floor, who does nothing to intervene make any difference to the defender?" Milan coach Stefano Pioli asked DAZN's pundits.

"Juan Jesus is not blocked by Giroud. What else can I say? It's a shame because the team didn't

early match but could not help the Viola put pressure on Serie A's Champions League positions.

Serbia forward Vlahovic struck his league-leading 16th goal of the season in the 51st minute in Florence to pull a goal back after his team trailed by two at half-time.

Lucas Torreira levelled just after the hour mark but Vincenzo Italiano's side then lost Cristiano Biraghi to a second yellow card in the 68th minute and could not complete a comeback which would have put them within three points of the top four.

Fiorentina sit sixth, level on 31 points with Roma and Juventus and six points behind Atalanta.

"Without the Biraghi red card, I think we would have gone on to win," said Italiano to Sky Sport Italia. Vlahovic, who will turn 22 next month, has now scored 33 Serie A goals in 2021 - matching Cristiano Ronaldo's total last year - and is expected to be a target for some of Europe's biggest clubs in the January transfer window.

AFP

*We had the game in hand pretty well for most of the match, apart from a few moments when Milan's physical play didn't allow us to settle*

LUCIANO SPALLETTI

the pair fell in a heap, and Giroud was then ruled to have been in an active offside position, underneath Jesus, as the Napoli defender attempted to clear while on his back.

The decision to rule out Kessie's strike sparked fury from Milan fans in the stands, whose team were also missing a number of first team players, among them starting centre-back Simon

deserve to lose this match."

Pioli's side have been bumped down to third following that controversial ending but are level on 39 points with Napoli as four teams battle for the 'Scudetto' with Atalanta lurking a further two points back in fourth.

## Vlahovic on target

Dusan Vlahovic was again on target for Fiorentina in Sunday's

## Milik hat-trick saves Marseille more French Cup embarrassment

Paris, France - Poland striker Arkadiusz Milik's hat-trick saved Marseille from a shock defeat to fifth-tier Cannel-Rocheville but holders Paris Saint-Germain encountered no similar difficulties in their David and Goliath last 64 French Cup tie on Sunday.

PSG, who have lifted the trophy in six of the past seven years, swept aside their fifth-tier amateur opposition Feignies Aulnoye in Valenciennes 3-0.

Lionel Messi was rested for the game which was killed off as a contest with two penalties won by Kylian Mbappe in the first

half. He converted the first, with Mauro Icardi doing the honours for the second. Mbappe got his double and PSG's third before coming off, job done.

Earlier, down at the Velodrome, Cannel-Rocheville took a surprise lead but were reduced to ten men before half-time as Milik levelled from the penalty spot.

Milik struck again on 57 minutes and completed his treble in stoppage time after Luis Henrique added a third for Marseille, who were dumped out by fourth-division opponents in last sea-



Marseille's forward Arkadiusz Milik (centre) kicks to score a penalty during the match against Cannel-Rocheville (AFP)

son's competition.

Wissam Ben Yedder grabbed both goals as Monaco beat third-tier Red Star 2-0, while Lens defeated amateurs Stade Poitevin 1-0.

Pascal Dupraz won his first game in charge of Ligue 1 strugglers Saint-Etienne, who edged past Lyon-La Duchere of the fourth tier 1-0.

Fifth-tier Linas-Montlhery, however, claimed a shock 2-0 victory over Angers, ninth in Ligue 1.

Bergerac Perigord, another club from the fourth division,

knocked out top-flight Metz 5-4 on penalties after a 0-0 draw. Montpellier and Reims both won 1-0 against lower-league sides.

Senegal international M'Baye Niang scored four as Bordeaux won 10-0 against Jumeaux of Mzouazia, who are based on the island of Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, 7,884km from Bordeaux.

In the draw for the last 16 PSG are on the road to fourth-tier Vannes while the headline clash is the derby between champions Lille and Lens.

AFP

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## Tottenham out of Europe after UEFA award Rennes victory

Paris, France - Tottenham Hotspur's European campaign for this season is over after UEFA awarded Rennes a 3-0 victory in their final Europa Conference League group match on Monday.

Spurs were unable to fulfil the December 9 fixture due to a swathe of COVID-19 cases in the squad.

No agreement could then be reached between the clubs for a rearranged date before the deadline of December 31.

As a result Tottenham finish third in the section behind group winners Rennes, who progress directly to the last 16, and Dutch side Vitesse who now face Rapid Vienna in a knockout play-off.

"The UEFA Appeals Body took the following decision: To declare the 2021/22 UEFA Europa Conference League group stage match between Tottenham Hotspur FC and Stade Rennais FC, that was initially scheduled to be played on 9 December 2021, as forfeited by Tottenham Hotspur FC, who is therefore deemed to have lost the match 0-3," read the UEFA statement. The match in London was called off after Spurs manager Antonio Conte announced eight of his players and five members of staff had tested positive for COVID-19.

AFP

## Barcelona to face Real Madrid in Women's Champions League



Paris, France - Holders Barcelona will face rivals Real Madrid in the quarter-finals of this season's Women's Champions League after the sides were paired together in Monday's draw for the knockout phase.

Barcelona, with new Women's Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Putellas, hammered Chelsea 4-0 in last season's final and also won a domestic league and cup double. They won all six games in this season's inaugural Champions League group stage, scoring 24 goals and conceding just one.

Real, meanwhile, finished second in their group behind French champions Paris Saint-Germain.

The winners of the all-Spanish

## DRAW

### Quarter-finals

Bayern Munich (GER) v Paris Saint-Germain (FRA)

Juventus (ITA) v Lyon (FRA)

Arsenal (ENG) v Wolfsburg (GER)

Real Madrid (ESP) v Barcelona (ESP)

### Semi-finals

Real Madrid/Barcelona v Arsenal/Wolfsburg

Juventus/Lyon v Bayern Munich/Paris Saint-Germain

- Quarter-finals to be played March 22/23 and 30/31

- Semi-finals to be played April 23/24 and April 30/May 1

tie will go through to a quarter-final against either Arsenal or Wolfsburg.

The Germans pipped Chelsea to qualify for the last eight, while Arsenal - the only English club ever to have won the title - came

second in their section behind Barcelona. The other half of the draw is set up for a potential all-French semi-final showdown between PSG and seven-time European champions Lyon.

AFP

# Battling England succumb as Australia clinch second Ashes Test

## THE ASHES

Adelaide, Australia - Australia ground down a battling England to win the second Test in Adelaide on Monday and go 2-0 up in the Ashes series, leaving the visitors' dreams of winning back the hallowed urn in tatters.

England resumed day five of the pink ball Test in deep trouble at 82 for four chasing a massive 468 to win, realistically needing a miracle just to salvage a draw.

They gamely hung on into the final session, fighting a desperate rearguard action until ultimately crumbling to be all out for 192, crashing to a 275-run defeat.

Jhye Richardson was the pick of the attack with 5-42.

England slumped to defeat by nine wickets in the first Test at Brisbane and the loss this week means their hopes of winning back a trophy they last secured on Australian turf in 2010-11 are all but over.

Joe Root's men will head to Melbourne for the Boxing Day Test starting on Sunday knowing that the only instance of a team coming from 2-0 down to win the Ashes was Donald Bradman's Australia way back in 1936-37.

### 'It's frustrating'

"The reason it's disappointing is because we made the same mistakes. I think we could have bowled a lot fuller, and with the bat we need to be better, make bigger scores and apply better," said Root.

"The second innings is the attitude and desire we need. It's frustrating because we know we are better. Lessons learnt, we



Australian players celebrate their victory against England in the second Test, at Adelaide Oval on Monday (AFP)

have to be better in the next game."

With Root, the world's number one Test batsmen, removed by Mitchell Starc in the final over on Sunday evening, England's hopes appeared to rest with all-rounder Ben Stokes.

The 30-year-old has so often rescued his team, with memories of his match-winning exploits against Australia at Headingley in 2019 to keep that series alive still fresh.

But trying to nurse England's batting through 90 overs against Australia's relentless bowling was too big a task, even for him.

He put his head down and

lasted 77 balls for 12 runs before Nathan Lyon struck. The umpire initially gave the lbw shout not out, but Australia reviewed and it was shown to be plumb in front.

Ollie Pope lasted only seven balls, edging to Steve Smith at slip off Starc, out for four to go with his disappointing first innings' five. But Jos Buttler (26) and Chris Woakes (44) dug in, frustrating Australia in a 61-run stand before Jhye Richardson clattered Woakes' stumps.

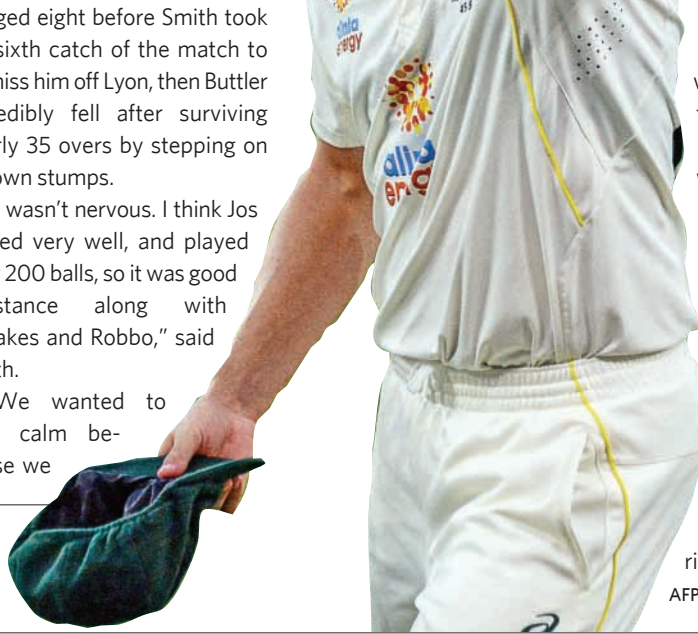
Ollie Robinson made a

Australian paceman Jhye Richardson leaves the ground with the match ball after taking five wickets (AFP)

dogged eight before Smith took his sixth catch of the match to dismiss him off Lyon, then Buttler incredibly fell after surviving nearly 35 overs by stepping on his own stumps.

"I wasn't nervous. I think Jos played very well, and played over 200 balls, so it was good resistance along with Woakes and Robbo," said Smith.

"We wanted to stay calm because we



## Australia name unchanged squad for final three Tests

Adelaide, Australia - Australia named an unchanged 15-man squad for the three remaining Ashes Tests against England on Monday with captain Pat Cummins and fast bowling partner Josh Hazlewood re-joining the team in Melbourne later this week.

The home team resisted any changes after a nine-wicket win in the first Test at Brisbane and their impressive performance with the bat and ball in Adelaide.

Cummins, the world's number one Test bowler, missed the day-night Test this week after being a close contact of a positive COVID-19 case at Adelaide restaurant.

He was supposed to iso-

late in the South Australia capital for seven days but was permitted to return to Sydney on a private charter flight.

Hazlewood was ruled out with a side strain, with Jhye Richardson and Michael Neser replacing them in the starting eleven in Adelaide.

The third Test in Melbourne starts on December 26.

**Australian Squad:** Pat Cummins (capt), Alex Carey, Cameron Green, Marcus Harris, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Michael Neser, Jhye Richardson, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc, Mitchell Swepson, David Warner.

AFP

## SCOREBOARD

Australia 1<sup>st</sup> Innings 473/9d

England 1<sup>st</sup> Innings 236

Australia 2<sup>nd</sup> Innings 230/9d

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   | lbw b Lyon              | 12 |
| O Pope     | c Smith b Starc         | 4  |
| J Buttler  | hit wicket b Richardson | 26 |
| C Woakes   | b Richardson            | 44 |
| O Robinson | c Smith b Lyon          | 8  |
| S Broad    | not out                 | 9  |
| J Anderson | c Green b Richardson    | 2  |
| Extras     | (b 2, lb 3, nb 4)       | 9  |

TOTAL: 192 all out

Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-48, 3-70, 4-82, 5-

86, 6-105, 7-166, 8-178, 9-182, 10-192

Bowling: M Starc 27-10-43-2,

J Richardson 19-1-9-42-5, N Lyon 39-16-

55-2, M Neser 13-5-28-1, C Green 9-5-90,

M Labuschagne 4-2-10-0, S Smith 1-1-0-0,

T Head 1-1-0-0



## S Africa's Smith, Boucher face hearing on racism

Johannesburg, South Africa - Graeme Smith and Mark Boucher, two of South Africa's most prominent cricket personalities, will face formal hearings into claims of racial discrimination, Cricket South Africa announced on Monday.

The announcement came just six days before the start of a high-profile Test series against India.

Smith, CSA's director of cricket, played a key role in the negotiations that led to India agreeing to tour despite a spike in coronavirus infections

in the host country, while Boucher is the national team's head coach. Both men will remain in their positions until the hearings, to be conducted by independent legal professionals, have been concluded.

Former Test stars Smith and Boucher, along with now-retired batsman AB de Villiers, were implicated in a report by Social Justice and National Building (SJN) ombudsman Advocate Dumisa Ntsebeza of acting in a 'prejudicial or discriminatory manner'.

AFP

## Kiwis to tour Pakistan twice to make up for postponed series

The second tour will make up for the matches lost when NZ called off the tour this year because of security concerns



Wellington, New Zealand - New Zealand are set to tour Pakistan twice next season, the two boards confirmed on Monday.

The two teams will first face each other between December 2022 and January 2023 for two Tests, which will be part of the World Test Championship, and three ODIs, which will be part of the ODI Super League (for qualification for the World Cup).

New Zealand then return to the country in April 2023 for five ODIs and five T20Is - the ODIs, in this instance, will be solely for ICC rankings points and not part of the ODI Super League.

The first visit will be a part of the Future Tours Programme,

while the second was agreed to make up for the matches lost when New Zealand called off their limited-overs tour of Pakistan in September this year, citing security concerns. The limited-overs tour in April 2023 will have two additional ODIs being played, along with those scheduled in the 2021 series.

'It's good to be going back,' NZC chief executive David White said in a statement. 'Our respective chairmen, Ramiz Raja and Martin Snedden, had very fruitful and constructive discus-

sions while in Dubai, further strengthening the bond between the two organisations.'

After being especially critical of the NZC's decision when they abandoned the tour this year, Ramiz said that the board was 'pleased with the outcomes of our discussions and negotiations'. "This reflects the strong, cordial and historic relations the two boards have, and reconfirms Pakistan's status as an important member of the cricket fraternity," he said.

Cricinfo

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