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US TO LIFT TRAVEL BAN ON SOUTHERN AFRICA
GO TO PAGE 10 WORLD



His Majesty the Sultan returns from the UK

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq returned home on Friday after concluding his private visit to the United Kingdom which lasted several days.

During the visit, His Majesty the Sultan met Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain and

Northern Ireland and Head of the Commonwealth, in addition to a number of senior UK officials.

His Majesty the Sultan was accompanied by Sayyid Shihab bin Tariq al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al

Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Nu'amani, Minister of Royal Office, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, and Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al Hinai, Ambassador of Oman to the UK.

His Majesty the Sultan's visit aimed to enhance the advanced relations between Oman and the United Kingdom to serve the two countries' joint interests and achieve aspirations of their peoples. The visit also touched on regional and international topics of common

interest.
May the Almighty Allah protect His Majesty the Sultan wherever he might be and grant him continued good health and wellbeing to achieve further progress for the Omani people.
ONA

Water sports sites on anvil

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To stimulate tourism and spread awareness and the culture of water sports, the government will set up sites with facilities for water sports activities.

The Municipal Affairs Committee in the wilayat of Muscat recently discussed in its tenth meeting of 2021 the allocation of sites suitable for water sports in beaches in Muscat.

The committee included water biking, kayaking and sailing among the water sports activities it will promote. The committee will coordinate with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning to identify sites for these activities.

Several adventure and water sports enthusiasts welcomed the decision.

Omani adventurer Khalid bin Said al Anquodi said, "The decision is excellent. Such facilities will encourage young people to engage in water sports and raise awareness on Omani maritime history."

"Water sports will also allow families to find another outlet for recreation and end the need to travel abroad for entertainment. It will also support domestic tourism and attract tourists from



other countries."

Juma Khamis al Amri, head of Quriyat Divers, informed that these facilities will create job opportunities and establish projects that provide the appropriate equipment for water sports to be practised in safe environment. "It will also attract foreign investors and increase the national income of the country."

According to Salim Juma al Hosni, founder of Oman Team and Al Khabourah Diving Team, the decision is significant consid-

ering Oman has beautiful beaches that attract adventure lovers. "The government should expedite implementation of the project."

Said al Rashidi, a sailor, said such projects will create business opportunities for citizens and woo tourists, but authorities must ensure strict regulations to prevent mishaps on beaches. "Experts must be engaged at these facilities to supervise the activities."

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SAF Hospital performs spinal fusion surgery using AR



Fitch upgrades OQ's outlook to 'stable'; affirms 'BB-' rating



Bollywood replays India's seminal '83 cricket triumph

'Free booster dose only for Omanis'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Affordability is impacting uptake of the COVID-19 booster dose among low-wage earning expatriates even as authorities urge all to get the their third dose.

While the first two doses of AstraZeneca vaccine for expats cost RO22, the Pfizer shots cost RO46. The single booster dose of Pfizer now being administered to expats at private health institutions costs RO23.

According to the Ministry of Health (MoH), the booster dose is available for free only for citizens in its health centres. "As of now, the booster dose at government-run vaccination centres is for citizens only. Expatriates need to go to private hospitals and clinics to get the booster shot," an MoH official informed.

According to Jacob Oommen, chief operating officer of Badr al Samaa Group of Hospitals, the response to the booster dose has been good. "We have not faced any shortage of supply of Pfizer doses from MoH."

Ministry of Health reduced the gap for the booster dose from six months to three

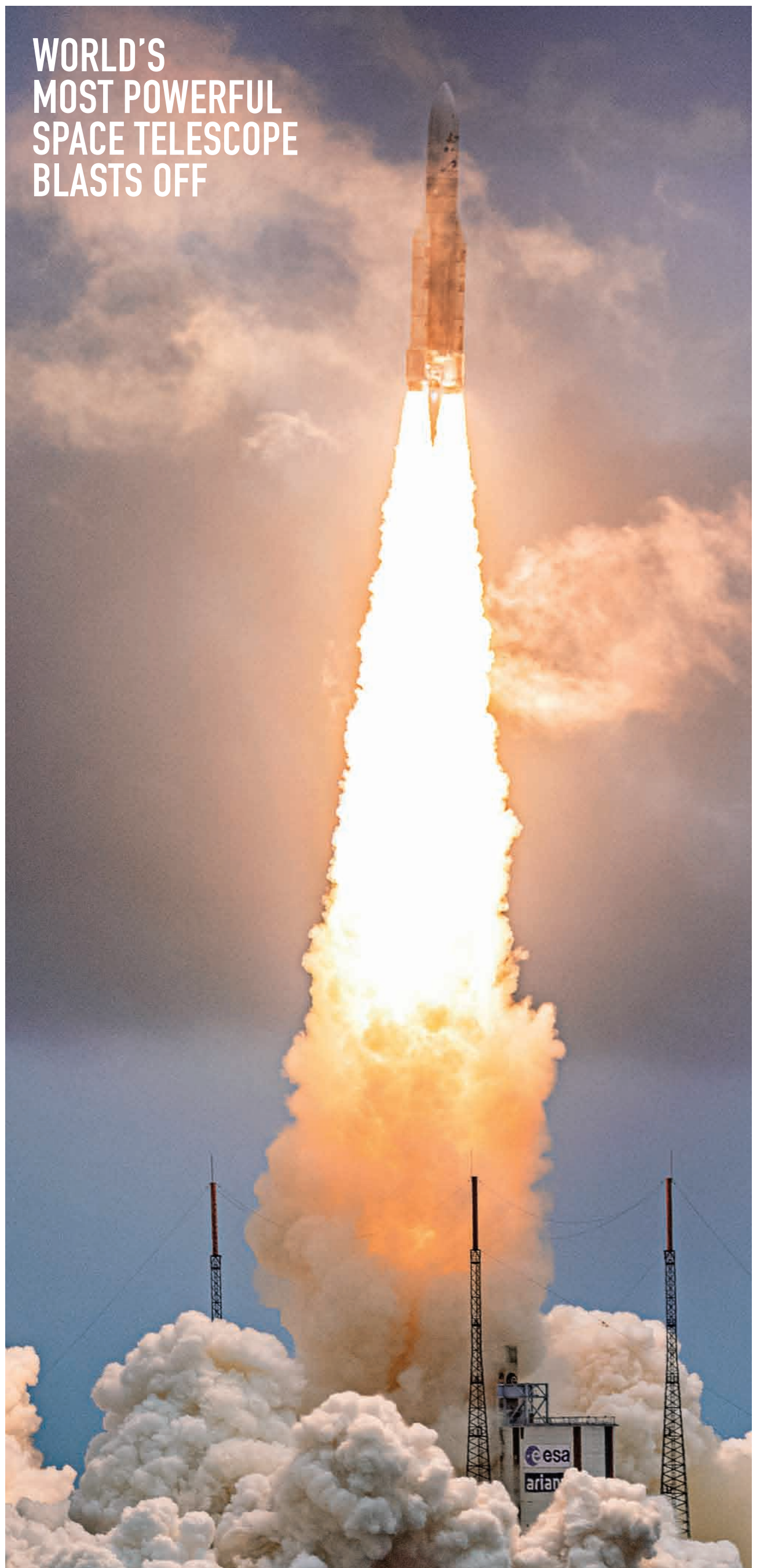
Badr al Samaa started administering booster doses on December 9. "We have given more than 2,000 booster doses in this period."

An official of another private hospital said, "Most low-earning expatriates have taken AstraZeneca and it cost them RO22, but for the booster dose, only Pfizer has been approved which costs RO23."

"In general, the response to the booster dose is good from middle-class expatriates and recently among Europeans travelling for Christmas. Now some companies have started vaccinating their expat staff who are older."

Earlier this month, MoH reduced the gap for the booster dose from six months to three.

WORLD'S MOST POWERFUL SPACE TELESCOPE BLASTS OFF



Arianespace's Ariane 5 rocket with NASA's James Webb Space Telescope onboard is seen at the launch pad at Europe's Spaceport, the Guiana Space Center in Kourou, French Guiana, on Saturday. The telescope is the most powerful space observatory ever built. An engineering marvel, it will help answer fundamental questions about the Universe, peering back in time 13bn years (AFP)

See story on Page 12

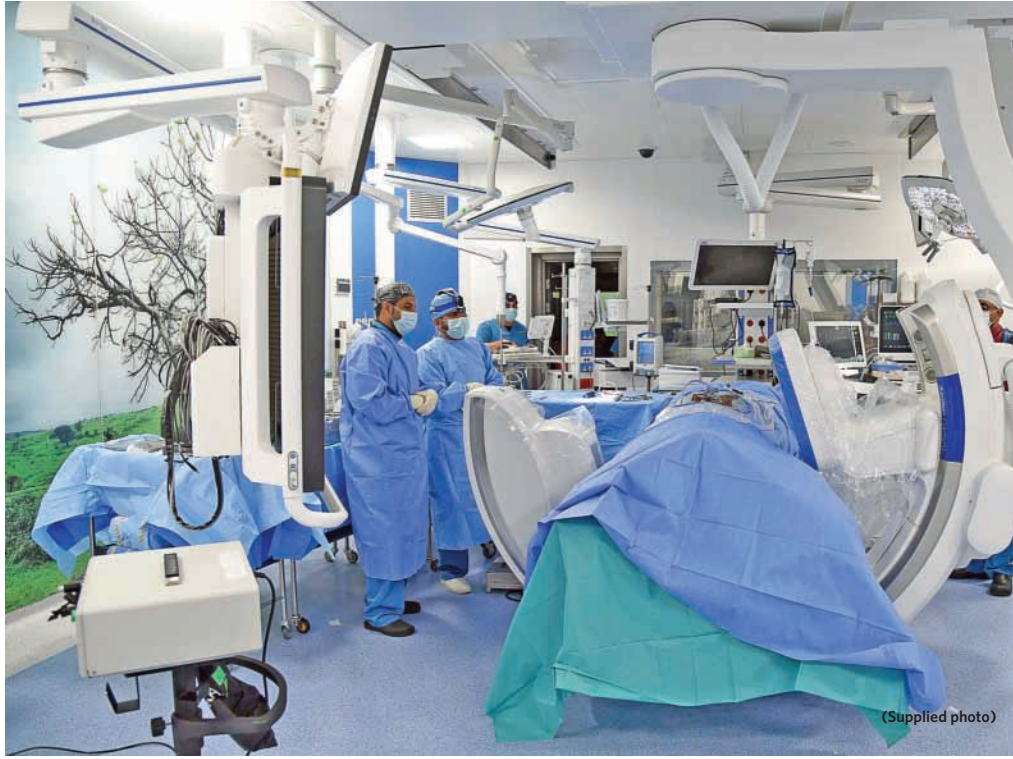
SAF Hospital performs spinal fusion surgery using AR

Our Correspondent
Muscat

An Omani medical team from the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) Hospital in Al Khoudh succeeded in using augmented reality (AR) technique to perform a spinal fusion surgery on a 52-year-old patient. The team was led by Col Dr Ahmed Saif al Jahwari, senior consultant, Head of Orthopedic Department at SAF Hospital.

Speaking about the procedure, Col Dr Jahwari said, "Advanced techniques are entering the medical field at a fast pace. They present precise solutions in surgical operations, thereby improving human intervention in assisting patients. They pave the way for the success of surgical procedures. The Orthopedic Surgery Department at SAF Hospital takes keen interest in employing such techniques in serving patients in a variety of ways, including disc fusion using augmented reality."

He informed that the recent surgery performed by the SAF



(Supplied photo)

medical team combined CT scan and 3D imaging with fixed camera imaging. This, he added, creates a 3D augmented reality view of the patient's internal anatomy. The combined image facilitates exploration and guides surgeons to fuse the

Augmented reality technology focuses on what is happening right in front of the surgeon's eyes and gives them direct X-ray view of anatomical areas that are not visible to the naked eye

COL DR AHMED SAIF AL JAHWARI

vertebrae with surgical screws in a precise location, thereby reducing the chance of injury to surrounding sensitive tissues, such as nerves and blood vessels.

According to Col Dr Jahwari, this technique enhances clinical accuracy, helping doctors avoid surgical risks, minimising scope of medical error.

"Augmented reality technology focuses on what is happening right in front of the surgeon's eyes and gives them direct X-ray view of anatomical areas that are not visible to the naked eye. This new technology sets the stage for successful surgeries and constitutes one of the main pillars of surgical medicine."

The SAF Medical Services Department has several firsts to its credit and the recent surgery indicates that it is on track as it keeps pace with technological and scientific developments while providing the best healthcare to personnel of the SAF and other departments of the Ministry of Defence as well as the general public.

Forum on tourism, real estate openings in Muscat on Feb 20

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) will hold an event titled Forum for Tourism and Real Estate Opportunities in Muscat on February 20, 2022.

A statement issued by OCCI, said, "Close to 150 investors and businessmen engaged in tourism and real estate development from Oman and outside the sultanate will participate in the forum that will introduce the investment opportunities available here in an effort to attract more foreign investment and capital."

According to Redha bin Juma al Saleh, chairman of the board of directors of OCCI, several agree-

ments to establish tourism projects in the Al Sharq neighbourhood project will be signed at the forum, which will focus on qualitative investments, integrated tourism projects, entertainment projects with international standards, and real estate development for integrated cities.

"The forum will include several discussions on tourism investment in Oman and investors' opportunities to own property - incentives and facilities provided to encourage tourism investment for investors," Saleh said.

"Oman has a safe and stable environment and simplified procedures that help attract foreign investments, and OCCI will continue to organise such events."

Water sports sites on anvil

Continued from Page 01

Muscat Municipality recently announced four main objectives to make Muscat sustainable and prosperous, including sustainability of the environment and economic development.

It aims to improve peoples' lifestyles, build a sustainable environment in Muscat city to at-

tract investors to the country, and regulate urban development in the city. Muscat Municipality also aims to set up a smart, sustainable and vibrant urban structure in line with its efforts of safeguarding the environment, preserving its natural resources and mitigating the effects of climate change.

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ESO launches phase two of Namat Competition

Muscat - Environment Society of Oman (ESO) has launched the second phase of the Namat Competition for 2021-2022, supported by Veolia Oman and Emily's Garden. Previously known as the Green School Competition, the contest aims to encourage eco-friendly awareness and promote a conservation culture within schools across the sultanate by tasking students to come up with sustainable ideas to combat environmental issues.

ESO invites all government schools in Oman - grades 5 to 12 - to register. Registration is open until January 2, 2022, through the website <https://eso-edu.com/green-school/gs-registration/?lang=ar>.

"We are delighted to see how ESO has come forth to nurture a culture of sustainability in our students. The first phase of the competition had an incredible impact and the teams worked relentlessly to complete their projects, with nine schools from six different governorates ultimately taking the title," said H E Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Undersecretary for Education in the Ministry of Education. "We are excited to see all the new ideas they will



(Supplied photo)

come up for Phase 2."

Seeking to contribute to the implementation of the goals set by the United Nations on education for sustainable development, the project is sponsored by Veolia Oman, a leading global and regional resource management firm, and Emily's Garden, a memorial fund of the late Emily Jewitt, an environmental activist in Oman and the Netherlands.

"We chose to support this initiative mainly because of Emily's passion for the environment. This is our way of giving back to Oman, her home for nearly six years," said Juliet, Emily's mother.

Erwan Rouxel, CEO of Veolia Oman, said, "This partnership with ESO is our latest effort to support the education and en-

gagement of youth on environmental issues and a marvellous step towards instilling a proactive attitude among the youth."

Namat Competition encourages participating schools to form a team consisting of students and members from the faculty and parents' council. Each team is required to identify an existing environmental threat within their school or community under one of the following themes: 'Best School in Waste Management', 'Best School in Water Management' or 'Best School in Energy Management'.

The winners will be announced in June 2022. The winning schools will receive a cash prize of RO1,000 for the first place, RO300 for second, and RO150 for third.

MOL DELEGATION VISITS EXPO 2020 DUBAI



(Supplied photo)

A delegation from the Ministry of Labour (MoL) visited Expo 2020 Dubai last week. The visit aimed to keep abreast of the latest technological developments and modern administrative practices. Mohsen al Maamari, director general of Administrative and Financial Affairs in MoL, said, "It was an opportunity to learn about the mechanisms of work of international organisations and civil society to meet the global challenges of our time."

Hotels fined for non-compliance of physical distancing

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) said on Saturday that violation notices were issued against two hotels in Muscat for not committing to social distancing norms.

In a statement, MoHT said, 'In the context of following up the commitment of hotels and tourist establishments to the precautionary measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism issued violation notices against the hotels for not applying the principle of social distancing.'

'MoHT alerts all hotels and tourist establishments on the importance of adhering to the precautionary measures to prevent COVID-19 and to avoid legal measures that may include closure of the establishment.'



672 cans of olive oil destroyed in Salalah: FSQC

Muscat - As many as 672 cans of olive oil were destroyed in the Port of Salalah, according to Food Safety and Quality Centre (FSQC).

A statement issued by FSQC, said, 'Cans of olive oil were destroyed in the Port of Salalah due to non-compliance with the specifications and requirements for transport and storage.'



120 students plant 1,200 mangrove seedlings

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Environment Authority (EA) recently conducted a campaign to plant 1,200 mangrove seedlings in North Batinah governorate with the participation of 120 students.

The mangrove plantation campaign was conducted in Khor Shinas with the participation of students from various schools in the wilayat of Shinas, said an official in the Environment Department in North Batinah.

"The campaign is part of the initiative to plant 10mn trees launched by the EA in January 2020," he said.

The campaign also included a lecture on mangrove flora and their environmental and economic importance, and a photo exhibition on the damage of plastics on the environment and marine life. The event also saw the distribution of environmentally



The campaign is part of the initiative to plant 10mn wild trees launched by the Environment Authority in 2020

friendly bags and the participants were encouraged to use these instead of plastic bags.

The Environment Department

in North Batinah has conducted several awareness campaigns among members of the community on the importance of mangroves and their benefits to humans. It discussed the main factors related to the growth of these trees and some of the threats and dangers faced by them, the official said.

The official informed that mangroves purify the atmosphere from harmful gases, especially carbon dioxide, which is

threatening many countries around the world.

"The continuity of work in preserving environmental systems in accordance with internationally approved standards and measures will have a significant positive impact in creating a sound environmental balance," he said, while emphasising the importance of community participation and solidarity in preserving these ecosystems.

Khor Shinas is considered one of the most important sites for the growth of mangroves in the North Batinah governorate. The authority started planting mangroves in Khor Shinas in 2008 and its height is nearly 8m currently. The number of mangrove seedlings planted in Khor Shinas has reached more than 51,000.

The authority said that the 10mn indigenous species trees that will be planted include ghaf, al samar and sidr, for which nurseries are currently being set up in different wilayats.

Villagers set up nursery to provide free seedlings



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The people of Beda'h village in the wilayat of Wadi Bani Khalid, North Sharqiyah, have established a nursery to increase agricultural area and help farmers diversify their crops.

The nursery offers a variety of seedlings of fruits, free of charge to the people of the village and neighbouring villages.

Speaking to Muscat Daily, Nasser al Rashdi, one of the enterprising villagers who is volunteering in the community project, said, "The people of Beda'h village in the wilayat of Wadi Bani Khalid, North Sharqiyah, established a nursery last month. Some volunteers collect various seedlings in cooperation with private nurseries and distribute them to the people."

Our village was selected to be part of the Ministry of Health's healthy villages programme. This motivated us for the project

NASSER AL RASHDI

"The volunteer team has distributed about 400 seedlings of different types of fruits in the first stage. The team has also distributed a number of seedlings of ornamental trees to some homes."

According to Rashdi, Beda'h was selected to be part of the Ministry of Health's healthy villages programme. "This motivated us for this project and to

distribute seedlings. The initiative aims to develop the agricultural sector in the village and achieve self-sufficiency in food crops. It also aims to increase agricultural area to reduce global warming and CO₂ and continue the professions inherited from our parents," he said.

"The nursery distributes fruit seedlings of mango, figs, pomegranate and grapes. We also started a project of protecting trees, especially of citrus fruits such as lemons from pests."

"The nursery will distribute more than 1,000 seedlings of different types of fruits annually. It will plant blue bananas next to the yellow and red varieties available in the village."

Ministry to undertake meteorite recovery project: MoHT

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) will undertake a project to recover Omani meteorites on Monday.

The project will be launched under the patronage of H E Ibrahim bin Said al Kharousi, Undersecretary for Heritage in the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in Nizwa Cultural Centre.

The project aims to shed light on the significance of Omani meteorites and raise awareness of the importance of preserving these.

In 2017, 352 meteorites - weighing an estimated 53kg - were found, accounting for a total of 6,558 meteorites discovered in Oman, with a total weight of 4,775kg, according to the Public Authority for Mining (PAM).

The five most important meteorites found in Oman are the



Sayh al Uhaymir (SaU) 094, Sayh al Uhaymir (SaU) 169, Shisr 043, Jiddat al Harasis (JaH) 073 and Jiddat al Harasis (JaH) 091.



MoCIIP asks all to observe COVID-19 measures

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has called on all commercial establishments to adhere to precautionary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

A MoCIIP statement said, 'The ministry urges all commercial establishments to abide all the decisions issued by competent authorities regarding the prevention of the spread of COVID-19. The ministry urges commercial establishments to adhere to preventive measures and emphasises the importance of reducing the number of visitors to 50 per cent, in addition to adhering to preventive measures such as wearing a mask and maintaining social distancing, etc to ensure the safety of society and to avoid any legal measures that may include closure of the establishment.'



Fitch upgrades OQ's outlook to 'stable'; affirms 'BB-' rating

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Global credit ratings agency Fitch Ratings has revised OQ Group's outlook to 'stable' from 'negative' and affirmed its 'BB-' long-term issuer default rating.

The rating action on Oman's globally integrated energy company follows a similar action on OQ's ultimate sole shareholder, the government of Oman via the Oman Investment Authority (OIA), Fitch said in a statement.

On Monday, Fitch upgraded Oman's outlook to 'stable' from 'negative' while affirming the sultanate's sovereign long-term foreign- and local currency issuer default ratings at 'BB-'.

The revision of Oman's outlook, according to Fitch, reflects actual improvements in, and the expected evolution of, key fiscal metrics including government debt/GDP and the budget deficit, driven by higher oil prices and fiscal reforms, and a lessening of external financing pressures.

OQ's issuer default rating is equalised with that of Oman and reflects Fitch's view of strong links between OQ and the state.

'We assess OQ's standalone credit profile at 'b', reflecting its complex group structure and leverage metrics that are relatively high but likely to decline over the medium term.

It also reflects OQ's solid business profile with integrated operations spanning exploration and production, refining, marketing, chemical and petrochemical



OQ's business profile is supported by the scale of its operations and business diversification with a presence in the oil and gas upstream, downstream and midstream sectors, Fitch said

segments,' the ratings agency said.

Fitch said OQ is ultimately fully owned by the government of Oman via OIA and was established to strengthen and centralise Oman's oil and gas industry. OQ accounts for a substantial portion of assets transferred to OIA from the Ministry of Finance in 2020.

The government exerts significant influence on OQ's business and funding strategy via OIA. While OQ's privatisation is not planned, disposals of minor-

ity stakes in its subsidiaries are expected as market conditions improve. The privatisation strategy is in line with similar steps taken in recent years or being planned in the near term by other GCC governments with respect to national oil companies,' Fitch noted.

According to Fitch's analysis, OQ accounted for 4.4 per cent of Oman's 2019 GDP and is one of the largest employers in the country with 6,600 employees. OQ is Oman's main downstream company owning all domestic refining assets producing all

transport fuels for the Omani market and is tasked with increasing the value per barrel of extracted oil by further expanding refining and petrochemical assets. It is also the exclusive operator of Oman's domestic natural gas transportation infrastructure.

Fitch noted that, with total gross debt of US\$14.1bn at end-September 2021, OQ and its subsidiaries are the largest borrower after the government. Fitch expects that the government's funding needs will continue to be partially met with external debt and that an OQ default would have a significant impact on the availability and cost of foreign financing options to Oman.

'The business profile of OQ is supported by the scale of operations, business diversification with a presence in the oil and gas upstream, downstream and midstream sectors, quality of its exploration and production and its newly built refining and petrochemical assets as well as its favourable location with access to high-growth markets,' the ratings agency said.

OQ recently completed the construction of its RO2.7bn Liwa Plastics Industries Complex (LPIC) project that will annually produce 880,000 tonnes of polyethylene and 300,000 tonnes of polypropylene.

Other key OQ downstream projects include the Duqm Refinery project with 230,000 barrels per day that is expected to be commissioned in 2023.



GCC labour markets weathered pandemic relatively well: IMF

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Despite recent increases in unemployment rates, the GCC labour markets have weathered the coronavirus pandemic relatively well, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The large number of nationals working in the public sector and recent departure of expatriate workers helped the GCC labour markets to adjust to the pandemic-induced recession, the IMF said in a report titled 'Economic Prospectus and Policy Challenges for the GCC Countries'.

'Where more recent data is available, employment of non-nationals has fallen during the pandemic, but may be rebounding somewhat where recoveries have been stronger, while employment of nationals has held up better or even increased,' the IMF said.

Nevertheless, GCC labour markets still suffer from longstanding structural issues, the International Monetary Fund noted.

'For instance, labour markets in the region continue to be fragmented, with large public sectors used as an employment vehicle for nationals, and a private sector dominated by expatriate workers. However, recent increases in participation rates among nationals, especially women, and large young populations underscore the need for continued efforts to modernise labour markets,' the IMF said.

Moreover, the fund said that despite recent improvements, female labour market participation in the GCC countries remains less than half of male participation.

'Labour reforms across the GCC are therefore welcome. For instance, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE have passed legislations that prohibit gender-based discrimination in employment. Qatar has also announced measures including the introduction of a minimum wage and the abolishment of the sponsorship system for foreign workers, offering more flexibility and protection for expatriates,' the IMF said.

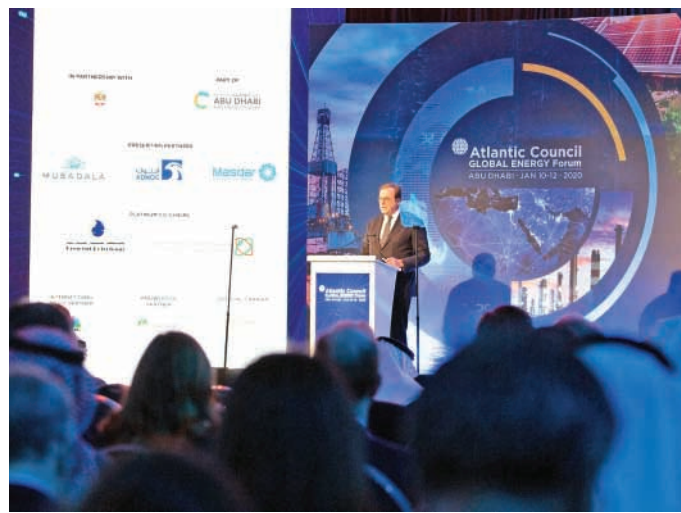
Abu Dhabi to host 2022 Global Energy Forum from January 15

Abu Dhabi, UAE - The Atlantic Council will hold its sixth annual Global Energy Forum on during January 15-16 in Abu Dhabi, UAE.

The forum will be held as a part of Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week, a global event accelerating the world's sustainable development. It will bring together a geographically diverse roster of senior government officials, industry executives, energy ministers, and recognised thought leaders in Abu Dhabi and around the world to set the energy agenda for the year ahead.

The 2022 Global Energy Forum will build upon the record-breaking engagement of the 2021 forum - held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic - which harnessed the Atlantic Council's unmatched convening power by using innovative digital tools and platforms to bring together leaders and influencers from around the world.

The 2022 forum will have a particular emphasis on the path to net-zero and a look-ahead at



the challenges and opportunities as the UAE prepares to host COP28. The Atlantic Council's Global Energy Centre will also be releasing the second edition of The Global Energy Agenda, a comprehensive set of essays from global energy leaders and a survey of hundreds of energy experts on the state of energy geopolitics.

Suhail bin Mohammed al Mazrouei, the UAE's Minister of

Energy and Infrastructure, said, "The UAE has been on the forefront of the ongoing energy transition in the region, being the first in MENA region moving towards the net-zero initiative. In order to tackle the energy transition, the UAE has adopted a wide range of energy mix with the right balance between sustainable development and reducing climate change as part of our energy strategy 2050 to ensure net-

zero emissions by 2050." "Our vision is for these initiatives to increase the contribution of clean energy in our total energy mix to 50 per cent in 2050," he added.

Frederick Kempe, president and CEO of the Atlantic Council, said, "There has never been greater urgency for the world's energy leaders to meet the dire challenge of climate change, and the 2022 Global Energy Forum will provide a critically important platform for policymakers to accelerate the energy transition. We look forward to the opportunity to return to Abu Dhabi and build upon the immense success of our virtual 2021 Forum by bringing together leaders from around the world to set the 2022 energy agenda."

The Forum is convened in partnership with the Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (Adnoc), and Mubadala Investment Company.

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MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSX posts 2.3% gain on support from all sectors

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) last week ended higher by 2.34 per cent supported by gains in the stocks of all sectors.

All sub-indices closed in green territories for the week. Financial index closed up by 2.11 per cent, while Industrial and Service indices closed higher by 1.7 per cent and 1.84 per cent, respectively. MSX Shariah index closed higher by 1.68 per cent.

One of the important developments of the week was that Fitch Ratings revised Oman's outlook to 'stable' and affirmed its rating at 'BB-'. The revision of the outlook reflects actual improvements in, and the expected evolution of, key fiscal metrics including government debt/GDP and the budget deficit, driven by higher oil prices and fiscal reforms.

Fitch Ratings said that Oman's government has made progress with the implementation of its medium-term fiscal plan, which aims to balance the budget and lower government debt/GDP to 61 per cent by 2025.

Local news

►Renaissance Services disclosed on the bourse that MEDC awarded a three-year contract to its subsidiary Tawoos Industrial Services, for the installation of smart meters across all three zones of the Muscat governorate. The project

was awarded by Muscat Electricity Distribution Company (MEDC). The value of the contract is RO9.3mn. The scope includes rollout of more than 400,000 smart meters across all three zones of the Muscat governorate. The duration of the project is three years starting from January 2022. Earlier, the government announced that it is undertaking a 1.2mn smart meter rollout nationwide over the next five years.

►Energy Development Oman (EDO) announced that it has launched its new brand identity by unveiling its corporate vision and logo. The company was set up in Muscat in December 2020 to take over the government's 60 per cent stake in PDO's Block 6 oil and associated gas, and 100 per cent in PDO's Block 6 non-associated gas and condensate. PDO continues to operate Block 6, and EDO, through PDO, is responsible for the bulk of Oman's hydrocarbon output. PDO also announced that it is leading a cross-sector effort to accelerate digitalisation across industry in Oman. The pan-industry strategy is a joint initiative of the government entities and industrial organisations.

►Central Bank of Oman's latest statistics show that total conventional banking credit rose to RO22.996bn as at the end of October 2021, rising by 3.4 per cent year-on-year. On year-to-date basis, conventional credit



is up 2.9 per cent. Conventional deposits have grown to RO20.945bn, rising by 2.9 per cent year-on-year. On year-to-date basis, deposits have grown by 2 per cent. Loan-to-deposit ratio stood at 109.8 per cent in October 2021 against 109.2 per cent a year ago.

As per the CBO data, Islamic credit growth remained strong on yearly basis at 15.5 per cent year-on-year in October 2021, with total financing extended by Islamic banks and windows touching RO4.771bn. Islamic deposits stood at RO4.344bn, rising by 18.9 per cent year-on-year.

►During the last week, the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) announced the launch of Madayn

Investment Complexes which will provide an ideal opportunity for local and foreign companies to invest in Oman's industrial cities. Under the Madayn Investment Complexes project, companies shall develop specialised investment complexes through their real estate plans, and the designs shall be approved by Madayn, according to Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, CEO of Madayn.

►It was announced last week that the proliferation of private individuals offering financial advisory services to investors on an informal basis is sought to be regulated by the Capital Market Authority (CMA). The draft regulations, titled 'Rules for Independent Financial Planners (IFPs)', were published by the

CMA last week with the goal of eliciting feedback from market stakeholders and members of the general public. The goal, say officials, is to create a regulatory framework to support the growth of a cadre of qualified private professionals offering financial advisory services outside of the scope of well-established and regulated corporate service providers.

►Oman Information and Communication Technology (OICT) Group, Oman Data Park and Oracle announced that they have jointly launched Oracle's Hyper-Scale Cloud Infrastructure Data Centre in Oman - the first Oracle Cloud Infrastructure (OCI) in the country. The new cloud infrastructure will provide a broad range of IaaS/PaaS cloud services for all entities in the public and private sectors, across the sultanate, through Oman Data Park's certified Tier III Data Center. Oracle's Cloud Infrastructure (OCI) will enable the entities in the country to run all their Oracle systems on a multi-tenant cloud infrastructure with physical control of infrastructure and data to help them meet the most demanding regulatory, data residency, and latency requirements

Regional and global news

Consumer spending data released by the Saudi central bank (SAMA) indicates that more and more point-of-sale (POS)

transactions are taking place in the country while ATM withdrawals are on a downtrend trend. Further, overall spending (including ATM and POS) is on an uptrend as well. Number of ATMs in the country have reduced from the highest number seen in January 2020 at 18,890, down to 17,050 in October 2021. However, number of ATMs has risen from 16,820 in September 2021. The number of POS terminals and POS transactions are rising exponentially.

Rising Omicron cases weighed on the global stock markets at the start of the week. However, markets saw a widespread recovery as investors continued to shake off recent market losses. While investors grapple with news about the fast-spreading Omicron variant, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved a first-of-its-kind oral treatment from Pfizer (PFE). This news may have been what helped markets helped markets stave off a potential mid-session reversal to the downside.

Oil prices climbed during the week as US crude stockpiles fell more than expected. South Korea, meanwhile, will start releasing crude and oil products from its strategic reserves next month, the first major consumer to follow through with a pledge to tap emergency stockpiles as part of a US-led initiative.

Oil is heading for a yearly gain following a strong rebound from the pandemic but there are bearish headwinds mounting for the market including the Omicron variant of the virus. However, an energy crunch in Europe and disruptions to supply in Libya and Nigeria have led to some tightening.

Recommendations

The global markets started the week with declines but quickly started to recover during mid-week on improved sentiments surrounding the pandemic, as US economic data poured in. Markets are expected to witness more swings, given the uncertainties surrounding the Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

The Saudi Stock Exchange continued to outperform other GCC markets during the week. The UAE stock markets remained under pressure due to rising Omicron cases. We recommend investors to watch for developments on Omicron. One positive news has been Pfizer receiving approval for its COVID-19 antiviral pill.

Locally, the stock market remained buoyant, likely on news of improving macroeconomic indicators, as Fitch Ratings upgraded the country's outlook to stable from negative. We advise investors to look for high dividend yielding stocks but, at the same time, stay wary of developments on Omicron front.

By special arrangement with U Capital

US spending rises at slower pace amid high inflation

Washington, US - American consumers ramped up spending in November but at a slower pace than the prior month, while prices continued to march upward, posting the biggest gain since 1982, according to government data released on Friday.

The hot housing market also continued to see price pressures amid a shortage of new homes available for buyers, according to the latest monthly figures.

Personal consumption expenditures last month rose 0.6 per cent or US\$104.7bn, less than half the increase in October, with most of the gain going to services, the Commerce Department reported.

The small increase in spending on goods was fuelled largely by rising gasoline prices, among the most visible of the wave of price increases that have hit the US economy as it recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic amid supply chain snarls and labour shortages.

Analysts said some of the slowdown may have been due to



Shoppers visit the Dolphin Mall in Miami, Florida on Tuesday (AFP)

shoppers making holiday purchases earlier in the year due to concerns about shortages.

Accelerating inflation has become a political liability for President Joe Biden who has made the issue a priority for his administration.

The PCE price index picked up speed again last month, jumping 5.7 per cent compared to November 2020, the biggest increase in nearly four decades,

with energy prices surging 34 per cent, according to the report.

Excluding food and energy goods, the core PCE inflation measure increased 4.7 per cent over the past year, the highest since 1983.

The PCE inflation measure is the one preferred by the Federal Reserve and has been rising steadily in recent months.

Fed officials have become increasingly worried that price in-

creases could become entrenched and signalled earlier this month that it will pull back on stimulus more quickly, to be ready to raise borrowing rates in the first half of the year.

"Rising inflation continues to eat into real incomes," said Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics, pointing to the big gains in rent and car prices.

He predicted core PCE 'will rise further over the next few months, peaking at nearly 5.5 per cent in March. Favourable base effects and - we hope - easing pressure on vehicle prices will then start to bring it down'.

New home sales jumped in November, accompanied by another increase in prices, according to the latest data from the Commerce Department.

Nationwide sales jumped 12.5 per cent compared to October to an annual rate of 744,000, seasonally adjusted, although that is far below the sales pace in the same month of 2020, the report said.

AFP

EU expects €17bn from carbon tax

Brussels, Belgium - The EU said it could raise up to €17bn annually through a carbon border tax, emissions trading and taxes on big corporations.

Money from the three new revenue streams would go to pay down debt raised to cover a chunk of the bloc's €800bn coronavirus recovery fund, branded as NextGenerationEU, that is being shared between member states.

EU budget commissioner Johannes Hahn, who laid out details of the package in a media conference, said the projected €17bn windfall would only be realised in 2026-2030, when the measures reached 'cruising speed'.

"This well-calibrated package will not only provide a steady stream of revenue used for the repayment of NextGenerationEU but also align the revenue side of

the union budget with the union's policy goals: the green and digital transition," Hahn said.

The European Parliament and EU member states have to sign off on the package for it to come into force.

The carbon border tax, the most controversial of the instruments, is projected to bring in €1bn a year from 2026. It would be a levy on imports in targeted sectors coming from countries

whose production lags the EU in terms of costly carbon reduction policies. Another tax, on emissions trading within the EU, already exists but currently money from it goes into the national coffers of EU member states. Under the package, 25 per cent of money from that tax would be transferred to the EU budget, raising around €12bn a year over 2026-2030.

AFP

HEARTFELT CONDOLENCES

We deeply mourn the sudden and sad demise of



GULABSI RATANSI KHIMJI on 22 December 2021

"We pray and ask The Almighty to give his family the strength to bear this great loss."

May his soul rest in peace



Bank Muscat Najahi: A preferred solution for MSMEs

The micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSME) sector plays an important role in economies around the globe, considering its substantial contributions towards creating employment, improving economic diversification and driving GDP growth. The role of MSMEs is a critical one for the economy of the Sultanate of Oman too, and the government has been continuously taking a series of steps over the past decade to strengthen the position of micro and small business, culminating in the strong emphasis given in the landmark Oman Vision 2040.

Continuous Najahi support
With the objective of developing entrepreneurship in the sultanate as part of the overall strengthening of the economy, Bank Muscat has been one of the biggest supporters of the MSME sector in the country with the aim of providing the widest range of products and services. It has been continuously striving to meet their unique needs, boost development and enhance the ease of MSME banking through a number of major initiatives, including the setting up of the Najahi (Retail Enterprises) unit in 2014. Over the years, Najahi has been growing from strength to strength in its role of supporting the MSME sector with over 2,000 small businesses having



benefitted from its various services and solutions. Today, the beneficiaries of Najahi's collateral-free financing include businesses operating in retail trading, services, manufacturing and processing, construction, hospitality, travel and tourism, mining and agricultural sectors.

The Najahi products suite includes the value-added Najahi Current Account; Najahi Flexi Loan to support working capital, business expansion and other business needs; the Najahi Business Credit Card; and Najahi PoS Receivables Financing for customers who use PoS machines for sales. All financing options

are available to the bank's customers' collateral-free' and customer relationship managers are available at all times to guide entrepreneurs in utilising the different facilities available. Customers can easily access the facilities by visiting any of the bank's branches or the 14 Najahi centres available across the sultanate. It must be noted that small businesses can get credit up to RO100,000 using Najahi's financing options.

Non-financial support
The Najahi programme is contributing greatly to the success of

micro and small businesses in Oman as it aids them in previously unimaginable ways through collateral-free loans and credit facilities. In addition to financial services, Najahi also provides highly supportive non-financial services to SMEs like free digital marketing certification programmes, consultations and seminars to share entrepreneurial success stories and learning. For example, the Maharat Min Google digital marketing course is arranged free of charge for Najahi customers interested in enhancing their digital marketing skills. It has witnessed an excellent turnout and feed-

back from participants with over 400 Bank Muscat Najahi customers completing the certification programme, which upgrades their digital skills in a fast-changing world. Topics covered previously include, Digital identity building tools, Digital marketing basics and Steps to building a digital marketing plan. Bank Muscat is greatly encouraged by the excellent response from Omani entrepreneurs who are looking for a wide variety of digital tools in building successful businesses. The bank will play a key role in handholding them in their entrepreneurial journey as part of its strategy of supporting



the development of MSMEs.

Another initiative worth highlighting is the bank's tie-up with Omani e-commerce site MarkeetEx through which Najahi supports MSMEs selling their products and services online. MarkeetEx.com currently has merchants from different parts of the country registered on its online platform, including 27 Najahi customers who are active on it. More and more MSMEs are now using the marketplace to sell and deliver products and services including groceries, household goods, mobiles and computers, fashion, beauty, and health products at highly-competitive prices. This initiative builds on the success of the bank's annual exhibitions, which used to be held regularly before the COVID-19 pandemic made social distancing norms mandatory.

Digital banking platform
Bank Muscat's Corporate Inter-

net Banking services provide a fast, convenient and secure banking experience for MSMEs control their finances 24x7. Available in both Arabic and English language options through <https://www.bankmuscatonline.com>, the Corporate Online Banking platform can be used by Najahi customers for real-time banking, fund transfers to local or foreign accounts, bill payments and bulk payments to vendors. It also facilitates salary payments for employees under the Wages Protection System (WPS).

Najahi Current Account holders can also open FD accounts and request for cheque books. They can block their Najahi Card in case it is lost or stolen. Security is ensured by a physical token and a secure mailbox. It must be noted that the bank's online banking platform features the latest technologies and world-class security features.

Jeep Grand Cherokee L recognised at Luxury 100 Awards in SUV category

The Jeep Grand Cherokee L won 'Iconic Premium SUV of the Year' award at the seventh edition of The Luxury 100 Awards 2021, held by *Signature* magazine at the Al Bustan Ritz Carlton Hotel Muscat. Considered one of the most prestigious accolades in the region, the award was presented to Hatem al Najjar, general manager of Dhofar Automotive Company, the official distributor of Jeep, Dodge, Chrysler, Fiat, Alfa Romeo and Ram vehicles in Oman.

Commenting on being the recipient of the award, Najjar, said, "We are extremely delighted to have the all-new Jeep Grand Cherokee L be bestowed with this prestigious award, which is also an honour for us at Dhofar Automotive. The Luxury 100 Awards celebrates brands that have extended exemplary com-



mercial and personal services that are exclusive to its customers, in turn, evoking passion and excellence. By winning this award, we are pleased to reinforce our commitment towards excellence and providing our customers with only the best car models in the automotive sector.

Dhofar Automotive always strives to provide the highest quality services to its valued customers to ensure a valued ownership experience."

"The Jeep Grand Cherokee has held a prominent position on the list of the most preferred vehicles in the sultanate since its

launch, thirty years ago. The incredible Grand Cherokee L model was built based on surveys conducted with Jeep customers all around the world. This way their desires and needs were utilised to ensure that the Jeep Grand Cherokee L was built to deliver legendary Jeep off-road 4WD and on-road capabilities. This is in addition to other advanced technology and safety features, with the design extended to accommodate a third row of seats to meet the growing needs of Jeep customers who wanted more space and functionality," he added.

The average price for the all-new Jeep Grand Cherokee L ranges between US\$40,000 and US\$70,000 pre-VAT, with a wide lineup that includes V6/V8 engines and 4 trims including premium versions.

Bank Nizwa recognised as Strongest Islamic Retail Bank in Oman for 2021

Leading the way in the Islamic banking industry, Bank Nizwa was awarded the title of the Strongest Islamic Retail Bank in Oman in 2021 at the recently conducted Islamic Retail Banking Awards (IRBA).

The prestigious award honours Bank Nizwa for its contributions to the development, growth and success of Islamic retail banking in the sultanate. The award was received by Arif al Zaabi, AGM-Retail of Bank Nizwa, on behalf of the bank.

Commenting on the win, Khaled al Kaye, CEO of Bank Nizwa said, "We are indeed honoured to have received this coveted award as it celebrates excellence and best practices in the Islamic retail banking sector. At Bank Nizwa, we ensure that our Sharia'a-compliant products



and services are thoughtfully designed keeping the needs and demands of our customers in mind. At the same time, we have remained dedicated to achieving the objects of our digital transformation drive with a keen emphasis on providing

customers with the highest level of cyber and data security. Innovation, reliability and customer convenience are critical aspects of all our operations as we continue to enhance our digital banking ecosystem. All these factors put together have helped Bank Nizwa establish its positions as the preferred Islamic banking partner and set a new benchmark for progressive Sharia'a-compliant solutions."

Talking about the bank's successful retail segment, Zaabi said, "While this award gives us the assurance that we are on the right path, it also motivates us to continue enhancing our retail banking portfolio by creating value-added products and offering world-class Islamic banking services to the local community."

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Renault Duster gets endorsement for strength and SUV capability

Consisting of a powerful engine, an attractive modern design, a comfortable and spacious cabin, Renault Duster truly meets the aspirations of customers who wish to own a sports utility vehicle at competitive prices.

Reflecting Renault's inherent characteristics of strength and SUV capability the Renault Duster's feature a powerful engine, an attractive modern design, a comfortable and spacious cabin, in addition to strength, functionality and safety to meet the aspirations of buyers.

Tariq al Abri from Rustaq who is a long time Renault Duster owner says, "Renault Duster adds more splendour and elegance with its distinctive features. The sports utility vehicle offers a refreshing take on 4WD driving experience, equipped with the same off-road capability and affordability to beat the best in the market."

Calling it an innovative product, Amal al Zedjali from Muscat says, "I admire the car for its unique exterior styling, distinctly



assertive look and fuel efficiency. With its proven strength to handle all challenges, the Renault Duster equipped with multiple outstanding features and technology enhancements, continues to set new benchmarks in Oman. Renault Duster 2WD and 4WD's impressive exteriors, elegant interiors and advanced equipment reiterates the maker's commitment for setting new standards in the SUV segment."

Khalil Balushi from Salalah who owns a 1.6ltr 2WD Renault

Duster from Musandam likes the car for its superior SUV capabilities and enhanced features. "I am a very proud of owner of this brand which offers excellent mileage. It has demonstrated strength to handle all challenges. It is equipped with multiple outstanding features and technology enhancements. It is an embodiment of strength, functionality and safety. It offers a refreshing take on driving experience, equipped with the same off-road capability and af-

fordability to beat the best in the market."

Ramesh C from Sohar who owns Renault Duster's 4WD says, "The impressive vehicle is an impressive all-terrain vehicle. I have been a long-time fan of Renault Duster and will vouch for the vehicle performance and mileage. Renault Duster's impressive exteriors, elegant interiors and advanced equipment reiterates the maker's commitment for setting new standards in the SUV segment. I am a very proud of owner

of this brand."

A spokesperson for Renault Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles, said, "The vehicle plays a pivotal role in Renault Oman's product portfolio and has the widest offering in the segment and caters to evolving customer needs. Setting new standards in the SUV segment, the popular Renault Duster continues to be a best-seller in Oman. The brand, which is embodied by top attributes, continues to resonate completely with proud customers in Oman."

Self-assured look
Renault Duster has an individually self-assured look and features a brand-new exterior styling with a more full-bodied look and boosted by a wide chrome-finish grill which extends to the headlights at the car's front corners. With a front skid plate and Renault's signature C-shaped lighting with LED daytime running lights, Renault Duster further reinforces the

SUV's personality as a sturdy, yet a smart city vehicle.

Strong adventurer credentials
Step into the all-terrain world of Duster and discover attractive design, enhanced grille and lighting signature. The SUV's exterior has been given a more robust look thanks to the addition of a wide chrome-finish grille which extends to the head lights positioned at the car's front corners. A front skid plate reinforces the Duster's adventurer credentials and ensures that the vehicle never loses its smart looks. Finished with Renault's signature C-shaped lighting with LED daytime running lights the Duster is a modern SUV with a rugged personality.

All-new Duster means a new front end as well as modern and powerful lines. It features robust and all-terrain styling with high ground clearance, chrome grille surround and Hill Descent Control. Every road is open to you from now on.

SOHAR signs MoU to supply UTAS Suhar with new AI lab

Sohar Port and Freezone (SOHAR) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Suhar which will see the development of an AI lab on campus. Signed by H E Dr Saeed bin Hamad al Rubaie, vice chancellor of the University Technology and Applied Sciences and Omar bin Hamood al Mahrizi, Deputy CEO Sohar Port and CEO of the Freezone, the agreement will see SOHAR supply the necessary equipment to develop artificial intelligent technology capabilities to benefit the community as well as improve efficiency within the port and freezone. It is expected that the lab will start operations by the end of the first quarter of 2022.

SOHAR has strategically invested in new technologies to capitalise on its beneficial location and abundant resources to maintain its competitive advantage and drive growth in Oman's industrial sectors.

The use of cutting-edge technology throughout the complex will unlock new opportunities for tenants, maximise productivity and assist in the smooth running of the port and freezone as it



continues to expand.

During the signing, H E Rubaie said, "This partnership feeds directly into our goals at the University which aim to identify the right private sector partners and bridge our educational output with the technical requirements on the job."

"The upcoming lab in the Suhar is a testament of our advancement, as we continue to shape the future of education. By integrating AI into our academic

curricular, we will be creating a generation with the right skillsets and knowledge that will continuously innovate. Furthermore, we are laying the foundation to develop new disciplines that will allow us to keep up with the rapid developments we see in technology, machine learning and robotics."

"The MoU with UTAS provides SOHAR with an outlet for talented students to develop AI applications and initiatives with

a real-world purpose in mind. Ultimately, the adoption of technology will benefit the wider community, industries across the country and have a wide-reaching impact on the lives of people in Oman by creating a culture of innovation which will last long into the future. As we continue to expand, we will need intelligent solutions to increase efficiency and support evolving supply chains" said Mahrizi.

The collaboration between SOHAR and UTAS will build national capacities in the field of AI and technology, directly benefiting students as well as faculty, technicians and researchers.

This will also bring the educational sector together with the manufacturing and industrial sector to nurture a workforce that will contribute in building a knowledge based society.

SOHAR already uses AI in its maintenance and observation routines, becoming the first port in Oman to adopt drone technology as part of the Port's monitoring system.

Underwater drones equipped with cameras also provide real-time observation and analysis of the infrastructure, security and environmental situation across the port by sending images to the quay where problems can be solved quickly and up-to-the-minute status reports can be compiled.

The use of artificial intelligence has proven successful in predicting future maintenance through lifecycle reports and capable of reaching areas humans cannot while offering a new perspective of the entire complex.

Jhulan Goswami gets pre-bid in NFT cricket artefacts auction in Dubai

Jhulan Goswami stormed the exciting new world of non-fungible token (NFT) with the Dubai based CricFlix, in association with RevSportz and Fanatic Sports, launching its first-ever cricket non-fungible token (NFT) auction in Dubai on Friday.

Goswami's 2017 World Cup jersey has already been pre-bid even before the start of auction making her the first among equals in NFT cricket universe.

"I am very pleased. May I say this should be the start for many other colleagues of mine to unlock NFT value and reach out to fans," said Goswami who is also the highest wicket taker in women's ODIs.

Already, pre bids worth US\$200,000 has been placed indicating the kind of overwhelming response that Cricflix is receiving from cricket fans across the globe.

"We, at CricFlix, are providing powerful transformations into the metaverse by bringing world class cricket memorabilia with a renowned history behind it. It is an investment piece of a rare asset class for the future generations where the metaverse and physical world come together and thrive," said Anwar Hussein, co-founder of CricFlix.

This initiative aims to empower cricket fans by creating value investment opportunities as well as allowing access to rare and historically significant collectibles.

Sports NFTs have proven to be game-changing digital assets in recent times and the launch of CricFlix's rare NFTs will offer fans unique ownership rights alongside opportunities to make revenue by accumulating treasured moments from their digital sporting collection.

Apart from Goswami's jersey, cricket fans, across the globe, will also have access to exclusive collections of rare and authentic cricket memorabilia from the playing days of legendary cricketers such as C K Nayudu including rare artefacts like match ticket from the most talked 1932 and 1936 India tour of England, legendary Donald Bradman's rare signed stamp, signed memorabilia from the 1983 team as well as the Lata Mangeshkar's concert recording for the 1983 World Cup-winning cricketers are among the various other memorable artifacts which are up for the upcoming NFT auction.

The unique augmented reality backed block chain certifications of CricFlix will provide true value to the fans to become investors and shareholders for the first time through NFT purchase as well as avail an opportunity to immortalise these exclusive digital artefacts.

"This is world's first hybrid cricket NFT auction providing valuable collectible investment opportunities along with 'Once in a lifetime' sports experiences worldwide. We believe combining a tangible experience with the NFT auction is a game-changer and unique proposition for the passionate fan. Imagine watching the most viewed match from the best seats in the stadium and interacting with the legends of the game and providing immersive and unforgettable experiences is our speciality," said Raghav Gupta, founder and CEO of Fanatic Sports.

Talking about benefits of NFT purchase, Prantik Majumdar, co-founder of RevSportz said, "A fan can now own a piece of history in the form of digital memorabilia and this is what makes the NFT technology such a game changer. By bringing decentralisation to the world of sports, NFTs also provide athletes at all levels an opportunity to start earning an income from fans."

This collaboration will enable to create a market valuation that will transform fandom moments into profitable moments for cricket fanatics' world over.

Karwa with Bahwan CyberTek implements Microsoft Dynamics

Marking yet another milestone achievement for the brand, Karwa Motors, Oman's first-ever bus brand and manufacturing facility, in partnership with Bahwan CyberTek, recently completed the successful implementation of the Microsoft Dynamics 365 Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system.

Commenting on the implementation of the new ERP system, Dr Ibrahim al Balushi, CEO of Karwa Motors said, "We live in an ever-changing world where new processes and technologies are being developed and introduced continuously. Having a robust business management solution at the foundation of our



Dr Ibrahim al Balushi

business is vital to maintaining a high level of productivity and a strong growth trajectory throughout our supply chain. Given its proven track record and flexibility, Microsoft Dynamics 365 was a perfect fit."

"With this state-of-the-art ERP solution at our core, we will be able to enhance the end-to-end visibility across our supply chain and strengthen our manufacturing business. Doing so by connecting systems and data to anticipate change, minimise disruptions, and reduce time to market. Additionally, we will gain planning agility across our manufacturing and distribution processes, which will enhance innovation and further optimise our operations in the future."

Bahwan CyberTek is a global provider of digital transformation solutions and a company that is instrumental in collaborating with the Sultanate of Oman to

create employment for Omani citizens. They have trained over 10,000 Omani youth, including 3,000 in the IT and ITES sectors. The company was tasked with the complete development, setup, and support of the Microsoft Dynamics 365 ERP solution for Karwa Motors.

In total, the scope of the activities covered six key aspects of Karwa Motors' operations - the process coverage of Karwa Motors' functional units, solution capabilities and features, process capabilities for manufacturing sector organisations, solution integration, future expansion and future-proofing, and strategic control over technology, usage, deployment, and support services.

Balushi added, "As one of the foremost industry leaders in digital transformation solutions in Oman, Bahwan CyberTek was the perfect partner to implement the system. Even with some unforeseen modifications and integration requirements, Bahwan CyberTek's support and expertise enabled us to deploy Microsoft Dynamics 365 across our operations in record time. With it in place, we can now build a more resilient future for ourselves by driving innovation, optimising operations, and deepening our customer relationships."

Changan Oman announces 1st year anniversary offer on popular models

To celebrate popular brand Changan's first year anniversary in Oman, Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment LLC (AGAE), part of Bahwan International Group, has announced a range of amazing benefits for customers.

The 'first anniversary' celebration offer is available on all models including: Changan CS95 (2.0ltr Turbo Engine, 224 hp, 6AT); CS85 coupe (2.0ltr Turbo Engine, 224 hp, 8AT); CS75 Plus (2.0ltr Turbo Engine, 224 hp, 8AT); CS35 Plus (1.4ltr Turbo Engine, 156 hp, 7DCT), EADO Plus (1.4ltr Turbo Engine, 156 hp, 7DCT) & EADO Plus (1.6ltr Engine, 126 hp, CVT) and Alsvin (1.5ltr Engine, 105 hp) and Hunter Pickup (2.4ltr Turbo Gasoline engine, 210 hp, 4WD, 6 Speed Manual or Automatic Transmission and 1.9ltr Turbo Diesel Engine, Manual Transmission).

The special offer which the customers can avail during the period include low EMI free service (from two years/35,000 kms to three years/55,000 years), free insurance (for first year Oman and UAE only), free registration (for first year only), and assured fuel card RO50 to RO100 depending on the models.

The offer is valid from November 30, 2021 till January 29,



2022 on all models purchased through Changan showroom for all retail customer only.

A senior official from AGAE said, "This is a very special one; 1st anniversary offer we would like to appreciate our valued customers for their trust in Changan Brand. Changan is a Premium Brand with Advanced Technology and Radar based safety features. We are happy to offer the best value to all our customers."

Free service 2years or 35,000km to 3 years/55,000km (PMS service)

Customers can avail Periodic Maintenance Service from two years/35,000km to three years/55,000km and includes only 10,000 kms Service Intervals.

Two years/35,000km is applicable on Changan Alsvin

model variants only.

Three years/55,000km applicable on EADO Plus, CS35 Plus, CS75 Plus, CS85 Coupe, CS95 and Hunter Pickup only.

Free assured fuel card worth RO50 to RO100

Customers can avail free fuel card ranging from RO50 for Changan Alsvin model variant to RO100 to all other Changan model variants.

EMI for six to eight years for individual customers only.

Easy monthly instalments are calculated based on 20 per cent down payment for six to eight year loan tenure for the respective Changan basic model. Subject to credit approvals from Banks for retail customers only.

►Changan Alsvin: EMI Starting from RO60 for eight years

►Changan EADO Plus: EMI Starting from RO81 for eight years

►Changan CS35 plus: EMI Starting from RO97 for eight years

►Changan CS75 plus: EMI starting from RO135 for eight years

►Changan CS85 coupe: EMI starting from RO142 for eight years

►Changan CS95: EMI starting from RO160 for eight years

►Changan Hunter: EMI starting from RO150 for six years

Changan CS95

Changan's high-performance full-size SUV CS95 is catching the attention of auto enthusiasts in Oman. The seven-seater SUV 4WD which amplifies driving experience with sophisticated luxury and superior comfort has been designed to stir the driving emotions.

With a commanding presence

and muscular stance, Changan CS95 is designed to demand attention wherever it goes.

Changan CS85 Coupe

Changan CS85, the luxurious crossover coupe combines the dynamic handling of an SUV with the sporty aesthetics of a coupe to give owners the best of both worlds. Packed with a 2.0ltr turbocharged engine which produces 224 horsepower and 360 Nm of torque, an 8 speed AT Changan CS85 Coupe redefines the definition of smoothness.

Changan CS75 Plus

With its premium design, comfortable automotive interior, and highly intelligent configuration, Changan CS75 Plus offers a host of special features. Changan CS75 Plus is impressing car enthusiasts for its promising quality of innovation, aesthetics, func-

tionality and stability. The compact Crossover is guaranteed to make a mark in the Omani market. The SUV that makes driving feel like winning with its stunning design, premium interior and intelligent features.

Changan CS35 Plus

Changan's CS35 Plus, a sporty new-gen crossover equipped with state-of-the-art technologies is popular for its unparalleled driving experience. Energetic like the youth, it is packed with a 1.4ltr Turbo charged engine which produces 156 hp and 260 nm of torque and fitted with a seven-speed Dual Clutch Transmission (DCT) to always keep you ahead of the segment competition.

Changan EADO Plus

The 'beyond your expectation' Changan EADO Plus is a com-

pact yet aggressive family sedan with premium styling, luxurious interior, and plenty of safety features. With intelligent safety features to assist, EADO Plus lets drivers be at peace when on the road. Taking from the inherent design language, EADO Plus ups the ante with a crisply styled exterior that emphasizes a strong sense of sportiness.

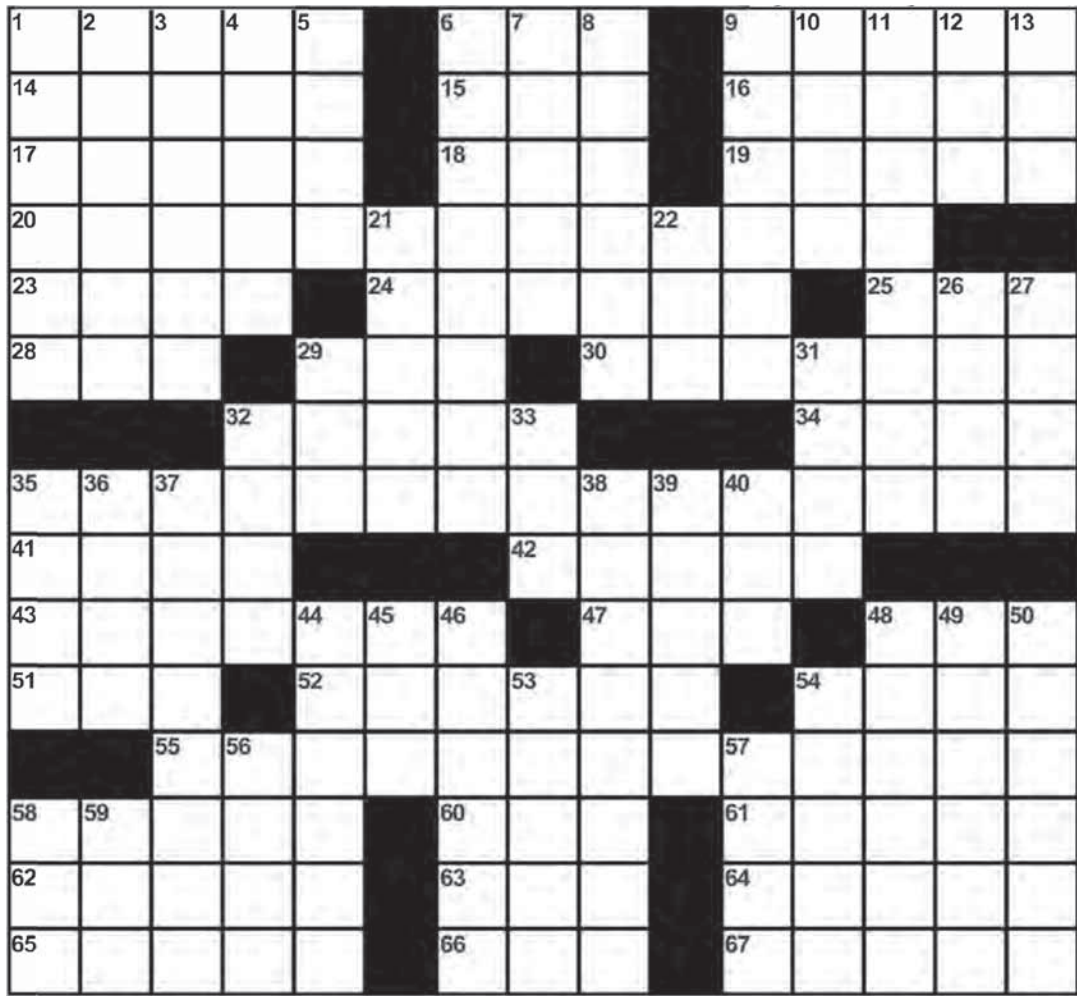
Changan Alsvin: Family sedan

Bearing a streamlined body design, exquisite interior design, and impeccable energy-efficient engine, the Changan Alsvin allows owners to exceed their everyday expectations. The 1.5L 5-speed dual clutch automatic transmission car truly brings unparalleled value to customers and offers an excellent fuel economy of 18.3 km per litre.

Changan Hunter

One of the best aspects of the Changan Hunter is its pickup capabilities and usage. Sturdy, spacious and of high quality it is suitable for various load and road conditions. Boasting of class leading power and excellent ground clearance it delivers an unmatched level of supremacy and capability. Changan Hunter ensures a pleasurable and comfortable drive for the passengers.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Lawn invaders
6) More, to a senior
9) Old Indian honorific
14) Dullsville's atmosphere
15) Weary traveler's stopover
16) China piece
17) Pelted on Oct. 31
18) Calypso offshoot
19) Reason to nitpick?
20) Subtle bits of intimidation
23) Societal woes
24) Flight parts
25) "Ten Most Wanted" org.
28) "Acid" used in some trips
29) Conway or Allen
30) Dry as the desert
32) Baltimore griddler
34) Back muscles, for short
35) Had a ready-made excuse
41) "Bone" anagram
42) Emulates an angry bull
43) At volume 10, often

- 47) "I do," in weddings
48) Numbers person
51) "Just a..." ("Hold on!")
52) Took a peek
54) Beaming look
55) Thing in some dreams
58) Overly pounded?
60) It stops if you raise your hand
61) Goes on a verbal tirade
62) Tree knots
63) Street sign abbr., sometimes
64) Specialised vocabulary
65) Atlas feature
66) "As to"
67) "God_ you" (sneeze response)
DOWN
1) Cotton pest
2) Marx's manifesto co-author
3) Decorate with gold.A leaf
4) One-on-one fights
5) One of two in a game
6) Clocked incorrectly
7) Looped crosses
8) Well-beaten instruments

- 9) Enter a pool
10) What little things mean?
11) Munich soccer mom
12) "... a Small World"
13) Hive builder
21) Control a car
22) Pitching stat
26) Sheet of matted cotton
27) Research facility (Abbr.)
29) Road coverage
31) Priests' robes
32) Tear apart
33) Christmas quaff
35) Animation sheets
36) Double reed instrument
37) Discount providers
38) Nervous time for turkeys
39) Gradually deteriorate
40) Do a seamy thing?
44) Like one's firstborn
45) Grassy layer
46) Work boot reinforcement
48) Shrink in fear
49) Painted ponies
50) Feelings of anxiety
53) Deceitful person

- 54) Twisted knot
56) Ireland, the Emerald _
57) Typical Kuwaiti
58)_-Wan Kenobi
59) Bakery item

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
The world is your oyster today, and all you have to do is pick your condiments. Isn't it nice to be sitting at the head of the table for a change? Wrapped up in your own ambitions, however, you could lose sight of what's most important in your life. Make sure your priorities are straight. Don't forget the importance of a balanced meal and some time for relaxation. Let go of all that stress and just chill.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
Just because you know exactly what you want doesn't mean that everyone else is going to be panting to give it to you. Getting ahead has just as much to do with taking care of those around you as it does with taking care of yourself. When you feel your ego rearing up, take a deep breath and try to think from another's perspective. If the exercise makes you feel a little dizzy, you're probably not doing it enough.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
Difficult financial questions are likely to crop up today and make you sit up and think. Your immediate reaction might be to cut back drastically and resolve to forgo even some of your most cherished indulgences. But a long-term solution and a workable way out of this dilemma require a more balanced approach. Frugality and fun don't have to be mutually exclusive.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
Your strong sense of conviction and your ability to entertain divergent points of view could catapult you into a leadership position. People appreciate your excellent listening skills and the ease with which you quickly grasp their salient points. Always remember the qualities that got you to this pinnacle. Losing sight of them could diminish your effectiveness. Exercise the creative force within you.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
It's easy to pick apart another's inspiration, but a real leader can build constructively on just about any framework without tearing it down first. Are you up to the challenge? If you're pleased to be the object of someone's flirtatious attention, returning the sultry glances could lead to a most pleasant evening. An excellent dinner and lively conversation could be just the appetisers.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Creature comforts are particularly satisfying, and you're in just the mood to appreciate them. But in the mood you're in, just about everything pleases you. As an added bonus, it seems as if others are bending over backward trying to make things even better than they are. Examine your situation carefully. These moments are what life is all about. Live life to the fullest.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
You could be somewhat prickly today if your plans don't go exactly as you expect. Giving in to anger or defeatism will do nothing to solve the problem. It's time for a little detective work. Someone or something could be thwarting your efforts. Determining the source of the friction is the first step in resolution and reestablishing your peace of mind. This will sure help you to restart your plans and succeed.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
Your irritation threshold is definitely lower today than usual, but you're being hardest on yourself. Perhaps old memories are constricting your heart. Maybe past failures are haunting your mind. Banishing these negative influences will take a supreme act of will, and only you can do it. Believe it or not, you are strong and ready. You know what they say about spilled milk. There's a lot of wisdom in those words.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
Look for outside reasons if you want, but there's really only one reason you're so frustrated, and you know exactly what it is. Until you figure out a way to overcome your slapdash approach and your propensity to veer off on tangents, you simply won't have much to show for your efforts. It's easy to resist self-discipline, but if you want to break this habit, you have to start somewhere. It might as well be now.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
These obstacles may seem insurmountable, but you don't have to let them stand in your way. If you think through your options carefully, you should be able to maneuver around, over, or under any hurdle, especially with all the resources you have at hand. Think of yourself as an Olympic track star and push resolutely toward the finish line. Victory will be sweet. Be ready to celebrate with your loved ones.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
You've been thinking about making this life change for quite a while. Now it's time to stop rationalising and start doing. You have the strength of will to overcome a bad habit and the resolution to set off in a new direction. Procrastination is a thing of the past. Action and decisiveness are your new operative descriptors. Take this newfound determination and use it to your advantage.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
Different circumstances call for different approaches. The trick is to hit the right combination. There might be times today when you need to be in control and times when you simply need to let go and allow others to run with the ball. Even with others calling the plays, you can be very effective from the sidelines. In fact, you might enjoy being out of the spotlight. Take a step back and love yourself.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

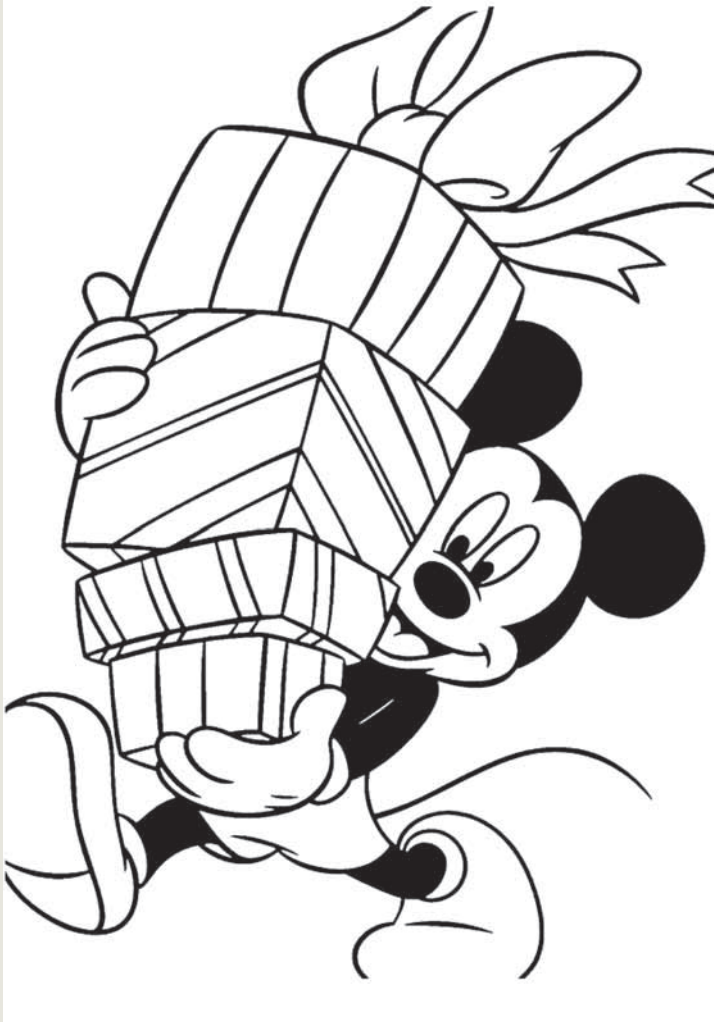
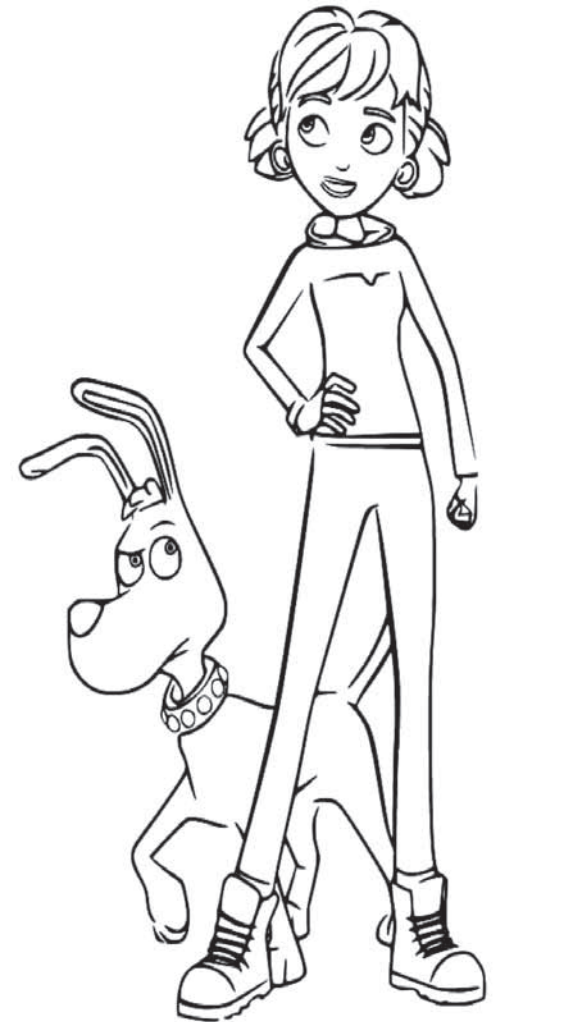
1. The parts of the Mahabharata which include Bhagawad Gita, is
a. more then 100 years old
b. more then 2500 years old
c. more then 1500 years old
d. None of the above

2. The ruling party of Singapore, where no opposition parties are allowed is called
a. People's Party
b. People's Action Party
c. Labour Party
d. Communist Party

3. The restoration of the Olympic Games was at the initiative of a/an
a. French baron
b. Greek philosopher
c. German philanthropist
d. English duke

Answers: 1. b 2. b 3. a

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

M	L	I	A
N	U	I	T
L	E	N	P
U	S	E	E

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.
Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

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

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Coalition launches operation after missiles fired from Yemen

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - The Saudi-led coalition on Saturday launched a 'large-scale' action on Yemen after missiles fired by Iran-backed Huthi rebels killed two people in the kingdom, the first such deaths in three years.

The Huthis warned Yemen's oil-rich northern neighbour of a 'painful' response if the coalition does not stop its 'aggression' against the country.

Yemen has been wracked by civil war since 2014 pitting the internationally recognised government supported by the Saudi-led military coalition against the Huthis who control much of the north.

Tens of thousands of people have since been killed, in what the UN has termed as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The latest violence came overnight when two people - one Saudi and the other Yemeni - were killed in the projectile attack on Jazan, said Saudi Arabia's civil defence.

"A military projectile fell on a commercial store on the main street, resulting in two deaths," it said, adding six Saudis and a Bangladeshi national were injured. Images from the official Saudi Press Agency purportedly of the aftermath of the attack showed a large crater in the ground and destroyed vehicles.

Huthis warn of 'painful' response

The Saudi-led coalition said shortly afterwards that it was 'preparing for a large-scale military operation'. It later launched



Yemenis inspect damage following an overnight airstrike by the coalition in Sanaa, on Friday (AFP)

an air strike in which 'three civilians including a child and a woman were killed, and six others were wounded', Yemeni medics told AFP.

The coalition will hold a news conference on Sunday to address the latest developments, the Saudi authorities said, clarifying an earlier advisory that it would be on Saturday.

Huthi spokesman Yahya Saree warned Saudi Arabia of 'painful operations as long as it continues its aggression and crimes'.

In a statement on the Huthis' Telegram channel, he said the

rebels had launched three ballistic missiles on Jazan, a southern region of the kingdom bordering Yemen.

The insurgents often launch missiles and drones into Saudi Arabia, targeting its airports and oil infrastructure. The latest was the first in more than three years that has resulted in fatalities in the kingdom, which recorded its first death from a Huthi missile attack when a missile struck Riyadh in 2018.

It also comes as fighting between the two sides intensifies, with the coalition ramping air strikes on Sanaa.

'Deaths every day'

Saudi Arabia and its ally the United States have long accused Iran of supplying the Huthis with sophisticated weapons, a charge the Shiite-dominated Islamic republic denies.

The US Navy said this week that it seized 1,400 AK-47 rifles and ammunition from a fishing boat it claimed was smuggling weapons from Iran to the Huthis, who are from Yemen's Zaidi Shiite minority.

"The stateless vessel was assessed to have originated in Iran and transited international waters along a route historically

used to traffic weapons unlawfully to the Huthis in Yemen," it said.

On Thursday - a day after the coalition targeted a Huthi military camp in Sanaa - the military alliance said it shot down a bomb-laden drone near Abha airport in the south of the kingdom, causing debris to fall nearby but leaving no casualties.

And earlier this week, it targeted Sanaa airport, whose operations have largely ceased because of a Saudi-led blockade since August 2016, with exemptions for aid flights.

In his Christmas Day message, Pope Francis deplored the fact that 'immense tragedies' in conflict-riddled Arab countries, including Yemen, were 'being passed over in silence'.

"Let us listen to the cry of children arising from Yemen, where an enormous tragedy, overlooked by everyone, has silently gone on for years, causing deaths every day," he said in the Vatican.

The World Food Programme said it has been "forced" to cut aid to Yemen due to lack of funds, and warned of a surge in hunger in the country.

The UN estimates Yemen's 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 Yemen's population of about 30mn requires humanitarian assistance in what the United Nations says is world's worst humanitarian crisis.

AFP



Protesters march during a mass demonstration in demand for civilian rule in the Sahafa neighbourhood, south of Khartoum on Saturday (AFP)

Tear gas fired as thousands march in anti-coup rallies in Sudan

Khartoum, Sudan - Thousands of Sudanese protesters rallied on Saturday two months on since a military coup, demanding soldiers 'go back to the barracks' and calling for a transition to civilian rule.

Waving flags, beating drums, dancing and chanting, crowds marched on the streets of Khartoum despite a heavy deployment of security forces - who later fired tear gas canisters to break them up.

Officers had earlier blocked bridges connecting the capital to suburbs, cut phone lines and restricted the Internet ahead of the planned protests.

At least 48 people have died in crackdowns during weeks of protests, according to the independent Doctors' Committee, and Khartoum's state governor has warned that security forces 'will deal with those who break the law and create chaos'.

Demonstrators converged on the presidential palace in Khartoum, the headquarters of the military government in control since General Fattah al Burhan seized power on October 25.

Burhan held civilian leader Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok under effective house arrest for weeks, but reinstated him on November 21 under a deal promising elections for July 2023.

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

Protesters online had encouraged supporters with slogans, in-

cluding demanding 'no negotiations' with the army.

As well as rallies in Khartoum and its suburbs, protesters also marched on the streets of Madani, a town around 150km to the south, witnesses said.

Internet cut at dawn

Security forces with cranes used shipping containers to block the bridges across the Nile river connecting Khartoum to the cities of Omdurman and North Khartoum, and web monitoring group NetBlocks reported mobile internet was cut on Saturday.

Activists reported the arrest of several colleagues beginning Friday night, and Volker Perthes, the UN special envoy to Sudan, urged the authorities to 'protect' the protests not to stop them.

"Freedom of expression is a human right," Perthes said on Saturday, adding that it includes 'full access' to the Internet.

"No one should be arrested for his or her intention to protest peacefully."

"We draw the attention of the world and ask them to monitor what happens in Sudan on the issue of the revolutionary movement for freedom and democracy," said the Doctors' Committee, which is part of the pro-democracy movement.

Khartoum's governor warned that 'approaching or attacking buildings of strategic sovereignty is punishable by law'.

At rallies last Sunday, crowds began a 'sit-in' protest outside the presidential palace.

AFP

Ten killed in road accident in Iran, over dozen injured

Tehran, Iran - Ten people were killed and more than a dozen injured in Iran on Saturday when a truck collided with a minibus transporting workers in southwestern Khuzestan province, state media said.

The accident occurred at around 7.15am on the road between the cities of Ahvaz and Khorramshahr, Khuzestan's traf-

fic police chief Reza Dolatchahi said.

"The number of people killed in the crash on the old Ahvaz-Khorramshahr road has reached 10," Dolatchahi said, according to the official IRNA news agency.

The collision caused a pile-up involving three other vehicles, Dolatchahi added.

At least 13 other people were

injured, IRNA said, citing a Khuzestan emergency services spokesperson.

Those who died were the truck driver and passengers on the minibus, Fars news agency reported, citing an official from the province's Red Crescent.

The Ahvaz-Khorramshahr road is 100km long and sees significant truck activity to and from

the Shalamsheh border crossing with Iraq, according to Iranian media.

Although its roads are generally in good condition, Iran has one of the world's highest traffic death rates partly because of poor driving habits, as well as the impact of international sanctions which prevent possible upgrades to vehicles.

In another accident this month, six migrants from Afghanistan were killed in a head-on collision between a car and a truck near the central city of Yazd.

That came a week after nine people were killed in collision between a truck and a minibus in the central province of Isfahan.

AFP

Russia completes drills near Ukraine

Moscow, Russia - Russia announced on Saturday that more than 10,000 troops had finished month-long drills near Ukraine, amid Western accusations that Moscow was plotting an invasion of its ex-Soviet neighbour.

The Defence Ministry said in a statement that the drills for Southern Military District forces had taken place in a host of southern regions including Rostov, Krasnodar and Crimea, which Moscow seized from Ukraine in 2014.

But the drills also took place further afield, including in Stavropol, Astrakhan, North Caucasus republics and even in Russia's Caucasus ally Armenia. The Defence Ministry said the troops were returning to their permanent bases and that standby units would be readied for the New Year's holidays.

Western countries have accused Russia of massing upwards of 100,000 troops near Ukraine ahead of a possible winter invasion.

According to Kiev's estimates, the number of Russian troops along Ukraine's borders has increased from around 93,000 troops in October to 104,000 now.

Russia says it is free to move its forces on its territory how it sees fit and denies that it is plan-



Secretary of the National security and defence council of Ukraine Oleksiy Danilov during an interview in his office, in Kiev on Friday (AFP)

ning a large-scale attack.

It has presented the West with sweeping security demands, saying NATO must not admit new members and seeking to bar the United States from establishing new bases in former Soviet republics.

Tensions reached a boiling point on Wednesday when President Vladimir Putin said Russia would take 'appropriate retaliatory' military steps in response to what he called the West's 'aggressive stance'.

But he lowered the volume the next day, saying he had seen a 'positive' reaction from the United States to Russia's security proposals and said talks would take place next month.

In an interview on Friday, a senior Ukrainian security official

told AFP that there is no risk of an imminent Russian invasion.

Kiev has been battling pro-Russia separatists since shortly after Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014 in a conflict that has claimed over 13,000 lives.

'Putin wants to destroy'

Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, said that talk of Moscow's invasion could destabilise Ukraine and play into Putin's hands.

"Russian President Vladimir Putin is bent on destroying Ukraine but there is no major risk of an imminent invasion," the senior Ukrainian security official said on Friday.

AFP

No further advance into Tigray: Ethiopia

Nairobi, Kenya - Ethiopia's government said on Friday that its troops would not advance further into the war-torn region of Tigray but warned that the decision could be overturned if 'territorial sovereignty' was threatened.

The announcement comes days after the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rebel group declared a retreat to their Tigray stronghold, and signals a pause in fighting following a series of battlefield victories claimed by the government.

Although unconfirmed, the TPLF pullout from the Amhara and Afar regions had raised hopes there would be talks to end a 13-month conflict that has killed thousands and left parts of the country on the brink of famine.

On Friday, the government communication service released a statement saying federal forces had secured eastern Amhara and Afar and been ordered to 'vigorously remain in areas under our control'.

'The Ethiopian government has decided not to command its forces to further advance into the Tigray region,' it said in the statement shared on Twitter.

UN chief Antonio Guterres welcomed the Ethiopian govern-



This file photo shows captive Ethiopian soldiers walking towards Mekele Rehabilitation Center in Mekele, the capital of Tigray region in Ethiopia, on July 2 this year (AFP)

ment's announcement and the message from the Tigrayan forces, his deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said.

'The secretary-general urges the parties to grasp this opportunity, cease hostilities in the year-long conflict, take all steps to ensure the provision of much-needed humanitarian assistance, the withdrawal of foreign fighters, and address political differences through a credible and inclusive national dialogue,' Haq said in a statement.

The temporary halt to fighting may help lower the temperature after months of battles that have seen both sides claim major ter-

ritorial gains.

At one point, the rebels claimed to be only 200km by road from the capital Addis Ababa, sparking alarm among foreign governments who urged their citizens to leave the country as soon as possible.

But since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed - the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner - headed to the front last month, according to state media, the government has claimed to have retaken a string of key towns.

The government has dismissed Monday's withdrawal announcement by the TPLF as a cover-up for military setbacks.

Communications have been cut in the conflict zone and access for journalists is restricted, making it difficult to verify battlefield claims.

The fighting in Africa's second most populous nation has displaced more than two million people and more than nine million are in need of food aid.

There have been reports of massacres, mass rapes and other atrocities by all sides, and the UN Human Rights Council last week ordered a probe into a wide range of alleged abuses, a move condemned by Addis Ababa.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Pandemic clouds Christmas celebrations for second year

Vatican City, Holy See - Pope Francis called for more solidarity with those living in poverty as he celebrated mass in the Vatican in front of a masked congregation of around 2,000 people, while billions around the world marked a second Christmas under the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic.

An explosion in cases driven by the rise of the Omicron variant has meant a Christmas season tainted by the pandemic for a second year running, with longed-for family reunions overshadowed by the prospect of yet more COVID-19 restrictions.

In St Peter's Basilica, the 85-year-old Argentine pontiff urged the faithful to 'value the little things in life'.

"On this night of love, may we have only one fear: That of offending God's love, hurting him by despising the poor with our indifference," said Francis, who later on Saturday gave his traditional Urbi et Orbi address and blessing.

About 2,000 members of the public and 200 religious figures attended the Christmas Eve mass, wearing face masks and respecting social distancing.

In Bethlehem's Manger Square, visitors in Santa hats and scouts beating drums marked Christmas Eve, but numbers were lower than usual.

The city where Christians believe Jesus was born is usually a focal point of the holiday, with thousands packing the streets and filling hotels.

But Israel, which controls all



The Vatican Guard personnel stand in empty St Peter's Square prior to the start of Pope Francis' Christmas Urbi et Orbi blessing on Saturday (AFP)

entrances to the occupied West Bank where Bethlehem is located, has also barred its borders to foreigners in an effort to rein in infections from the Omicron strain of the coronavirus.

"It is a bit surreal," American student Hudson Harder told AFP.

"There is a selfish part where it's like 'Oh I get to see this place so empty' but on the other hand you feel for the shops, all the money they are losing, it's really quite tragic."

'More joyful this year'

In his homily for midnight mass

celebrated in St Catherine's Church in Bethlehem, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Pierbattista Pizzaballa said celebrations were 'certainly more joyful this year'.

"Compared to last year's Christmas, the participation is much greater and this is an encouraging sign," he told the masked congregation.

In the southern Philippines, standing in a pool of water in his typhoon-hit church, Father Ricardo Virtudazo celebrated Christmas Day mass with devotees who prayed for a better year after the storm killed nearly 400 people and left hundreds of

thousands homeless.

"What's important is all of us are safe," said Joy Parera (31) attending the service with her husband in the town of Alegria on the island of Mindanao.

Another survivor, Marites Sotis, said she would usually serve up meat, spring rolls and salad for Christmas but that her family was struggling after the storm felled most of their coconut trees.

"We won't have those this year because they cost a lot of money," Sotis (53) told AFP. "We'll make do with spaghetti."

For the second year, surging infections have complicated

ytelidie plans from Sydney to Seville.

The new coronavirus strain severely disrupted holiday travel, with tracking website Flightaware.com reporting more than 4,500 flights had been cancelled around the world, hundreds of them in the United States.

Millions of Americans were nevertheless on the move to see loved ones for Christmas, even as COVID-19 infections surpass the peak of the previous wave and hospitals run out of beds.

In Washington, US President Joe Biden and his wife Jill visited a children's hospital for the tra-

ditional Christmas book-reading by the first lady.

The couple chatted with patients and doctors, showing one boy a photo of 'Commander' - their new puppy - before settling into chairs beside a Christmas tree and reading a book inspired by the Disney movie *Frozen*.

In Europe, governments are reimposing misery-inducing safety measures that are draining the fun from Christmas for many.

The Netherlands is back in lockdown while Spain and Italy have made wearing masks compulsory outdoors.

And with Britain hitting a record high number of infections again on Friday for a third day in a row, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson suggested getting a vaccine booster shot as a Christmas gift for relatives.

'Ray of light'

Still, Christmas gatherings will be easier than a year ago in many other places around the world.

Most Australians are allowed to travel interstate over the festive break for the first time in two years, with Sydney's Catholic Archbishop Anthony Fisher saying that Christmas was 'a ray of light' in dark times.

And Santa Claus was not deterred from doing his rounds and been cleared for travel in Canada's airspace after showing proof of vaccination and a pre-flight negative COVID test, Ottawa's transport minister said.

AFP

'Blanket boosters likely to hit back'

London, UK - The World Health Organisation warned that rich countries cannot use boosters to escape the coronavirus and France became one of the first nations to vaccinate children over five, as nations scrambled to contain Omicron surges.

China meanwhile cracked down on the latest outbreak of the virus, shutting down a whole city.

And Britain, which reported a record 106,000 new cases in 24 hours, approved Pfizer's jab for children aged five and up, as US health regulators authorised the company's COVID-19 pill for high-risk patients aged over 12 years.

"No country can boost its way out of the pandemic," said the WHO Secretary General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

"Blanket booster programmes are likely to prolong the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than ending it, by diverting supply to countries that already have high levels of vaccination coverage, giving the virus more opportunity to spread and mutate."

Nor should a third dose of vaccine be seen as carte blanche, he added.

"Boosters cannot be seen as a ticket to go ahead with planned celebrations."

Unrestrained end-of-year celebrations could still prove to be major source of new infections, the WHO warned.

AFP



Delta Airlines aircraft are seen at John F Kennedy International Airport in New York on Friday (AFP)

Omicron disrupts holiday travel, flights cancelled

New York, US - Over 4,500 flights were cancelled around the world by Saturday and thousands more were delayed as the highly infectious Omicron variant disrupted holiday travel, according to tracking website Flightaware.

One route, however, was thankfully not affected: Santa was on track delivering presents to children across the globe, air defence officials assured US President Joe Biden.

As per Flightaware.com, at least 2,000 flights were cancelled worldwide on Christmas Day, including roughly 700 originating from or headed to US airports, with more than 1,500 delays as of 0720 GMT.

On Friday, there were around 2,400 cancellations and almost 11,000 delays. The site also reported over 600 cancellations for Sunday.

Pilots, flight attendants and other staff have been calling in sick or having to quarantine after exposure to COVID, forcing Lufthansa, Delta, United Airlines and many other carriers to

cancel flights during one of the year's peak travel periods.

Flightaware data showed United cancelled around 200 flights on both Friday and Saturday, or ten per cent of those that were scheduled.

"The nationwide spike in Omicron cases this week has had a direct impact on our flight crews and the people who run our operation," United said in a statement on Friday.

'As a result, we've unfortunately had to cancel some flights and are notifying impacted customers in advance of them coming to the airport,' the airline said, adding that it was working to rebook passengers.

Similarly, Delta cancelled at least 260 flights on Saturday and around 170 on Friday, saying it has 'exhausted all options and resources - including rerouting and substitutions of aircraft and crews to cover scheduled flying'. "We apologise to our customers for the delay in their holiday travel plans," the company said.

Eleven Alaska Airlines flights

were axed, after employees said they were potentially exposed to COVID-19 and had to self-isolate in quarantine.

The cancellations added to the pandemic frustration for many Americans eager to reunite with their families over the holidays, after last year's Christmas was severely curtailed.

Chinese airlines accounted for the highest number of cancellations with China Eastern scrapping around 480 flights or over 20 per cent of its flight plan, and Air China grounding 15 per cent of its total scheduled departures at around 0720 GMT Saturday.

According to estimates from the American Automobile Association, more than 109 million Americans were scheduled to travel by plane, train or automobile between December 23 and January 2, a 34 per cent increase since last year.

But most of those plans were made before the outbreak of the Omicron variant.

AFP

US to lift travel ban on southern Africa

Washington, US - The United States will next week lift the travel ban imposed on several southern African nations when the Omicron variant of COVID-19 was first detected, officials said Friday.

Countries around the world restricted travel from southern Africa after the variant was detected in South Africa, which reported Omicron to the WHO on November 24.

WHO and the United Nations spoke out against the travel bans and officials in South Africa said they were being punished for identifying the strain and being transparent.

White House assistant press secretary Kevin Munoz defended the ban on Twitter, say-



People enjoy Christmas decorations in Johannesburg (AFP)

ing, "The restrictions gave us time to understand Omicron and we know our existing vaccines work against Omicron, (especially) boosted."

He said the travel ban would be lifted on December 31.

A senior White House official

added that with Omicron present across the United States and globally, international travelers from the eight affected countries would not have a significant impact on US cases.

"During the travel pause President Biden reduced the

time for pre-departure testing to one day opposed to three days," the official said. "Travellers from these eight countries will be subject to the strict protocols."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken later on Friday spoke with South African International Relations and Cooperation Minister Naledi Pandor over the announcement.

'The Secretary again thanked South Africa's scientists and government for their transparency and expertise,' State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a statement.

The ban applied to South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique and Malawi.

AFP

China reports highest number of cases in four months, regions under lockdown

Beijing, China - China on Saturday reported its highest number of new coronavirus cases in four months as officials rushed to contain outbreaks in several regions, including Xi'an city where millions are still under lockdown.

China, where the coronavirus was first detected in late 2019, is on high alert for new infections as it prepares to hold the Winter Olympics in February in the capital Beijing.

Of the 140 new infections, 87 were locally transmitted, according to a statement by the National Health Commission, compared to 55 a day earlier.

Most were in Xi'an, in the northwestern province of Shaanxi, where 13mn residents



Security guards walking in an area under restrictions in Xi'an (AFP)

have been under lockdown since Thursday.

On Christmas Eve the city reported its highest daily count in a year with 75 domestic cases, according to the local health bureau on Saturday.

While China has reduced cases to a minimum - thanks to

a zero-COVID strategy of tight border restrictions, lengthy quarantines and targeted lockdowns - cases have been bubbling up in recent weeks.

Footage from state broadcaster CCTV on Saturday showed long queues outside Xi'an testing centres as officials

rushed to stamp out the latest flareup. Under strict lockdown rules, since Thursday all households in Xi'an have only been permitted to send one member outside every two days to purchase necessities. Residents need permission from their employer or local authorities to leave the city.

Xi'an has recorded 330 locally transmitted symptomatic cases since the first case was reported on December 9, few compared to outbreaks elsewhere in the world. But some 26 Xi'an government officials have been punished for lapses in virus prevention, China's disciplinary body said on Friday.

AFP

Young Iraqi film students tell their own stories

Backed by Mosul fine arts academy, 19 students are getting a chance to make their first short films

Mosul, Iraq - A budding Iraqi filmmaker yells 'action!' as an actress clambers over rubble in Mosul's Old City, proud students of a nascent film school.

Mosul still bears the scars of the brutal reign of the Islamic State group, who overran the northern Iraqi city in 2014 and imposed their ultraconservative interpretation of Islamic law.

They destroyed everything from centuries-old churches to musical instruments, before being routed in a devastating battle in 2017.

Now, in a collaboration between the Mosul fine arts academy, a Belgian theatre company and UN cultural agency Unesco, 19 students are getting a chance to make their first short films.

"We live in Mosul, we know everything that happened," said 20-year-old theatre student Mohammed Fawaz. "We want to show it all to the world through cinema."

Over a four-month course, students get a taste of everything from writing and shooting to acting and editing, according to Milo Rau, artistic director of Belgian NTGent theatre company who is behind the initiative. Cameras and microphones in hand, the students are now hitting Mosul's streets to tell stories from their wounded city.

'Stone Age to modernity'

An actress dressed as a bride searches for her husband, only to discover he has stepped on a land mine.

Children and other residents crowd around curiously, while a neighbour refuses to turn off a noisy generator.

"We're losing the light," one of the instructors reminds students, as the December sun goes down.

Studying at the fine arts academy after the IS defeat was a bit like 'passing from the Stone Age to modernity', said student Fawaz.

A fan of blockbuster movies like the *Marvel* and *Fast and Furious* franchises, Fawaz spent several of his teen years at home with no television or schooling under the extremists, learning English through books and thanks to a neighbour.



An actress is being prepared as a bride, for a shooting scene (AFP)

Over a four-month course, students get a taste of everything from writing and shooting to acting and editing. The students' nine works, each lasting up to five minutes, will be screened in Mosul in February and later in festivals

MILO RAU

dren play the main role," said Susana AbdulMajid, an Iraqi-German actress and teacher whose family is originally from Mosul.

Young people in the city 'have gone through a lot of difficult and horrible things... there is a kind of longing for childhood, and also for a time of innocence', she said.

The students' nine works, each lasting up to five minutes, will be screened in Mosul in February before being presented to European festivals, said Rau.

His production of 'Orestes in Mosul' - an adaptation of Aeschylus's ancient Greek tragedy - was produced in 2018-2019 with the participation of local students.

AFP



Students of a film school, work on a scene with an actress dressed as a bride, in the war-ravaged northern Iraqi city of Mosul (AFP)



have already decided 'to make films on Mosul and its war', Fawaz said. After a month-long intensive session in October, the students have been trying out different roles as they pair up to

make their films, said Belgian instructor, cameraman and filmmaker Daniel Demoustier.

All the equipment like lenses and sound gear brought in from abroad will stay, he said, with

the goal for the students to 'pick it up again and start making their films on their own'.

Even if only three or four do so, 'that will be a great success', he said.

'Longing for childhood'

Tamara Jamal, 19, said the course was her 'first experience' with cinema.

Her short film tells the story

of a young girl whose father beats her mother, while others have looked at issues including early marriage.

"Most of the students prefer to talk about stories where chil-

Bollywood replays India's seminal '83 cricket triumph

Mumbai, India - Bollywood's retelling of the 1983 World Cup hit cinemas on Friday, recalling a stunning underdog victory that was instrumental in turning India into the cricket-crazy nation it is today.

Captained by Kapil Dev, seen now as one of cricket's best ever players, India began the tournament in England as rank outsiders but ended up triumphing over the all-conquering West Indies in the final at a raucous Lord's. The victory 'was the turning point of how we saw ourselves as a cricketing nation, and... that incredible win fed into the veins of a country that till then had seen itself as also-rans on and off the cricket field', the *Indian Express* daily said ahead of the release of 83.

'The next morning, banner headlines screamed 'The Cup Is Ours', and nothing was ever the same. It was a blood rush to beat all blood rushes,' the paper said.

The first sign that India meant business was in the group stage of the tournament when Kapil Dev made 175 not out - with India having been on the ropes at 17 for 5 - against Zimbabwe.



Vehicles move past billboards of Bollywood film 83, which is based on India's first cricket world cup victory in the year 1983, in Mumbai on Friday (AFP)

A BBC strike on the day meant this extraordinary exploit was not filmed but hallowed cricketing almanac Wisden called it 'one of the most spec-

tacular innings played in this form of cricket'.

'No expectations'

An easy semi-final victory over

a fancied England side - featuring greats like Ian Botham, David Gower and Bob Willis - then set up the grand final against the West Indies, the de-

fending champions.

The West Indies were the best team in the world with fearsome fast bowlers Joel Garner, Malcolm Marshall and

Michael Holding - plus batting battleships Viv Richards, Gordon Greenidge and Clive Lloyd.

But India cruised to victory, causing pandemonium in the Lord's stands and back home.

Balwinder Sandhu, who scored an important 11 not out as last man - and later bowled Greenidge for one - remembers being hit on the helmet by a Marshall bouncer.

"It made me more determined... I didn't flinch," Sandhu, who helped advise the actors and director of 83 Kabir Khan, told AFP.

"[The West Indies had] great fast bowlers who had a 'no mercy' attitude," Sandhu said. "It was a great feeling just to get 10 or 15 runs off them."

'Never the same again'

Veteran journalist Ayaz Memon, who covered the tournament, said that cricket was already hugely popular and that India had won a Test series in England in 1971 for the first time.

"But it was the sheer unexpectedness of the triumph. Who had thought that India would beat the world champions? It triggered so much passion and

so much interest in the game in India that it was never the same again," Memon told AFP.

The victory also revealed the commercial opportunities of cricket in India, paving the way for the money-spinning spectacle it is now. This was also driven by the opening up of the economy and the advent of cable television in the 1990s.

"It (the win) completely transformed the future not just of Indian cricket but also cricket as a sport internationally. After that India became in a sense the epicentre of the cricketing world," Memon said.

Dev is played in 83 by Ranveer Singh. The Bollywood superstar honed his own cricket skills four hours a day for six months to bowl and bat - and walk, talk and smile - like the captain.

In an interview with AFP, Dev said India were helped by being underdogs and were simply 'enjoying ourselves'.

"There were no expectations. All the media's attention was on Australia, England, West Indies, and all the pressure was on the other teams," the 62-year-old said.

AFP

The James Webb Space Telescope separates from Arianespace's Ariane 5 rocket after launching from Europe's Spaceport, the Guiana Space Center in Kourou, French Guiana, on Saturday (AFP)



James Webb telescope on million-mile voyage

Kourou, France - The world's most powerful space telescope on Saturday blasted off into orbit, headed to an outpost 1.5mn kilometres from Earth, after several delays caused by technical hitches.

The James Webb Space Telescope, some three decades and billions of dollars in the making, left Earth enclosed in its Ariane 5 rocket from Kourou Space Centre in French Guiana.

It is expected to take a month to reach its remote destination.

It is expected to beam back new clues that will help scientists understand more about the origins of the Universe and Earth-like planets beyond our solar system.

JWST can see the heat signature of a bumblebee at the distance of the Moon

JOHN MATHER

Named after a former NASA director, Webb follows in the footsteps of the legendary Hubble - but intends to show humans what the Universe looked like even closer to its birth nearly 14bn years ago.

Speaking on social media, Webb project co-founder John Mather described the telescope's unprecedented sensitivity. "JWST can see the heat signature of a bumblebee at the distance of the Moon," he said.

All that power is needed to detect the weak glow emitted billions of years ago by the very



Arianespace's Ariane 5 rocket with NASA's James Webb Space Telescope onboard at the launch pad, in Kourou, French Guiana. The telescope, the most powerful space observatory ever built, will help answer fundamental questions about the universe, peering back in time 13bn years (AFP)

first galaxies to exist and the first stars being formed.

'Exceptional measures'

The telescope is unequalled in size and complexity.

Its mirror measures 6.5 me-

tres in diameter - three times the size of the Hubble's mirror - and is made of 18 hexagonal sections.

It is so large that it had to be folded to fit into the rocket.

That manoeuvre was laser-guided with NASA imposing strict isolation measures to limit

any contact with the telescope's mirrors from particles or even human breath.

Once the rockets have carried Webb 120km, the protective nose of the craft, called a 'fairing', is shed to lighten the load.

To protect the delicate instru-



Three decades and billions of dollars in the making, the world's most powerful space telescope's centrepiece is its enormous primary mirror, a 6.5m wide concave structure made up of 18 smaller hexagonal mirrors (AFP)

ment from changes in pressure at that stage, rocket-builder Arianespace installed a custom decompression system.

"Exceptional measures for an exceptional client," said a European Space Agency official in Kourou on Thursday.

Crew on the ground will know whether the first stage of the flight was successful about 27 minutes after launch.

Once it reaches its station, the challenge will be to fully deploy the mirror and a tennis-court-sized sun shield.

That intimidatingly complex process will take two weeks and must be flawless if Webb is to function correctly. Its orbit will be much farther than Hubble, which has been 600 kilometres above the Earth since 1990. AFP

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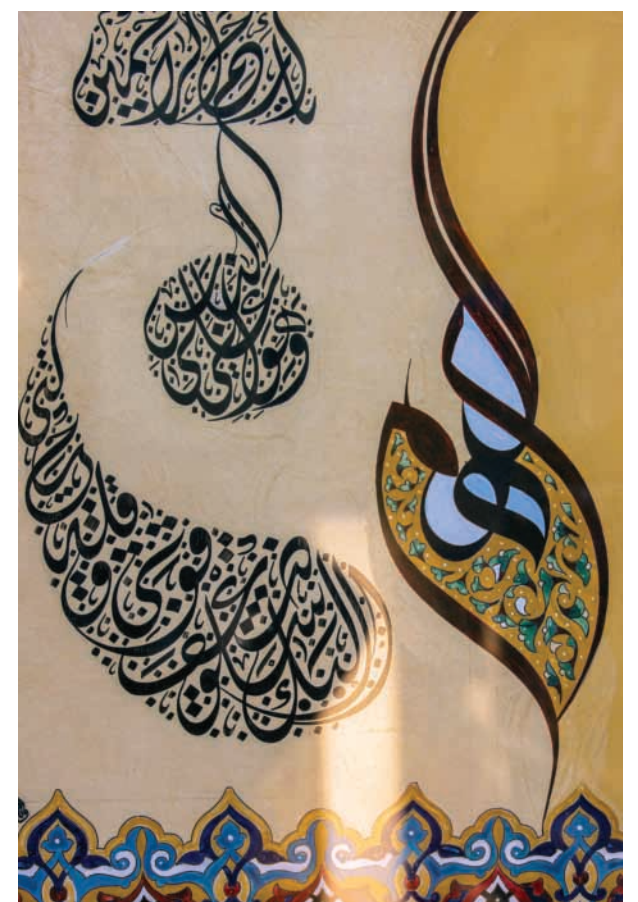
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Iraqi calligrapher Wael al Ramadan (left) hangs up one of his Arabic calligraphy framed pieces in the 'Thuluth' calligraphic style at his workshop in al-Ashar district of Iraq's southern city of Basra (AFP)



We hope that the government will take an interest in this art, through exhibitions and competitions

Wael al Ramadan

On paper he slowly begins to trace the requested words, with Arabic letters distinguished by their elegant curves.

Like his fellow calligrapher Hussein, Ramadan applauds Unesco for its 'great support for calligraphy and calligraphers all over the world'.

Ramadan earns money by teaching the discipline in schools but also sells his skill for advertisement purposes.

"We hope that the government will take an interest in this art, through exhibitions and competitions," said Ramadan, 49, who is clad in black with a shaven head.

"The survival of Arabic calligraphy depends on the support of the state."

It depends, too, on the devotion of men like Hussein and Ramadan.

"I obviously hope that my children will succeed me, just like I followed in my father's footsteps," Ramadan said with a smile.

AFP

The gentle art

When he is not hauling concrete blocks on a construction site in northern Iraq, Jamal Hussein devotes his time to preserving the gentle art of Arabic calligraphy. Though he has won awards in numerous competitions, Hussein acknowledged that 'you can't live on this', the artistic handwriting of Arabic script.

"I have a big family. I have to find other work," said the father of 11, who is 50 years old and earns his keep working on building sites in the Iraqi Kurdish town of Ranya.

Last week, the United Nations culture agency declared Arabic calligraphy an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity', following a campaign by 16 countries led by Saudi Arabia and including Iraq.

'The fluidity of Arabic script offers infinite possibilities, even within a single word, as letters can be stretched and transformed in numerous ways to create different motifs,' Unesco said on its web-site.

Abdelmajid Mahboub from the Saudi Heritage Preservation Society involved in the proposal to Unesco said the number of specialised Arab calligraphic artists had dropped sharply.

Hussein is one of them, and he welcomed the Unesco decision.

He hopes it will push 'the Iraqi government and the autonomous Kurdistan region to adopt serious measures' to support calligraphy - 'khat' in Arabic - and its artists.

Practising since the 1980s, his decades of experience and participation in competitions are attested to by about 40 medals and certificates displayed at his home.

No support

In October he came second in an Egyptian online competition, and is now training for a contest next month in the Iraqi holy Shiite city of Najaf.

Hussein's creations are made with a reed pen that he buys from Turkey or Iran. He sometimes sells the work for posters, shop displays and even tombstones, he said.

For decades, in the major regional centres of Cairo, Amman, Beirut or Casablanca, calligraphy was displayed on storefronts, on walls featuring popular sayings, or on plaques at the entrances of buildings to signal the presence of a lawyer or a doctor.

Today, the remnants of this calligraphy are only visible on the faded facades of old shops.

Still, nostalgia for the vintage aesthetic has become something of a trend, as hipsters of the region post pictures of their discoveries for their followers on social media.

But in impoverished, war-scarred Iraq, there is no support from the government 'whether for calligraphy or for other arts', Hussein lamented.

"Because of technology, the sanctity of calligraphy has declined," he said.

"Calligraphy requires more time, more effort and is more costly. People are moving towards cheaper technological production."

But it is impossible for Hussein to abandon his art. He dreams of 'travelling to Egypt or Turkey and living there temporarily to improve my khat'.

At the other end of Iraq, in the southern city of Basra, Wael al Ramadan opens his shop in an alley.

A client arrives to inquire about the preparation of an administrative stamp used to confirm attendance.

Ramadan seizes one of his sharp-nibbed pens and starts again to practise the art which his father introduced him to when he was still a child.

FOOTBALL ROUND-UP



Ex-Rangers boss Gerrard celebrates after debut win with Aston Villa

Players deserve credit for Villa’s rise: Gerrard

London, UK - Steven Gerrard said his players deserved the credit for Aston Villa’s climb up the Premier League table since he took charge of the Birmingham club.

Villa had lost five straight league matches and were just two points above the relegation zone when Gerrard left Scottish champions Rangers to replace Dean Smith, sacked as manager in November.

Since Gerrard’s arrival at Villa Park, the club have climbed from 16th to 10th and will be bidding for a fifth win in seven league games when they are at home to Chelsea on Sunday.

“I had confidence and belief that we could come in and have the impact that we’ve had,” said Gerrard, who brought several of his coaching staff with him from Glasgow giants Rangers.

“The players deserve the credit for going and carrying those performances out.”

The former Liverpool and England captain added, “Once I started talking to Villa, the very first thing I did was look at the fixtures in the short-

term. There were a lot of fixtures to be excited about, and I think the players have done extremely well in terms of the points return.”

Under Gerrard, Villa have beaten Brighton, Crystal Palace, Leicester and Norwich while losing narrowly to title contenders Manchester City and Liverpool.

I had confidence and belief that we could come in and have the impact that we’ve had

STEVEN GERRARD

“We were close to taking a point out of the City game as well,” Gerrard said.

“The Liverpool game was slightly different - they dominated for large parts.

“But I think we gave a good account of ourselves and made them extremely nervous in the latter stages of that game.”

AFP

Rodgers confident Leicester will avoid Liverpool hangover

London, UK - Leicester City manager Brendan Rodgers believes his side will recover quickly from their agonising penalty shoot-out exit from the League Cup when they face Premier League leaders Manchester City on Sunday.

The Foxes twice conceded a two-goal lead in their midweek League Cup quarter-final against Liverpool - including an equaliser deep into added time - before losing on spot-kicks.

Adding to the pain of defeat, Leicester defenders Caglar Soyuncu and Ricardo Pereira were forced off while star striker Jamie Vardy played the last 20 minutes with a tight hamstring.

None of which augurs well for Leicester’s fixture against Premier League leaders City, even though the Foxes have won with two of their last four meetings against Pep Guardiola’s side.

“There is always disappointment but I said before the game ‘You are coming to Anfield, a great place to play, and whatever happens let’s impose our way,’” said former Liverpool manager Rodgers on Friday.

“That’s what I’ve always had from these players. They have been competitive against the best teams in the country and we saw that, we just couldn’t do enough to get over the line.”

He added: “They (City) are playing well at the minute, so we will just have to see where we are at and then devise a plan with the players available and see what we can do.

“It doesn’t look like there are too many (City) players out, they’ve had a free week without a midweek game. They are a brilliant side with technical players, world-class players, and they are used to winning.

“We’ve done OK against them but it’s going to be a big challenge for us and we need to play with the spirit we played with against Liverpool.”



Liverpool celebrate after winning the English League Cup quarter-final football match against Leicester City, at Anfield in Liverpool on December 22 (AFP)



Leicester City’s manager Brendan Rodgers (right) speaks with team manager Jurgen Klopp (AFP)

City are on an eight-match winning run in the league and have failed to win only one of their last 11 games.

“I think you see from the game at Liverpool we can score goals, we are creative, but we have to see what we have available at the weekend and we will try to come up with a plan to get a result,” Rodgers said.

“We went there last season and got a fantastic win. You know the challenge you are up against: they will dominate the ball and are good in transition and have the confidence to play so that’s the challenge at the weekend. You have to play with courage.”

AFP

Tottenham boss Conte has no qualms over Harry Kane’s attitude

London, UK - Antonio Conte has said Harry Kane is ‘totally involved in the Tottenham project’ despite a modest start to the season.

Kane was linked with a pre-season move to Manchester City but the deal fell through.

Many pundits felt his failure to join the Premier League champions has contributed to Kane’s poor form in the early stages of the campaign - although England’s agonising penalty shoot-out loss to Italy in the Euro 2020 final at Wembley may have played a part as well.

England captain Kane found goals hard to come by when Nuno Espirito Santo, sacked in November and replaced by Conte, was in charge of Tottenham and even now the striker has scored just nine goals in all competitions this season.

However, he scored a second Premier League goal of the campaign against Liverpool last weekend and the 28-year-old will aim to build on that performance when Spurs are at home to London rivals Crystal Palace on Sunday.

Even so, Kane’s returns have been a long way off last season’s 23 goals and 14 assists in the Premier League.



Tottenham Hotspur’s English striker Harry Kane crosses the ball during the match between against West Ham United at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London (AFP)



“Harry has showed me great availability and showed me (he is) totally involved in the Tottenham project,” Conte said on Friday.

“I see him every day and I see that he is happy,” the Italian added.

“He leads in the training ground, he leads in the dressing

room and he leads during the training sessions in a fantastic way. I am happy for what I am seeing every day.”

AFP



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Indonesia defeat Singapore in semi-final

SUZUKI CUP

Singapore - Indonesia scored twice in extra time to overcome eight-man Singapore 4-2 at the city state's National Stadium on Saturday, as they reached the AFF Suzuki Cup final for the sixth time.

The hosts wasted an opportunity to win the semi-final when Faris Ramli missed a stoppage-time penalty and Indonesia capitalised in the extra 30 minutes as Irfan Jaya and Egy Maulana Vikri netted against the tiring Lions.

The Indonesians have never won the competition, but they will get their chance to end their drought in next week's final against Thailand or Vietnam.

The Thais hold a two-goal lead after the first leg of that tie.

Following a 1-1 draw in the first leg, Indonesia took the lead after 11 minutes when Witan Sulaeman capitalised on poor defending to square the ball for Ezra Walian to tap home.

Ricky Kambuaya shot just



Singapore's Shahdan Sulaiman takes a freekick to score during the AFF Suzuki Cup 2020 semi-final match against Indonesia; Indonesia's Witan Sulaeman (in the right photo) consoles Singapore's Ikhsan Fandi after the match at the National Stadium in Singapore on Saturday (AFP)

over the crossbar and Ramai Rumakiek's free-kick was stopped by Hassan Sunny as the Garuda tried to build on their advantage.

Singapore suffered a huge

blow in stoppage time when Sa-fuwan Baharudin was controversially sent off after he was shown a second yellow card following a tussle with an Indonesian de-

fender.

But the Lions immediately got back on level terms as Indonesia struggled to clear Shahdan Sulaiman's free-kick and Song Ui-



young fired home after a goal-mouth scramble.

Indonesia nearly restored their lead when Rizky Ridho fired against the crossbar on the

hour and they received a further boost when Irfan Fandi also received a red card for bringing down Irfan Jaya as he bore down on goal.

But Singapore's nine men rose to the occasion and went ahead in the 74th minute when Shahdan Suleiman curled in a superb free-kick from 20 metres.

Indonesia capitalised on their two-man advantage as Pratama Arhan scrambled the ball home three minutes from time to level the score once again.

Singapore still had a chance to win the game in regulation time when they awarded a last-minute penalty, but Faris' tame effort was kept out by goalkeeper Nadeo Argawinata.

The home side would rue that missed opportunity as Irfan turned the ball in from close range in the first minute of extra-time before Egy added another at the end of the first period to put Indonesia two goals up.

The home side battled gallantly but they were reduced to eight men when Hassan was sent off in the final minute of extra time for a foul outside his box.

AFP

Frost and Blackmore bid to be crowned Queen of King George



London, UK - Jockeys Bryony Frost and Rachael Blackmore have more than got the measure of their male rivals in the high-risk sport of jumps racing and can once again put the men in the shade in the King George VI Chase at Kempton Park on Sunday.

Frost and her mount Frodon are tough as teak competitors. Their victory last year, after leading from pillar to post, made Frost the first female jockey to win the King George

Though, they were well beaten behind Minella Indo, Blackmore's mount on Sunday, in March's Cheltenham Gold Cup they got their revenge in October.

Frost and Frodon teamed up to win the Champion Chase at Down Royal in Northern Ireland with Minella Indo five lengths back in third.

At 26, Frost is six years younger than Blackmore, and has also shown guts off the track in bringing a successful complaint of sustained bullying and intimidation against fellow jockey Robbie Dunne.

The Irish journeyman rider received an 18 month suspension, three of them suspended.

He was told in a damning judgment, "You meant to instil fear and humiliation and you succeeded."



Bryony Frost and her mount Frodon are tough as teak competitors

Frost is a turfiste favourite as became clear when she won at Sandown, while the hearing was still going on, and was greeted with three cheers of 'Hip Hip Hooray!'.

"That support from the racing public, they have been like a mass family. I felt the really personal thumbs ups: 'you're doing ace, keep kicking, stay who you are'," she said.

'Showed his guts'

Blackmore could round off her annus mirabilis - becoming the first woman rider to win the Champion Hurdle and the Grand National - by adding what is considered the second most prestigious steeplechase behind the Cheltenham Gold Cup.

Ironically, Minella Indo denied Blackmore the blue riband of steeplechasing the Gold Cup after the jockey chose to ride

trainer Henry de Bromhead's other runner A Plus Tard and finished second.

Minella Indo will bid to emulate Ireland's last winner of Sunday's race Kicking King who won the 2005 Gold Cup prior to winning the King George.

"You'd like to think a reproduction of his Gold Cup run would put him right there in the mix," said owner Barry Maloney.

Frost and Blackmore will be mindful that dangers lurk not least Frodon's Paul Nicholls stablemate Clan des Obeaux, part-owned by former Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson.

The horse finished a distant third in last year's race having won the previous two runnings but rediscovered his best form by season's end in winning top class chases at Aintree and in Ireland at the Punchestown Festival.

AFP

Former England Test captain Illingworth dies

London, UK - Former England captain Ray Illingworth has died at the age of 89, his county, Yorkshire, announced on Saturday.

"We are deeply saddened to learn that Ray Illingworth has passed away," the county wrote on its Twitter account.

He had been undergoing radiotherapy for oesophageal cancer.

Illingworth played 61 Tests for England between 1958 and 1973 and captained the country 31 times, winning 12 matches and an Ashes series in Australia in 1970-1

He was an all-rounder who scored 1,836 Test runs at an av-



erage of 23.24 and claimed 122 wickets with his offspin bowling at 31.20.

He was chairman of the England selectors between 1993 and 1996, and coached the team in

Ray Illingworth played 61 Tests for England between 1958 and 1973 and captained the country 31 times, winning 12 matches

"I don't want to have the last 12 months that my wife had," he said. "She had a terrible time going from hospital to hospital and in pain."

Illingworth made his debut for his native county in 1955 and played for them until 1968 before finishing his career at Leicestershire. He captained both counties.

"Illingworth's greatest gift as captain lay in creating the illusion that he had 14 or 15 players on the field: so expertly did he block a batsman's favourable scoring strokes," said specialist website, Cricinfo.

AFP



Djokovic to skip ATP Cup ahead of Australian Open

Belgrade, Serbia - Novak Djokovic will not play in the ATP Cup ahead of the Australian Open, where his participation is in doubt because he refuses to say if he has been vaccinated against COVID-19, his team said.

"It is 99 per cent sure that Novak won't go to the ATP Cup. He is training here (in Belgrade) but he has decided to give that tournament a miss," an unnamed member of his team told Serbian daily Blic.

The ATP Cup in Sydney is a team tournament that tradi-

tionally kicks off the men's season. World number one Djokovic could win a record 21st Grand Slam title at the Australian Open, which starts on January 17, but to enter Australia he and members of his entourage will have to be vaccinated and the 34-year-old has previously expressed his opposition to the vaccine.

His father Srđjan said in late November that Djokovic would probably not play the Australian Open and accused the organisers of 'blackmail'.

AFP

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Australia's Steve Smith (right) shakes hands with England's captain Joe Root after the second Test match, at Adelaide Oval on December 20 (AFP)

England ring changes for must-win Test

THE ASHES

Melbourne, Australia - Embattled England made four changes Saturday for the crunch Boxing Day Test in a bid to keep the Ashes alive, while Australia handed experienced seamer Scott Boland a surprise debut.

Joe Root's team must win at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in front of an expected 70,000 fans to stay in the hunt after heavy defeats in the first two Tests at Brisbane and Adelaide and with three still to play.

Those losses were characterised by batting collapses compounded by poor bowling and fielding with the visitors looking to stop the rot by shaking up the team.

Zak Crawley was recalled for the first time since March to replace struggling opener Rory Burns, despite averaging just 28.34 from his 15 Tests.

Veteran Jonny Bairstow, meanwhile, will add to his 78 Tests when he takes over at number six from youngster Ollie Pope, who has failed to adapt to the Australian conditions.

England also mixed up the bowling unit again with speedster Mark Wood returning after being rested for their 275-run defeat in Adelaide, which followed a nine wicket thrashing in Brisbane.

Off-spinner Jack Leach also gets another chance after being axed for the second Test despite the Adelaide pitch having plenty in it for the slow bowlers.

Chris Woakes and Stuart Broad were overlooked in an attack that will be led by veteran quick Jimmy Anderson and Ollie Robinson.

"It's a massive game for us, but it's a brilliant venue to play cricket at. Everyone is very excited to be here in what I'm sure will be a hostile environment," said wicketkeeper Jos Buttler, who keeps the gloves despite Bairstow's return.

"We know we need to bring our best cricket, we haven't brought that so far and that's disappointing.

"The reaction (after Adelaide) has been an honest one," he added. "We have a really tight-

knit group, some great mates in there, but we had some honest conversations as well."

'Someone fresh'

Australia are bolstered by the return of captain Pat Cummins, who missed the second Test after being a close contact of a COVID-19 case. He replaces Michael Neser.

But, as expected, fellow pace spearhead Josh Hazlewood will again miss out as he continues to recover from a side strain.

Jhye Richardson, who took five wickets in England's second innings at Adelaide, is still sore from his efforts with Boland replacing him to become the third Australian debutant this series after Neser and Alex Carey.

In doing so, he also becomes the first Indigenous man to play Test cricket for Australia since Jason Gillespie.

"He was pretty sore," Cummins told reporters of Richardson, adding that he also had a minor leg injury. "We were umming and ahing - he had a bowl yesterday but we thought seven

days off (before the fourth Test in Sydney) will kind of give him enough rest."

Boland will play on his home ground, where he has taken 91 wickets at 25.71 in 26 first-class games, often on unresponsive pitches.

Cummins said his record at the Melbourne Cricket Ground factored into their thinking.

"It was a huge part of it. His record speaks for itself here in domestic cricket," he said.

"Home ground, having someone fresh like him who can perform straightaway were the big factors."

SQUADS

England: Haseeb Hameed, Zak Crawley, Dawid Malan, Joe Root (capt), Ben Stokes, Jonny Bairstow, Jos Buttler, Mark Wood, Ollie Robinson, Jack Leach, Jimmy Anderson
Australia: David Warner, Marcus Harris, Marnus Labuschagne, Steve Smith, Travis Head, Cameron Green, Alex Carey, Pat Cummins (capt), Mitchell Starc, Nathan Lyon, Scott Boland

AFP

India seek to conquer final frontier in S Africa

Centurion, South Africa - Virat Kohli bruised from being fired as India's one-day captain bids to rebound by leading his country to an historic triumph in South Africa in a three-match Test series which starts at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Sunday.

South Africa is the only regular Test-playing nation where India have yet to win a series.

"We have worked really hard to win series away from India," said vice-captain K L Rahul at India's pre-match press conference on Friday.

"We've won series in England and Australia, which gives us a lot of confidence. We haven't won a series in South Africa, which gives us extra motivation to do our best."

South African captain Dean Elgar said he thought the teams were evenly matched.

"India are number one in the world for a reason but the fact that we are playing in our own back yard gives us an advantage."

Despite losing to New Zealand in last year's world Test championship final, India are the top-ranked Test team, five places ahead of South Africa, who have lost several key players to retirement in recent years.

Kohli leads an experienced side.

Crucially, it has the fast-bowling fire power to match South Africa's in conditions which usually favour pace.

No fewer than ten of India's 18-man squad have toured South Africa before.

Kohli, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ishant Sharma, Ravichandran Ashwin, Umesh Yadav and reserve wicketkeeper Wriddhiman Saha are on their fourth tour of the country.

Ajinkya Rahane and Mohammed Shami are on their third tour, while Rahul and Jasprit Bumrah were part of the closely-contested 2017/18 series which South Africa won 2-1.

"We know what to expect and we've had great preparation,"



We've won series in England and Australia... We haven't won a series in South Africa, which gives us extra motivation to do our best

K L RAHUL

said Rahul.

"The pace and bounce is very different to other countries and it was very important that we came here early and had preparation in the middle."

Rahul indicated India were likely to maintain their recent strategy of picking five bowlers, which he acknowledged would lead to a 'very difficult discussion' about settling on five specialist batsmen.

Centurion fortress

India have the luxury of choosing between capable players in both batting and bowling, while South Africa's options seem limited, especially since fast bowler Anrich Nortje withdrew from the series because of a hip injury.

South Africa will, of necessity, field a batting line-up short of proven quality, with two players in their top six yet to score a Test century, while India may be unable to find a place for Shreyas Iyer, who scored 105 and 65 on debut against New Zealand last month.

Elgar confirmed star wicketkeeper-batsman Quinton de Kock was only available for the first Test and will then take paternity leave, which will leave the home team's batting even more vulnerable.

South Africa's fast bowling remains their strength but the loss of Nortje is a major blow. Much will depend on former world number one Kagiso Rabada.

AFP

LOCAL CRICKET ROUND-UP

Sanuth stars in easy win for Ruwi

Muscat - Sanuth Ibrahim and Khalid Kail helped Ruwi Rangers to an easy 6-wicket win over Azaiba XI in an Oman Cricket-organised D20 League clash at OC Turf 1 in Amerat on Saturday.

Azaiba posted a disappointing 114 for 9 on the board, Arsalan Bashir topscoring with 42. Sanuth Ibrahim and Wasim Ali bowled well, taking three and two wickets respectively.

Ruwi raced to the target in just 14.2 overs, scoring 115 for 4 thanks to a superb 42 by Khalid Kail. Veteran Khalid Rasheed bagged 2 for 20.

Brief scores (D20): Azaiba XI 114 for 9 in 20 overs (Arsalan Bashir 42 - 3x4, 1x6, Sanuth Ibrahim 3-21, Wasim Ali 2-29) lost to Ruwi Rangers 115 for 4 in 14.2 overs (Khalid Kail 42 - 6x4, 1x6, Khalid Rasheed 2-20) by 6 wickets.

Ghubrah beats Bousher

Earlier on Friday, Ahmed Khan's 3 for 25 was the highlight of Ghubrah Giants' 5-wicket victory against Bousher Busters.

Ajay Lalcheta was the top-scorer in Busters' 124 for 6. Khan's spell was the major reason Busters could not post a bigger total on the board.

Giants found the going tough but prevailed in the final over



for a nail-biting 5-wicket win. Azmat Ullah (42) and Faizan Abdullah (37) led the chase with useful knocks. Fawad Ali picked up 2 for 30.

Brief scores (D20): Bousher Busters 124 for 6 in 20 overs (Ajay Lalcheta 45 - 3x4, 1x6, Ahmed Khan 3-25) lost to Ghubrah Giants 125 for 5 in 19.2 overs (Azmat Ullah 42 - 2x4, 2x6, Faizan Abdullah 37 - 4x4, Fawad Ali 2-30) by 5 wickets.

Shoaib, Ganesh star in Qurum victory

In another D20 encounter at the same venue on Friday, Shoaib Khan's brilliant batting, Ayaan Khan's excellent all-round per-

formance and Ganesh Chandashekhar's superb spell powered Qurum Thunders to a 40-run win over Amerat Royals.

Shoaib struck a stylish 69 while Ayaan contributed a vital 34 in Qurum's total of 167 for 3.

Ganesh and Ayaan were outstanding with the ball taking four and three wickets respectively as Amerat was dismissed for 127 in 19.2 overs. Pratik Athavale was Royals' main scorer with 57.

Brief scores (D20): Qurum Thunders 167 for 3 in 20 overs (Shoaib Khan 69 - 7x4, 1x6, Ayaan Khan 34 - 2x4) beat Amerat Royals 127 all out in 19.2 overs (Pratik Athavale 57 - 5x4, 2x6, Ganesh Chandashekhar 4-16, Ayaan Khan 3-19) by 40 runs.

Maqsood shines in Darsait win

Zeeshan Maqsood's massive presence in the middle once again proved to be the difference as Darsait Titans defeated Khuwair Warriors in a keenly contested game at OC Turf 1 on Friday.

Maqsood's magnificent spell of 3 for 18 was instrumental in restricting Khuwair to 154 for 8 despite brilliant batting by Sean Novak (44) and Zeeshan Siddiqui (28).

Maqsood led the chase with

a solid 58, supported by Khurram Khan's fluent 49 as Darsait sealed the victory in 19.2 overs, scoring 155 for 4. Young Muzahir Raza claimed 3 for 23.

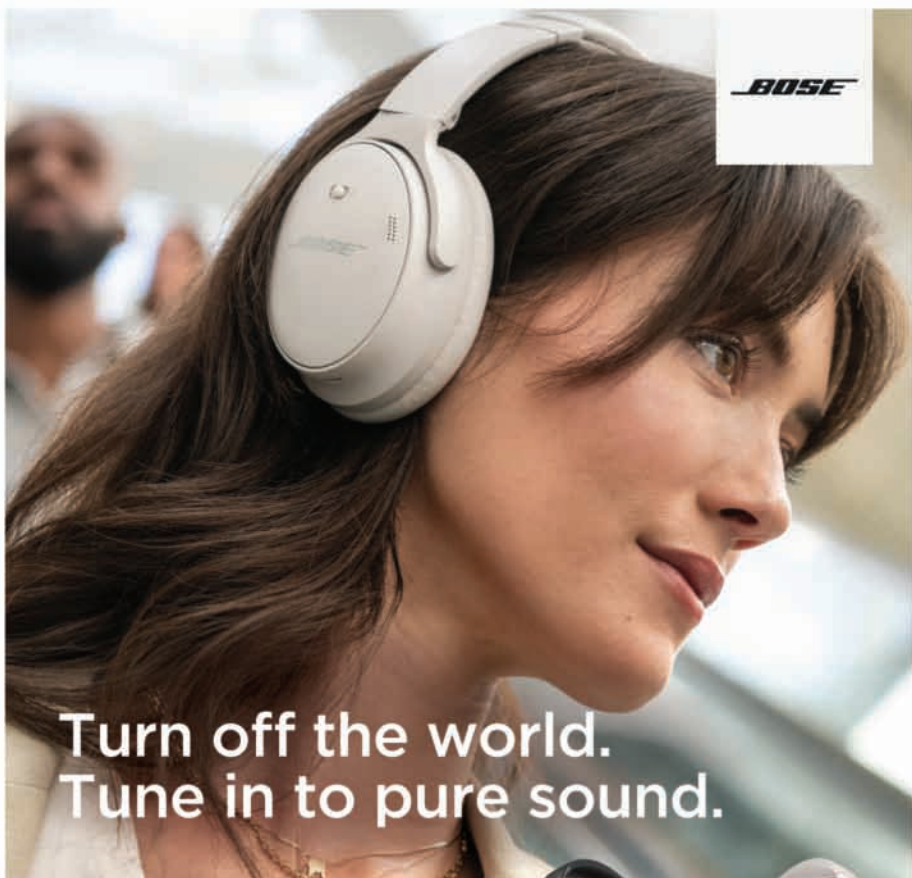
Brief scores (D20): Khuwair Warriors 154 for 8 in 20 overs (Sean Novak 44 - 6x6, Zeeshan Siddiqui 28 - 3x4, 1x6, Zeeshan Maqsood 3-18, Yagnik Ashwin 2-44) lost to Darsait Titans 155 for 4 in 19.2 overs (Zeeshan Maqsood 58 - 5x4, 3x6, Khurram Khan 49 - 2x4, 3x6, Muzahir Raza 3-23) by 6 wickets.

Rauf bats Darsait to victory

Earlier, on Thursday Abdul Rauf smashed 51 to help Bousher Busters to a 6-wicket victory against Darsait Titans.

Titans were bowled out for a paltry 104 due largely to magnificent bowling by Ajay Lalcheta and Sufyan Mahmood who claimed three wickets each. Bousher overhauled the target in 17 overs thanks to brilliant knock of 51 by Abdul Rauf.

Brief scores (D20): Darsait Titans 104 all out in 19.1 overs (Khurram Khan 21 - 1x4, 2x6, Ajay Lalcheta 3-13, Sufyan Mahmood 3-25, Bilal Muhammad 2-23) lost to Bousher Busters 105 for 4 in 17 overs (Abdul Rauf 51 - 2x4, 5x6, Yagnik Ashwin 2-12) by 6 wickets.



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