

► **NEWS BRIEF**

OMAN PARTICIPATES IN GCC CENTRAL BANKS MEET

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Oman, represented by Central Bank of Oman (CBO), participated in the 78th meeting of GCC Committee for Central Banks Governors, held at the GCC Secretariat General in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Tuesday.

The sultanate's delegation was headed by Tahir Salim al Amri, executive president of CBO. The committee discussed supervision and oversight over the banking sector in the GCC, as well as payment systems, GCC fintech developments and banking related cyber security issues.

04

OCOCI signs agreements for promotion of Oman as a filming destination

05

Oman's non-oil exports jump 91% in 2021 on strong global demand

Ramadan Mubarak to all the readers

رَمَضَانُ مُبَارَكٌ لِكُلِّ قَارِئٍ

Please See Page 2 & 3 for Special Lulu Ramadan Offers

No public iftars; kids under 12 not allowed in mosques

Individuals who received two doses of vaccine can attend Taraweeh congregational prayers in mosques

Muscat - The Supreme Committee tasked with dealing with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic issued a decision to ban iftars in mosques and other public places, including tents, during Ramadan. It also decided to limit attendance at prayers, including Taraweeh, to those who received COVID-19 vaccines.

The Supreme Committee studied the epidemiological situation locally and internationally and noted a drop in daily case count and hospitalisations in Oman while the number of cases have picked up in some countries.

As Ramadan approaches, in realisation of Islam's edicts calling for safeguarding human life and to maintain the gains made



over the past few months, even as the pandemic continues worldwide, the committee took the following decisions which, it said, have to be followed throughout Ramadan:

- Attendance in Taraweeh congregational prayers is limited to worshippers who received two doses of vaccine against COVID-19. Unvaccinated individuals, including children aged under 12, are prohibited from entering mosques during Ramadan.
- Mass gatherings for charity meals (iftar) continue to be banned in mosques and other public places, including tents and public assembly halls. Charity teams and private establishments, including civil society institutions, may distribute meals to target beneficiaries without organising gatherings.
- All members of the public have to continue observing precautionary measures, including wearing face masks and maintaining physical distance in closed spaces, including mosques.

● The Supreme Committee also underscored the need to continue activities at venues - like meeting halls, conference sites, international exhibitions and other mass activity areas - limited to a maximum of 70 per cent capacity.

It urged all those who experience any symptom of COVID-19 to avoid attending congregational prayers or entering public gathering areas to help protect themselves and their society.

SQU professor wins prestigious global teaching award

Our Correspondent Muscat

A professor from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) has been awarded one of the most prestigious teaching awards in the world. Dr Mohammad bin Hamoud al Amri, professor of Art and Education and head of Curriculum and Instruction Department at SQU, received the 2022 Edwin Ziegfeld Award for his efforts in the field of art education earlier this month. According to ONA, he is the first Arab to receive the award.

The award is given by the International Society for Education Through Art (InSEA), a non-governmental organisation and official partner of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco).

"I'm so happy to receive the Edwin Ziegfeld Award. It is a great honour to be counted among the recipients of this award. Thank you InSEA for finding my accomplishments to be of significance.

"This award makes me believe more in my role as a leader and my big responsibility to-

It is a great honour to be counted among the recipients of this award. Thank you InSEA for finding my accomplishments to be of significance

DR MOHAMMAD AL AMRI

Prosthetics centre rehabilitates 700 wounded Yemenis

Our Correspondent Muscat

A prosthetics centre in Salalah has been on a humanitarian mission helping over 700 war-injured Yemenis to get back on their feet, literally.

Arabian Prosthetics Centre (APC) has continued its mission over the years and last Thursday concluded the rehabilitation of 50 injured Yemenis.

Wahab al Amer, director of APC, informed that the injured,

including women and children, receive medical care and prosthetic limbs at the centre. A specialised technical team trains the injured to use their new prosthetic limbs.

"This is the 11th batch of beneficiaries we treated successfully. We have completed rehabilitation of 700 wounded and injured," Amer said.

Saleh al Wahebi, a 12-year-old who lost his left leg in a landmine explosion three years ago in Al Bayda governorate in Yemen, said, "I have regained movement in the leg, and can now walk better with my prosthetic limb installed at APC."

Basheer al Kharraz, a young woman, also lost one leg during shelling as a result of the war in

Marib some years ago. "I am now beginning to lead a normal life after receiving medical care at APC," she said.

H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, visited APC recently and praised its efforts to help those affected by the war.

In turn, APC's management thanked the sultanate for its humanitarian efforts in the Yemen war and its fraternal ties with its neighbours.

APC is a charitable project that provides rehabilitation services for amputees in exclusive cooperation with the German prosthetics company Ottobock. APC was launched with the aim of serving wounded Yemenis with the support and facilities provided by the sultanate.

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RIAL 1.350
RIAL 0.990 Assorted Tikka Platter (Chicken Tikka 2 pcs
+ Malai Tikka 2 pcs + Hariyali Tikka 2 pcs
+ Mint Chutney + Salad + Tandoor Bread 1 pc)



SAVE 37.974%
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From 10th March to 7th May 2022

OCCI to promote Oman as a filming destination

Agreements signed with two companies that specialise in global promotion of locations for filming

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) signed agreements on Tuesday with Action Films Production and Destinations Rising with an aim to promote the sultanate as a destination for filming and to attract international filmmakers.

The two companies specialise in global promotion of locations for filming movies and television programmes, the OCCI stated.

'Through these agreements, the chamber seeks to promote Oman's diverse geographical locations and landscapes, which can make it a destination for the film and television industry

globally,' it stated.

With these agreement, OCCI said Oman will be able to leverage its 'soft power' in film and television production thereby boosting tourism and supporting its future plans under Oman Vision 2040.

A promotional campaign for sites suitable for filming will be supported by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the Ministry of Information and Omran Group.

'This sector represents promising investment opportunities for small and medium enterprises working in this field,' OCCI stated.



(Supplied photo)

Al Gharimineen Charity hosted by Majlis A'Shura Services Committee

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Majlis A'Shura Services Committee hosted members of Al Gharimineen Charitable Association on Tuesday in line with its efforts to discuss issues related to the local community and public interest.

The committee was briefed on the objectives and activities of the association.

The Majlis A'Shura Services Committee reaffirmed that it is committed to supporting all social, economic and charitable projects that benefit Omanis.

Yousef bin Mohammed al Maamari, a member of the association, described it as a national model in charity work in the sultanate and the first of its kind regionally. "The association aims to pay off bank debts of Omani citizens, while spreading solidarity throughout the country," Maamari said.

Supporting his statement, Dr Haider bin Abd al Lawati, another member of the association,



Yousef al Maamari



Dr Haider al Lawati

said that the association seeks to repay the loans of citizens unable to do so, increasing financial liquidity in the market and increasing financial activities of banks.

"By paying off debt, the association relieves psychological and economic burden and pressure resulting from these loans," Lawati said.

CPA launches consumer awareness campaign in Barka



(Supplied photo)

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) launched a campaign in the wilayat of Barka on Tuesday to raise consumer awareness among members of society.

An official of the Consumer Protection Department in Barka informed that the campaign will run till April 30 targeting all segments of society, while also intensifying inspection visits to markets to ensure price stability and availability of goods in sufficient quantities.

Besides inspection visits, the campaign will include mobile exhibitions in the wilayat.

The authority also started a series of inspection visits to commercial centres in Muscat re-

Inspection visits are also being made to shops selling fruits and vegetables, meat, perfumes, incense and sweets, besides car agencies, sheep pens and tailoring shops

cently. CPA and its departments have developed action plans to intensify monitoring activities of markets to ensure consumers are not exploited through the special offers made in the run-up to Ramadan.

CPA confirmed that work

teams have been formed which include judicial control officers and shop inspectors to detect any violation that may occur before and during Ramadan.

Work teams are monitoring suppliers during this period to prevent overpricing. Inspection visits are also being made to shops selling fruits and vegetables, meat, perfumes, incense, nuts and sweets, besides car agencies, sheep pens and tailoring shops.

The inspections ensure the credibility of Ramadan promotions and conformity of the offers to applicable legal procedures.

CPA urged consumers to help the authority in its mission by reporting any violations that they may come across while shopping.

Global Travel Week ME helps put spotlight on Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Global Travel Week Middle East, organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT), concluded on Tuesday.

The event reviewed ways to enhance partnerships and communication between international travel and tourism companies and their counterparts in Oman, including hotel establishments as well as providers of tourism experiences using innovative communication methods.

The event was attended by 70 tourism specialists from abroad and 38 Omani tourism and hotel establishments.

The event was held under the patronage of H E Ibrahim Said al Kharousi, Undersecretary for Heritage in MHT.

H E Kharousi said that organising the Global Travel Week has contributed to building and reviv-



(Supplied photo)

The event also helped showcase fascinating and hidden jewels of Oman tourism

H E IBRAHIM SAID
AL KHAROUSI

ing tourism in Oman, which will help limit the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and eventually recover the competitiveness of the sector.

He added that the event successfully attracted major international travel companies specialising in luxury, leisure and adventure tourism. The event also helped showcase fascinat-

ing and hidden jewels of Oman tourism.

On the sidelines of the Global Travel Week, tours were organised for 14 tourism companies in the governorates of Muscat, Dhakliyah and North Sharqiyah to explore various tourist attractions, as well as discover Oman's civilisation and history.

MoL conducts interviews of jobseekers in N Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL), represented by the Directorate General of Labour in North Batinah governorate, conducted recruitment interviews of jobseekers in coordination with the Zaafaran Development Company on Tuesday.

The exercise was part of the



(Supplied photo)

ministry's announcement in January for the creation of 402 job opportunities in private sector institutions in North Batinah governorate for various specialties and qualifications.

The ministry confirmed that priority for appointment will be given to individuals who were laid off from work in North Batinah.

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MARKET WATCH

MSX30	4,194.99
Sensex	57,943.65

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)	
Indian Rs	196.29
Pakistani Rs	473.98
Bangladesh taka	223.81
Philippines peso	134.74
Sri Lankan Rs	768.33

*Rates as on March 29
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Russia insists on ruble payments for gas after G7 outcry

Russia reiterated Tuesday that it will only be accepting payment for gas deliveries to the EU in rubles after G7 ministers called this arrangement "unacceptable".

"Nobody will supply gas for free. This is just impossible. And it can only be paid for in rubles," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters, AFP reported.

"Companies must understand the completely changed environment that has arisen in the conditions of the economic war waged against Russia," he said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said last week that Moscow will now only accept rubles as payment for natural gas deliveries to "unfriendly" countries, which include the European Union.

Western countries have piled crippling sanctions on Moscow since it moved troops into Ukraine, with the United States banning the import of Russia oil and gas among other measures.

Oman's non-oil exports jump 91% in 2021 on strong global demand

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a sharp bounce back from the COVID-19 pandemic that had hit global trade hard in 2020, Oman's non-oil exports shot up by more than 91 per cent in 2021, after economies reopened and global demand recovered from the recession.

Total non-oil exports surged by 91.2 per cent to RO5.792bn in the full year 2021 from RO3.032bn recorded in the previous year, driven by increased demand from key markets in the region and around the world, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

As Oman's economy reopened and returned to normalcy in 2021 after previous year's twin-shock of oil price collapse and the coronavirus outbreak, the burgeoning demand for Omani exports suggests that the sultanate's economy is well on a recovery path. Supported by strong recovery in oil prices and government's economic stimulus measures, Oman's nominal GDP grew at a solid pace of 16.1 per cent during 2021.

Omani exports to the UAE - the biggest destination for the sultanate's non-oil shipments - grew by 71.3 per cent to RO986mn during last year against RO575mn in 2020. Exports to Saudi Arabia grew by 14.8 per cent to RO566mn during the year ended December 31,



2021.

As more trading partners of the sultanate recorded economic recovery last year, the robust growth in Omani exports was led by strong demand from the United States, China, India and other countries.

Non-oil exports to the United States spiked more than 86 per cent in 2021 amounting to RO632mn compared with RO338mn in the previous year. Omani shipments to China grew by nearly 77 per cent to RO377mn in 2021 against RO213mn in 2020. Exports to India also surged by 172 per cent

The sultanate's non-oil exports to the United States surged more than 86 per cent to RO632mn, while shipments to China grew nearly 77 per cent to RO377mn in 2021

to RO478mn last year as compared to RO176mn recorded in 2020.

The NCSI data suggests that the strong recovery in non-oil exports is broad-based for almost all of Oman's trading partners. The strong trade performance shows that Omani

exporters are making good recovery in attracting overseas orders.

Omani non-oil exports to other countries jumped by 122.7 per cent during 2021 to RO2.751bn against RO1.235bn in 2020.

International trade had col-

lapsed during 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic forced much of the world into lockdown. However, global trade rebounded strongly in 2021, helping Omani exporters to recover the lost demand for their shipments.

As per the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development's (UNCTAD) latest global trade update, the value of global trade reached a record high of US\$28.5tn in 2021. That is an increase of 25 per cent on 2020 and 13 per cent higher compared to 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

Minerals, plastics and chemicals dominate

As per the NCSI data, Oman's mineral products exports more than doubled to RO843mn in 2021 from RO415mn in the previous year. Shipments for chemical products also surged more than 93 per cent to RO1.235bn last year in comparison with 640mn in 2020.

With rising production capacities of the sultanate's downstream industries, exports of plastics, rubber and their items grew nearly five times to hit RO890mn in 2021 compared to RO183mn recorded in the previous year.

Base metals and articles accounted for RO1.328bn worth of exports during 2021, an increase of 54.5 per cent compared to RO860mn in the previous year.

UNCTAD said the world trade in goods remained strong in 2021 and trade in services finally returned to its pre-pandemic levels. 'All major trading economies saw imports and exports rise above pre-pandemic levels in the fourth quarter of 2021, with trade in goods increasing more strongly in the developing world than in developed countries,' the UN agency said.

Oman's re-exports, by contrast, declined 22.5 per cent in 2021 at RO1.322bn compared to RO1.706bn recorded in 2020. The decline in re-exports was caused mainly due to reduced transshipments of base metals, electrical and mechanical goods, and transport equipments.

Tender Board, BP Oman sign memorandum of cooperation

Muscat - In efforts to enhance In-Country Value (ICV) and improve the efficiency of spending on procurement and project implementation in the government sector, the General Secretariat of the Tender Board and BP Oman on Tuesday signed a memorandum of cooperation.

The memorandum was signed between H E Eng Bader al Mamari, Secretary General of the Tender Board, and Eng Yousuf al Ojaili, president of BP Oman, according to a press release.

This agreement is aimed at improving means of cooperation and promoting knowledge exchange to develop local added value, ensure optimal utilisation of spending and maintain efficient delivery of projects through the cycle of planning, tendering and execution.

The signing is part of a step to enhance mutual cooperation and provide support to enhance capacity and efficiency and develop work in the fields of tenders, projects, local added value and strategic procurement.

Moreover, the deal aims to



identify joint opportunities and develop implementation plans to participate in the capitalisation of specific opportunities that will enhance value for Oman and contribute to the nation's economic diversification.

The memorandum of cooperation includes sharing best practices in key systems such as electronic bidding, projects such as Design-Build-Own-Operate-Maintain (DBOOM) supplier database systems. It will also look to establish a standard for successful practices related to market dynamics, supplier infor-

mation, project and supplier performance and indicators. Moreover, it looks to develop standard models for national project contracting and procurement that cover key elements such as health, safety and environment, carbon efficiency, ICV, specifications and standards.

The process looks to create a capable national workforce, both before and after awarding of the contract, followed by measuring compliance through the main performance indicators of in-country value.

CBO issues RO100mn treasury bills

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A tender of the government treasury bills (issue number 569) was issued by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) this week.

Total value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO100.5mn, for a maturity period of 364 days, from today until March 29, 2023. The average accepted price reached RO98.458 for every RO100 bill and the minimum accepted price

arrived at RO98.250.

The average discount rate and the average yield reached 1.5467 per cent and 1.5712 per cent, respectively. The interest rate on the repo operations with the CBO is 0.5 per cent while the discount rate on the treasury bills discounting facility with the central bank is 0.75 per cent.

Treasury bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the

opportunity to invest their surplus funds. The Central Bank of Oman acts as the issue manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (repo).

Furthermore, treasury bills promote the local money market by creating a benchmark yield curve for short-term interest rates. The government may resort to this instrument whenever felt necessary for financing its recurrent expenditures.

Tender Notice

Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI), announces following E-Tender for 2022:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Deadline for Specifications Request	Deadline for tenders bids	Tender Price
11/2022	Supply and Implement Servers in HQ and DR Sites	07 April 2022	21 April 2022	55 RO
12/2022	Oracle Infrastructure Support Renewal with Local Support	07 April 2022	21 April 2022	25 RO

Interested companies registered with Tender Board may obtain Tender document from the E-Tendering website: <http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>. The Vendors must provide **Electronic Bank Guarantee** issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of (2%) of the Tender value valid for (120) days on website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> and addressed to Public Authority for Social Insurance.

CORRESPONDANCE:

1. Tender inquiry : All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at E-Tendering system (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
2. E-Tendering system inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the e-tendering system technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: Tel : **+968 24402200** , E-mail : etenderhd@ita.gov.om

PASI is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other tender that may be received

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Bank Muscat reveals Sayyarati auto finance offer for Ramadan

On the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the sultanate, is excited to announce the attractive Sayyarati vehicle finance offer with some of the best rates available in Oman. The exclusive offers on Sayyarati include a special discounted rate that starts at just 3.5 per cent for both new and used cars. The offer will be available from the beginning of Ramadan till May 31 in line with the bank's customer-centric vision 'To serve you better, everyday'.

Bank Muscat's Ramadan Sayyarati offer, the easiest path to finance your dream car, features some of the lowest rates for auto finance and will prove to be of great advantage to customers looking forward to buying a new or pre-owned vehicle during the holy month. The highly competitive rates are available for a period up to ten years along with free third-party insurance for used car financing. The new Sayyarati offer will be available for Omani nationals working in government and semi-government institutions as well as Tier 1 and Tier 2 companies. Expatriate residents working in government and semi-government organizations as well as Tier 1 companies can also make use of the offer to purchase a car of their choice.

With a fast turnaround time,



Abdullah Tamman al Mashaani

absolutely no need for post-dated cheques and competitive interest rates on reducing balance, the feature-rich auto finance can be obtained within the

shortest possible time from Sayyarati Centres and Bank Muscat branches located across Oman. Loans up to RO60,000 for Omanis will be offered for both new vehicles and used vehicles. The documents needed to process the loan facility are minimal and include the buyer's ID card, salary assignment letter, quotation / car valuation from the approved valuator, driving license, Mulkiya (for pre-owned cars only) and seller's ID card (for pre-owned cars only).

The monthly loan installments for Sayyarati finance are automatically deducted from the customer's account once the

mandate to do so is provided to the bank by the customer. For the added convenience of customers during the holy month of Ramadan, the bank's Sayyarati centres at Wattayah and Salalah will be open in the evenings too from 8pm - 11pm on all weekdays (and 8pm - 11pm only on Saturday).

Speaking on the occasion, Abdullah Tamman al Mashaani, general manager - products, Bank Muscat, said, "I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate and wish our very best to all our valued customers during the holy month of Ramadan." "The bank has been greatly

encouraged in the past by the positive customer feedback on its various services and facilities, and continues to keep working to offer the best possible options for its customers. We hope that by offering these very attractive auto finance options, customers will be able to realize their dreams of owning a car according to their individual needs and circumstances," he said.

"The Holy Month witnesses a lot of interest from customers to buy cars and benefit from the different offers available. Bank Muscat is also very keen to enhance cooperation and partnership with different car agencies to offer the best services possible. We encourage all our customers to enjoy the excellent benefits by availing this offer at any Bank Muscat branch or Sayyarati Centres at Wattayah and Salalah," Mashaani added.

With some of the world's best and safest vehicles available for purchase in the sultanate, the bank continues to do its part in making attractive auto finance easily available for people in Oman. Customers can also easily check their eligibility and applicable interest rates by going to <https://www.bankmuscat.com/en/Pages/Loan-Calculator.aspx>.

Please go to <https://bm.click/SayyaratiEN> for more details about the bank's Sayyarati Auto Finance.



Al Mouj Muscat and ahlibank sign finance deal

Al Mouj Muscat has entered into a new partnership with ahlibank that provides finance on ready-to-move-in homes as well as those under construction at Oman's premium lifestyle destination with the special arrangement marked today by an official signing ceremony.

ahlibank is a leading financial institution and Al Mouj Muscat is signing the new financing framework agreement with the bank to help property buyers obtain the financing they need to secure their dream home in Al Mouj Muscat.

Nasser bin Masoud al Sheibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat, said, "Al Mouj Muscat continues to innovate across every aspect of our operation to meet the aspirations of buyers and investors. Our partnership with Ahlibank allows people to access finance for their dream property prior to its completion. This creates opportunities for people to

be part of Oman's most successful and exciting lifestyle destination."

Commenting on the signing, Muneer Ahmed al Balushi, AGM - head of retail distribution at ahlibank said, "We are an innovative bank that continually seeks ways to enable our customers to benefit from the best services and products. This new partnership is an excellent example of how we not only provide financial stability but support lifestyle goals and aspirations."

"Al Mouj Muscat is an exceptional place to live both in terms of the high quality of the properties it creates through to the lifestyle opportunities it presents and so we are pleased to be able to provide this bespoke banking solution that helps make owning a dream home here a reality."

Award winning Al Mouj Muscat is the first oceanfront, integrated lifestyle and leisure development in the sultanate.

Mercedes-Benz Oman offers rewarding journeys this Ramadan

This Ramadan, Mercedes-Benz Oman is joining the festivities with a host of special benefits on its latest models. From April 1, 2022 to May 31, 2022, customers can drive away with one of the most sought-after vehicles and enjoy five years/75,000km service package, four years Mobilo on road assistance service, three years unlimited mileage warranty, free registration for the first year, plus a complimentary gift from the Mercedes-Benz Lifestyle Collection. With an uncompromising commitment towards style and luxury, Mercedes-Benz Oman makes sure every journey is comfortable and peaceful.

Shaun Michael, CEO at Mercedes-Benz Oman, said, "The holy month of Ramadan is filled with joy and goodwill, and at Mercedes-Benz Oman we love



to celebrate it with our customers. We are thrilled to be able to offer this fantastic package, adding to the benefits of owning one of our iconic vehicles. With all of the latest models to choose from and our dedicated specialists on hand to help, customers are sure to drive away with a car that matches their lifestyle in every way."

Extending across the new Mercedes-Benz Cars and SUVs stock range, with the exception of the Mercedes-AMG G-Class, drivers are sure to find the perfect vehicle for themselves and their family. With these exceptional benefits, customers are guaranteed an unmatched driving experience long after their purchase.

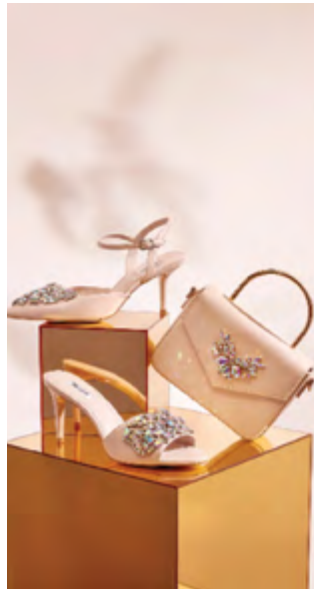
Dune London launches Ramadan collection 2022

Discover Dune London's Ramadan collection for 2022, a beautifully curated capsule collection of timeless footwear and accessories, designed for the holy month and beyond.

Whether honouring traditions at home or gathering for celebratory Iftar and Suhoor with friends and family, no outfit is complete without the perfect pair of shoes.

Elegant and feminine silhouettes are dressed in luxurious textures, exclusively sourced materials and sumptuous satin fabrics for a truly special, one-of-a-kind collection. Shimmering metallics are paired with soft, natural accents of blush, oyster, sage and ecru to complement modest dressing.

Eye-catching embellishment and intricate trims carefully sourced by Dune London's in-house designers continue to deliver that something special. Crystal cluster jewels and decorative necklace trims adorn slim stiletto heels, modern mules and elevated slingback silhouettes, offering beautiful keepsake pieces.



Must-have satin slip-on heels, jewel-encrusted block heel mules and twinkling flat



sandals offer statement, yet versatile day to evening options.

Matching bejewelled crossbody and top handle handbags serve as the ultimate plus-one to bring to every celebration whilst ensuring perfectly coordinated style.



Lending itself to a truly joyous occasion to be celebrated in style, Dune London's captivating and exclusive Ramadan footwear and accessory collection exudes elegance and effortless, everyday glamour.

Muscat Slashers champions in Joyalukkas women's volleyball tournament

Muscat Slashers edged Muscat Blazers 20-18, 20-17 in the final to claim the title in the first edition of women's volleyball tournament organised by Joyalukkas Exchange and Instant cash at Bausher Club indoor hall on March 25.

Sixteen teams took part in the one-day tournament that saw three preliminary rounds and one knockout round along with semifinals, third-place play-off and final.

The teams included players of different nationalities including Oman national team.

The event was supported by POLO & OWVA (Embassy of Philippines) and OFW.

The tournament was the concluding event in line with the Women's Month celebration by Joyalukkas Exchange.

"We have conducted various activities at our branch level across the sultanate. The empowerment of women in all sections of the society is the main agenda by supporting women in various sports and games," a Joy Alukkas statement said.



tions of the society is the main agenda by supporting women in various sports and games," a Joy Alukkas statement said.

Ahmed Faisal al Jahdhami, secretary-general, Oman Golf Association, was the chief guest of the concluding ceremony

who delivered the prizes to the winners. Anthony Jos, managing director of Joyalukkas Exchange, was the special guest. The event

was graced by Gregorio T Abalos, Jr - Labour Attache at the Philippine Embassy; Nixon Baby - general manager Joyalukkas

Exchange; Nihass Nourdeen - country head, Instant Cash; Mumthaz al Balushi, Omani sport person and Punnose

Mathew, general manager UAE Exchange. Organising committee spokesperson Ansar Shenthathar, manager operations, said, "This type of sports event will be continued to be organised by Joyalukkas Exchange to empower women in our society and for their socio-cultural development. This was also one of the biggest tournaments conducted by an exchange house in Oman."

In the semifinals, Muscat Blazers beat All Star 18-13 while Slashers prevailed over The Heat by the same margin.

The Heat finished as second runners-up in the tournament after beating All Star 18-15 in the play-off.

Among individual awards, Darb claimed the Most Valuable Player honour. Abby was the best setter, Apple became the best spiker and Maan was selected as the best server of the tournament.

Oman Air switches off for Earth Hour 2022

Lights went out across Oman Air's headquarters in Muscat, as well as across its network destinations, as the national carrier of the Sultanate of Oman marked Earth Hour at 08:30pm to 9:30pm local time on March 26.

The airline was joined by tens of thousands of organisations and millions of people around the world in marking Earth Hour by switching off lights for one hour to highlight the importance of tackling climate change.

Oman Air's headquarters in Muscat took the lead on behalf of the airline, and was joined by its offices in Europe, the Middle East, South and South East Asia and Africa. Many of the airline's partners also participated in the initiative.

Eng Abdulaziz al Raisi, Oman Air's chief executive officer said,



"Oman Air was once again proud to take part in Earth Hour this weekend, when we switched off the lights in all but our most essential services in order to raise awareness about the importance of protecting our planet. This is the 12th consecutive year that Oman Air has joined millions of people on every continent in drawing attention to the role that each of us can play in minimising our environmental impact. I would like to thank all of our staff, throughout our network, not only for participating in Earth Hour, but also for playing an active part in moving Oman Air's environmental programme forward."

Earth Hour was launched in 2007 by international campaigning organisation WWF. Since then, the initiative has captured

the imagination of people around the world and, last year, 192 countries and territories came together on to lend their support for the planet.

Oman Air's participation in this year's Earth Hour continues the airline's efforts to reduce its environmental impact. Ongoing initiatives include energy reduction and waste reduction strategies, increasing the local sourcing of supplies, operating smaller aircraft on short haul routes and replacing older aircraft with new, more fuel-efficient models. This includes the nine Boeing B787 Dreamliners in service currently, which are 20 per cent more fuel efficient, deliver 20 per cent fewer emissions, and offer a 60 per cent smaller noise footprint than equivalent aircraft.

Pankaj Khimji visits IISM



Pankaj Khimji, chairman of Oman Cricket and vice-president of the Asian Cricket Council, was invited to the International Institute of Sports Management (IISM) on March 7 to interact with the university's Bachelors and Masters students.

IISM was the first establishment of its kind in India and has maintained its reputation as one of the finest sports management centres in Asia for the entirety of its existence. Based in Mumbai, its expertise in producing a long-line of professionals who are adept at adapting to the ever-changing needs of the sporting landscape is well-known.

The stream of sports management too has increased in value over the past decade. Whether it is a nuanced understanding of sporting law, the science of sponsorship negotiation

or the know-how needed to market a brand or product, its curriculum promises to equip all undertakers with the knowledge needed to successfully deal with real-world challenges in the sporting sphere.

In a 150-minute session with the students of IISM, Khimji provided some invaluable insight into the world of sports administration along with some of his personal anecdotes and experiences from working to increase the shine of the global spotlight on Oman Cricket over the past decade.

Oman Cricket's highlights in the recent past include gaining official T20 and ODI statuses from the ICC, qualifying to participate in the 2016 T20 World Cup in India and becoming the only associate nation to host and take part in one in 2021.

The qualification round for

the 2022 T20 WC was also held in the country - a testament to the facilities, hospitality and professionalism on offer, and further evidence of the sport's holistic development in the sultanate. Khimji's role in all of these achievements cannot be overstated.

Speaking on the overall IISM experience, he said, "It was brilliant. Both my father and I caught the cricketing bug while completing our education in Mumbai, so the city has a special place in my heart. Speaking of IISM, I have always admired their work and track record of success. I remember back in the day, there was no definitive curriculum dedicated to sports management. The fact that it exists today, and that such a reputed institute is helping propel the entire field forward is wonderful to see."

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As part of Ooredoo's commitment to its customers, Hala prepaid and Shahry postpaid users can now transfer credit internationally directly from the award-winning Ooredoo App to family and friends, or even add credit to their own account when travelling. Distance does not need be the reason for not staying in touch.

Making it extra easy, subscribers can send credit to a desired number through the Ooredoo App that will allow for the receiver to make calls and send SMSs without the fear of ever running out of credit. Ooredoo regularly updates its app with the latest features, giving users an awesome digital experience and get everything they need right from their smartphones, no matter where.

Log in or sign up to the Ooredoo App, or dial *222*127# to unlock a world of benefits.



NBO joins hands with Embassy of Nepal

National Bank of Oman (NBO) welcomed Somesh Thapa, second secretary at the Nepali Embassy in Oman, to its headquarters in Athaiba to reinforce the bank's commitment to supporting expatriate communities across the country and raise awareness of NBO's affordable international remittance services.

Tariq Atiq, chief retail and digital banking officer at NBO, said, "As part of our commitment to

providing customers with convenient banking services, we understand that being able to provide for families and loved ones overseas is vital to so many communities. In just three clicks using the award-winning NBO Mobile App, customers can transfer funds quickly and safely, and see confirmation that the money has reached the recipients' account. We would also like to remind customers that they should only use officially-licensed transfer agents or approved apps from banks across Oman."

NBO customers can easily send funds ranging from RO5 to RO7,500 directly from their account in a few simple steps using the NBO Mobile App and Lite Mobile app. The app is available in various languages, including Arabic and English, with competitive exchange rates on every transfer.

All-new 2022 Nissan Pathfinder redefines standards of comfort

Furthering its SUV leadership and strengthening its line-up to cater to the evolving needs of customers in the sultanate, Nissan Oman from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) unveiled the all-new 2022 Pathfinder in the country recently.

Embracing the toughness of its predecessors, the fifth-generation Pathfinder features a revolutionary design while redefining the standards of comfort, connectivity, and performance.

Sharp, muscular design cues pay homage to the original 1987 model and conveys both strength and capability, while an all-new 9-speed automatic transmission provides strong acceleration for a smooth and direct vehicle response. Within the cabin, infotainment and connectivity upgrades including the addition of ProPILOT technology help reduce distractions and enhance attentiveness for a more intuitive and confident driving experience.

A spokesperson for Nissan



Oman, said, "The all-new 2022 Pathfinder offers a bold, rugged, completely redesigned exterior and a family adventure-ready interior. A 271-horsepower 3.5-litre V6 engine is matched with

an all-new 9-speed transmission for smooth, direct response. The all-new Intelligent 4WD with 7-position drive and terrain mode selector helps provide confident driving on- and-off-road, while

Pathfinder's best-in-class 1500kg maximum towing capacity provides plenty of capability to haul heavy items. Available technology features include an all-new Head-up Display, 12.3-

inch digital dashboard, ProPILOT Assist with Navi-Link and standard Nissan Safety Shield 360."

Performance

Drivers can conquer the condi-

tions with seven modes, including Eco, Sport, Sand and Mud. The all-new Pathfinder offers smarter towing with a driver-selectable tow mode, advanced tech, including trailer sway control, and a maximum capability to tow up to 1,500kg, you bring what you want with comfort and confidence. The technical specifications includes 271 horse power, V6 Engine 3.5L, new nine-speed automatic transmission, Intelligent 4x4 New System, up to 1500kg of smarter towing capability.

Exterior

The all-new 2022 Pathfinder looks to the future with a return to its roots. This fifth generation is paying homage to the original one with elements such as three-notch front grille, triangular C-pillar and the side wheels fenders inspired by the first generation. The C-shape LED headlamps, V-motion grill and floating roof are complementing this modern design and show proudly our Nissan DNA. It boasts of a C-Shape

LED standard headlamps, Up to 20" machine cut alloy wheels and is available in 10 single tone body colours and 5 dual tone body colours.

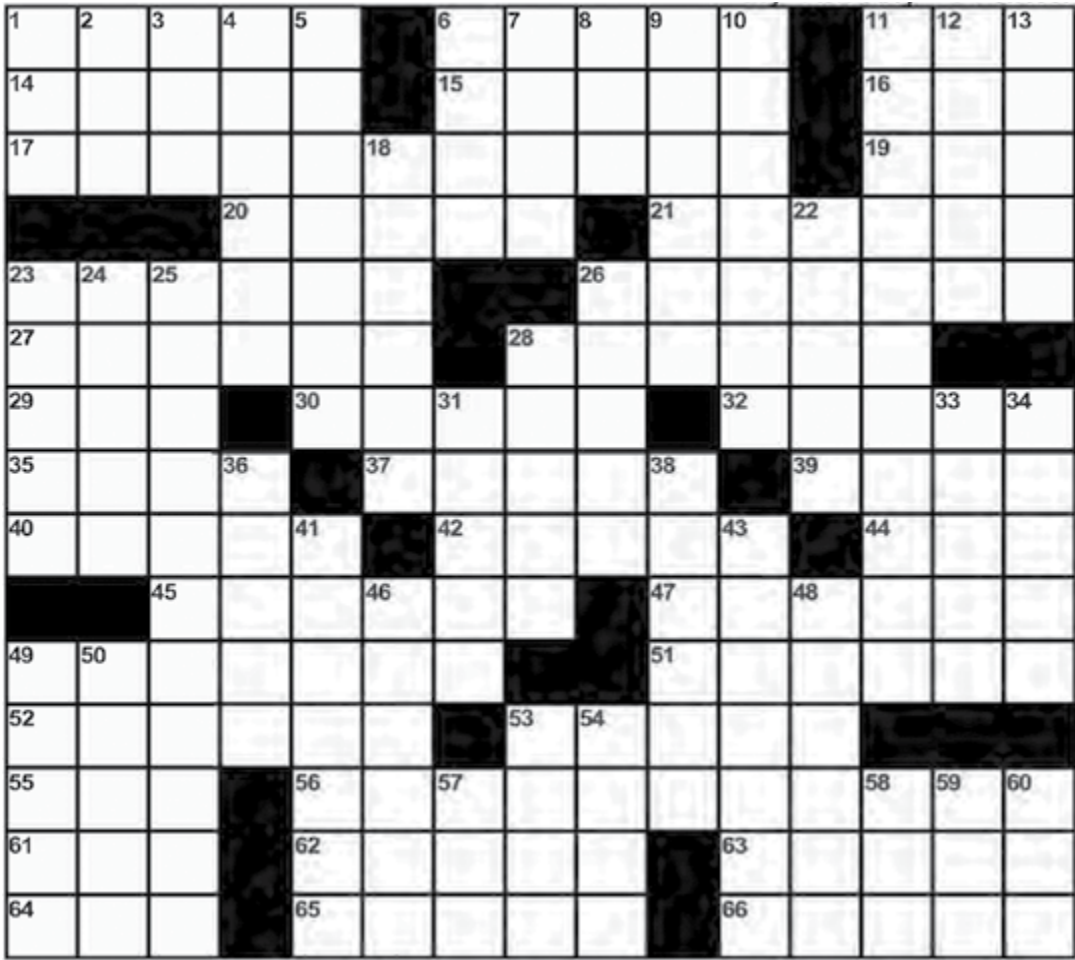
Interior

The redesigned Pathfinder interior was crafted to feel like sanctuary after a long day on the trails. With three rows, and the EZ FLEX Seating System that lets the 2nd row tilt and slide even with a car seat attached, its tailor-made for all the family. It offers a panoramic electric moonroof, semi-aniline, leather-appointed seats with quilted inserts, up to eight seaters, tri-zone automatic temperature control.

Technology

Owners can command their adventure with intuitive ways to access information, including essentials like speed and next-turn projected on the windshield. It also has 9 inch colour touchscreen display, wireless Apple Carplay & Android Auto, 12.3 inch Digital Dashboard.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Heirloom location, often
6) Crude dwelling place
11) Tool in a bucket
14) A Marx brother
15) City on the Red River
16) Fury
17) Film: "Road ..."
19) It's spotted in casinos
20) Mars' two
21) More suggestive
23) Give the go-ahead
26) Is a middleman
27) Piano that's not so grand
28) Eye drops brand
29) A long way from festive
30) Brief scouting mission?
32) Bundle-of-joy deliverer of legend
35) Jet fighter heroes
37) Chopper blade
ROAD TRIP
39) Admire from_
40) Kind of Boy Scout badge
42) Skirts that leave little to the imagination

44) What's due in Venice?
45) Kid's charity associated with Halloween
47) Female fowl that's less showy than the male
49) Beach changing places
51) Like some horrid weather
52) Spheres of influence
53) Small shovel
55) Seven on a sundial
56) Famous walkway: ... road
61) Uncanny trio?
62) Mountain climber's accessory
63) Bar, at the bar
64) "Stupid me!"
65) Broke off
66) It's certain along with taxes, it's said

DOWN

1) Take steps
2) Despite the fact that, briefly
3) Money left on a table, often
4) Deliverers of cold blocks, once

5) Dead reckoner?
6) Leg bone
7) Lids
8) "Wheel of Fortune" gimme?
9) Tailgater's container
10) Response to a stimulus
11) Position to take: ... road
12) Projecting window type
13) Social equals
18) "i" finisher
22) _-courtin' (dated, country-style)
23) Indian state
24) "The final frontier"
25) Trash: road ...
26) Like a rambling sentence
28) Recurring theme
31) "Here, trouble!"
33) Having less training
34) Danish currency
36) Exodus mountain
38) Lumber mill noisemaker
41) Old type of photo
43) Cultivation place
46)_ point (example)
48) Having distaste
49) Went spelunking

50) Type of acid
53)_ gin fizz
54) Duck's home
57) Inc., in the U.K.

58) "Let's call_ day"
59) Bunk
60) Australian road sign abbr.

NOTE PAD

GRID RABBIT FLAT
RENO OPALS LASH
ANTI PECOS ESPY
HAUNTED HOUSES
AMIGO PEP OBI
MET WEBB PRATION
FIRE UP ANTS
CEMETER YAT NIGHT
AVER GENIAL
PENNED REEK AGA
TNT TEA EAT UP
ABANDONED SHIP
ABLE TOKEN TONE
DOLT ERRED OMEN
SOYA DEARS READ

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
Someone's mumbling, and from their voice, it sounds like fighting' words. You'd recognise them anywhere, and you're not at all intimidated. In fact, you're already thinking about how to apologise once the debate's over, because you know you're going to win. You probably even know how many sentences it will take to completely befuddle the opponent. Get over the guilt thing. It's not your fault you're better equipped than they are to handle this.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
Being asked a favour is nothing new to you. You're always available when a friend or family member calls, whether they're looking for a loan, a ride to work, or a shoulder to cry on. You pride yourself on being a good and loyal friend, and there's no reason to expect that to change. You might need to think for a second before you respond to this latest plea for help, though. It's a big one and you might not want the responsibility.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
The day could turn out to be quite interesting thanks to a mixed bag of heavenly influences. On the one hand, you're feeling especially close to an elder or authority figure. On the other, you're not quite sure who to trust or if you can trust anyone at all. Don't fall into that trap. There's always someone out there to confide in. You know who your someone is. Get in touch and start talking.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
Although you've lightened things up a bit, you're still not in the mood for exaggeration. So when a certain person starts to feed you all kinds of stories, you won't be patient. Not even a tiny bit. And if they start to try the old deflection technique, taking the attention off themselves by asking questions about you? That's almost laughable. Didn't you invent that play?

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
An older, more experienced friend is eager to help you out of a tight spot. And regardless of how you feel about accepting that help, you really should allow them to do it for you, just this once. If anyone has earned the right to a little rest and relaxation, it's certainly you, so practice relinquishing some of your responsibilities. It's finally your turn to be spoiled. Well past your turn, right? Have a great time!

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Stop glaring at that higher-up from across the office! The person you suspect is trying to give you the boot is most likely innocent. Just for a second, sit and think about this: What could anyone possibly gain by deliberately getting rid of someone with limitless energy who's always willing to better their last best effort, which is who you clearly are. See? Breathe.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
Being excessive is at the very top of your list of favourite qualities, or more accurately, your guilty pleasures. Alongside it you'll find a tendency toward the lavish, an urge to overdo just about everything, and...but those are just other ways of saying "excessive," aren't they? You see where this is going. Enjoy it. It's what you do best.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
For days, just about everyone you know and love has been telling you that things will get better if you just hang tough and keep your chin up. Just this once, they are actually right. You can stop worrying now, and forget about the thousand little things that have been keeping you from getting a good night's sleep for far too long. Just relax and the stars will work it out!

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
What a great day! You'll have all the energy you need to get your chores out of the way bright and early. Then, just as you're winding down from work and preparing to play, a team of heavenly ambassadors will arrive, ready to furnish you with a substantial second wind and some interesting playmates from a far-off place to help you spend it. Everything looks good, so take advantage of those cosmic gifts.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
All kinds of unusual, coincidental meetings are happening around you and to you. That's just the kind of energy you're attracting right now. So when you cross paths with someone you could swear you've known for years, don't be surprised if you already know a lot about each other. In fact, if you're single, this could be a particularly fortunate meeting.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
You're feeling great and bursting with fabulous energy. Let the world know how you feel. It's waiting for you. Besides, you'll be thrilled with what's on the menu today: Nothing but friendship, fun, and romance! Just make sure you surround yourself with the kind of company that can sustain unfettered hours of entertainment. Your momentum is not for the faint of heart.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
If something is broken in one of your relationships, you need to fix it. There's no point now in dwelling on what caused the problem or who said what to whom. The stars say that the two of you need to focus more on moving forward together. Let go of past mistakes. Be forgiving. Blame just doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things. What does matter is the quality of your connections with other people.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

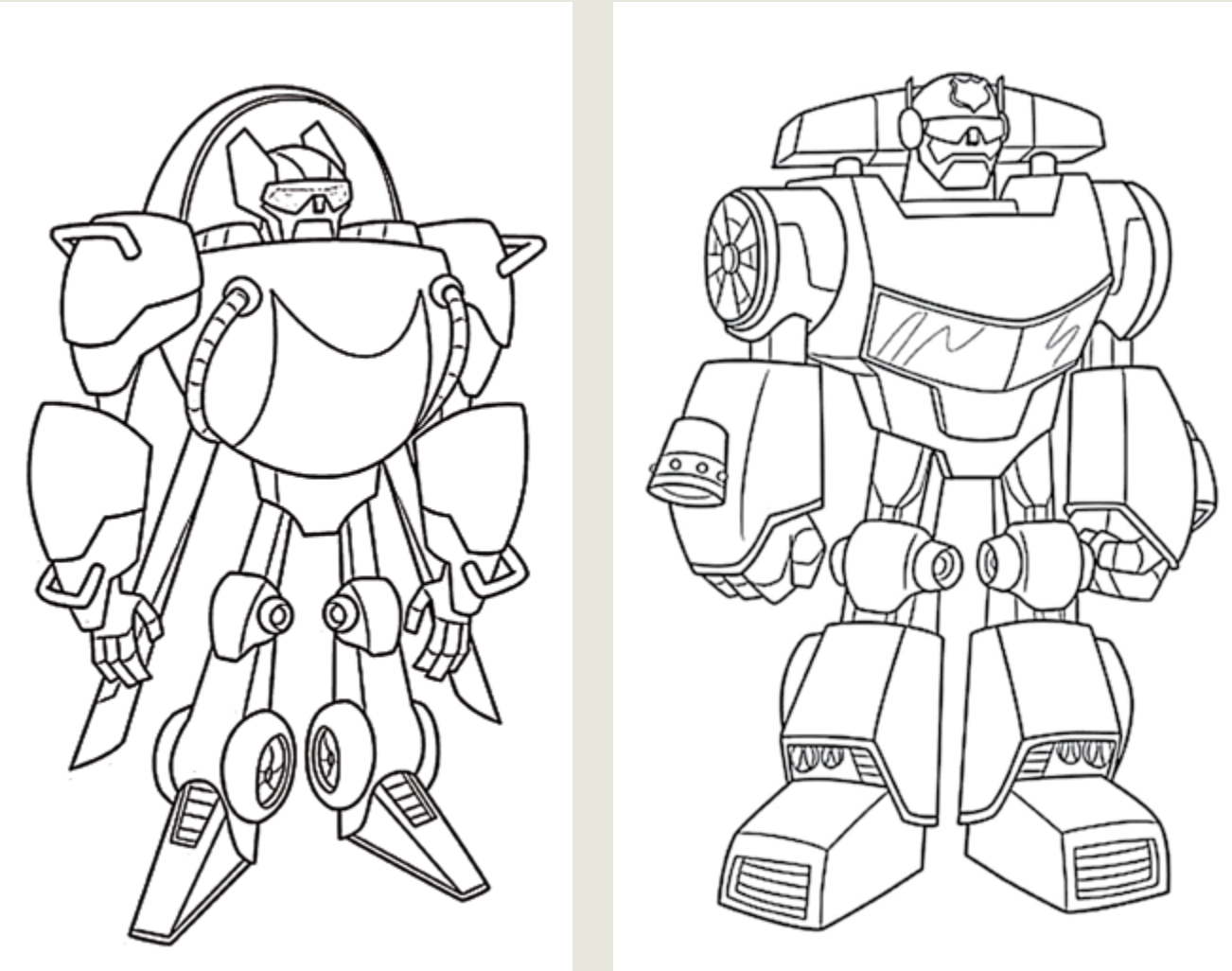
1. Which of these games has 9 squares on a standard board?
A. Noughts and Crosses
B. Chess
C. Snakes and Ladders
D. Scrabble

2. Which of these gospels is last in the Christian New Testament?
A. John
B. Matthew
C. Mark
D. Luke

3. Which 20th century American composer wrote the American Festival overture in 1939, and Symphony No. 3 considered the most important new work of 1942, and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1943?
A. Robert Schumann
B. William Schuman
C. Clara Wieck Schumann
D. Walter Schumann

Answers: 1. A 2. A 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

I	S	S	A
A	L	S	O
U	R	S	I
E	B	L	T

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Russia to scale down fighting in Kyiv after ‘meaningful’ talks

Istanbul, Turkey - Russia said it would scale down military activity around Kyiv following ‘meaningful’ talks in Istanbul as Ukraine’s negotiators called for international guarantees for the country’s security.

Ukrainian negotiator David Arakhania also said there were now ‘sufficient’ conditions for a direct meeting between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Arakhania called for ‘an international mechanism of security guarantees where guarantor countries will act in a similar way to NATO’s article number five - and even more firmly’.

After the face-to-face meeting in Turkey, Russian Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin said talks on ‘the neutrality and non-nuclear status of Ukraine have moved into a practical field’. Therefore ‘a decision has been made to radically, by several times reduce the military activity’ in the cities of Kyiv and Chernigiv, he said.

Russia’s chief negotiator Vladimir Medinsky said there had been ‘meaningful discussion’ at the talks.

Seven killed in Mykolaiv strike

It is now more than a month since Putin ordered tanks into Ukraine, hoping to cripple or oust the democratic government in Kyiv. The fighting has already forced more than 10mn from their homes and according to Zelensky has killed an estimated 20,000 people.

But Tuesday’s announcements offered some hope.

US President Joe Biden said he would discuss the ‘latest developments’ with the leaders of Britain, France, Germany and Italy at 1315 GMT.

European stock markets lifted and oil prices fell by five percent as supply fears eased while the ruble surged 10 per cent against the dollar. But fighting still raged in many parts of the country.

Adding to the toll, Ukraine said seven people were killed by a Russian strike on a regional government building in the southern port city of Mykolaiv.

Ukraine says it has recaptured territory in recent days, including the suburban town of Irpin out-



Firefighters carry a dead body from the rubble of a government building hit by Russian rockets in Mykolaiv on Tuesday (AFP)



Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak (centre) arrives to speak to the press after the talks in Istanbul, on Tuesday (AFP)

side Kyiv - an important gateway to the capital.

It has also resumed evacuations from areas in the south of the country occupied by Russian forces.

Abramovich poisoned?

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had opened the talks at the sprawling Dolmabahce palace, recognising ‘legitimate concerns’ on both sides but urging them to ‘put an end to this tragedy’.

Russian oligarch and Chelsea

Football Club owner Roman Abramovich, who has been hit by Western sanctions, was also in attendance.

The Kremlin said he was acting as an intermediary and denied reports that he had been poisoned during a previous round of negotiations in Ukraine. “This is part of information sabotage, part of an information war,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists.

Putin has demanded the ‘demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine’, as well as the imposition of neutral status and

There are now sufficient conditions for a direct meeting between Putin and Zelensky

DAVID ARAKHANIA

recognition of the Donbas and Crimea as no longer part of Ukraine.

The West has imposed crushing economic sanctions in response to the invasion and several Western companies have pulled out of Russia.

Russia hit back on Tuesday, insisting that it would only be accepting payment for gas deliveries to the EU in rubles even though G7 ministers called this arrangement ‘unacceptable’.

“Nobody will supply gas for free. This is just impossible. And it can only be paid in rubles,” Peskov told reporters.

Russia also said it was expelling 10 diplomats from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in a tit-for-tat move after the Baltic countries expelled Russian diplomats over the conflict.

‘Crime against humanity’

While Ukraine’s forces are counterattacking in the north, they are struggling to retain control of the southern port city of Mariupol. Russian forces have encircled the city and have embarked on a steady and indiscriminate bombardment, trapping an estimated 160,000 people with little food, water or medicine.

At least 5,000 people have already died, according to one senior Ukrainian official who estimated the real toll may be closer to 10,000 when all the bodies are collected. Zelensky said the Russian siege constituted a ‘crime against humanity, which is happening in front of the eyes of the whole planet in real time’. Ukraine’s foreign ministry called the situation ‘catastrophic’, saying Russia’s assault from land, sea and air had turned a city once home to 450,000 people ‘into dust’.

France, Greece and Turkey are hoping to launch a mass evacuation of civilians from Mariupol, according to French President Emmanuel Macron, who is seeking agreement from Putin.

AFP

IAEA head Grossi visits Ukraine to discuss safety

Vienna, Austria - The head of the UN atomic watchdog, Rafael Grossi, is in Ukraine to discuss ‘the safety and security’ of nuclear sites there, the agency said on Tuesday.

This is Grossi’s first visit to Ukraine since Russia seized several nuclear facilities, including Chernobyl, as part of its war in Ukraine. Grossi is holding talks with senior government officials and will travel to one of Ukraine’s nuclear power plants, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said in a statement. It did not specify which plant.

“Just crossed the border into Ukraine to start IAEA’s mission,” Grossi tweeted. “We must act now to help prevent the danger of a nuclear accident.”

Since the start of the Russian invasion on February 24, the IAEA director-general has repeatedly warned of the dangers of the conflict. The war is the first to occur in a country with a vast nuclear estate comprising 15 reactors in addition to Chernobyl, the site in 1986 of the world’s



Rafael Grossi (AFP)

worst nuclear disaster.

During the visit, Grossi will discuss IAEA plans to ship ‘vital safety and security supplies’ to Ukraine, including monitoring and emergency equipment, and dispatch experts to several of its nuclear sites, the IAEA said.

“The military conflict is putting Ukraine’s nuclear power plants and other facilities with radioactive material in unprecendented danger,” Grossi said in the statement. “Ukraine has requested our assistance for safety and security. We will now start delivering it,” he said.

AFP

Sri Lanka hospitals run out of medicines

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka’s state-run hospitals are running out of life-saving medicines due to a shortage of dollars needed to import essentials as the country reels from a dire economic crisis, officials said on Tuesday.

Teaching Hospital Peradeniya which serves a population of 2.4mn people in the Central province said it was suspending all routine surgeries and was out of anaesthetic drugs and other essentials for operations.

A key health trade union said the problem at Peradeniya was common in most state hospitals where suppliers had not been paid for over six months.

A surgeon at the main National Hospital in Colombo said they were short of many vital medicines and patients requiring human insulin were told to bring their own. “The situation is very grave and we need a disaster management initiative to deal with the worsening situation,” said Ravi Kumudesh, the head of the Medical Laboratory Technol-



People stand in a queue to buy diesel in Colombo on Tuesday (AFP)

ogists Association (MLTA).

He said they were unable to carry out diagnostics as most chemicals and solutions needed for their tests were not freely available at state hospitals.

Sri Lankans are forced to spend long hours to buy food, fuel and even medicines as the dollar shortage has led to scarce imports in the country’s worst economic crisis since independence in 1948.

AFP

Queen leads royals in Prince Philip tribute after health woes

London, UK - Ailing Queen Elizabeth II on Tuesday made her first major public appearance in months, at a thanksgiving service for her late husband, Prince Philip, who died last year aged 99.

The monarch, who turns 96 next month, has not attended a high-profile event outside her homes since she spent a night in hospital last October.

Ill health, including a bout of COVID, and difficulties walking and standing forced her to pull out of the Commonwealth Day service at the last minute on March 14.

Buckingham Palace only confirmed her attendance at Prince Philip’s memorial service around two hours before it was due to start at Westminster Abbey in central London.

Unlike other members of her family and guests, she arrived by a side entrance and used a walking stick as she was helped to her seat by her second son, Prince Andrew, 62.

It was Andrew’s first public appearance since settling a US civil claim for sexual assault, and

after public outrage at his friendship with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Andrew took up a seat in the front row alongside his younger brother, Prince Edward. His elder brother Prince Charles, sister Princess Anne, and the queen sat opposite.

The Duke of Edinburgh, to whom the queen was married for 73 years, died on April 9 last year, just a few weeks short of his 100th birthday, after treatment for a heart condition. Coronavirus restrictions at the time meant long-rehearsed plans for his funeral were hastily revised, and just 30 mourners attended.

Health issues

The sight of her alone at the service has become an enduring image of the pandemic.

Tuesday’s event in front of the 1,800-strong congregation was a chance to include elements of the original plan, including sermons, prayers and music he chose himself.

Much of the focus was on the straight-talking former naval officer’s charity work, particularly



Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II (centre) and her son Prince Andrew (third from right) attend a Service of Thanksgiving for Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, at Westminster Abbey in central London on Tuesday (AFP)

his Duke of Edinburgh Awards scheme for young people around the world.

The sight of royals and their foreign counterparts, dignitaries, a traditional Church of England service, plus crowds outside the abbey, gave the impression of a return to business as usual.

A spokesman for Prime Minister Boris Johnson said it was ‘welcome to see Her Majesty out today, continuing her incredible decades of service to the country’.

But it has been an eventful year in the storied history of the royal family, with the growing

sense of the end of an era.

Much of the focus has been on the queen and her health since her unscheduled hospital stay was revealed, soon after she hosted world leaders at Windsor Castle and made a speech at the opening of the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff.

Doctors ordered her to rest and she cancelled a string of high-profile engagements, including hosting world leaders at the UN climate change summit in November. She has held private audiences from her Windsor Castle home, mostly by videoconference.

On February 5, she met some members of the public at her Sandringham estate in eastern England, a day before the 70th anniversary of her accession to the throne.

Andrew and Harry

She has complained of mobility issues, with reports she has been using a wheelchair - and even a golf buggy - in private.

Speculation has also been rife that she could soon spend more time at her Balmoral estate in Scotland, after claims that a stairlift has been installed.

Andrew’s lengthy legal battle has overshadowed the royal family, which has also faced claims from the queen’s grandson, Prince Harry, of racism.

He and his wife Meghan Markle quit frontline duties in

2020 and moved to the United States.

Harry, 37, who also criticised his father Prince Charles and brother Prince William in an explosive television interview last year, is currently battling the UK government in the courts over his security arrangements.

He stayed away from his grandfather’s service but has confirmed he will be at his Invictus Games for disabled veterans in the Netherlands in the coming weeks.

With eyes increasingly on the succession, there have been clear signs future issues loom, when William toured Belize, Jamaica and The Bahamas last week. The visit was criticised for being a throwback to colonialism and afterwards William acknowledged calls for the British monarch to be replaced as head of state.

That has been seen as potentially fuelling similar movements in other Commonwealth countries, with Edward due to visit other Caribbean nations next month.

AFP

Houthi rebels' ceasefire plan can help end Yemen war: Iran

Iran says it could be an appropriate platform for ending the conflict

Tehran, Iran - Iran offered its support on Tuesday for a ceasefire plan put forward by rebels it backs in Yemen's war, saying it could be an 'appropriate platform' for ending the conflict.

The Houthi rebels on Saturday announced the proposal and offered peace talks on condition Saudi Arabia stops its air strikes and blockade of Yemen and removes 'foreign forces'.

The offer came a day after the insurgents fired on 16 targets inside the kingdom, which heads a military coalition fighting on the side of Yemen's internationally recognised government.

On Tuesday, Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said the Houthi 'plan contained a strong message of determination to end the war'.

"If there is serious and positive interaction with (the plan), it could provide an appropriate platform for ending" the conflict,



A policeman stands guard as firefighters extinguish fire at a Saudi Aramco oil facility in Jeddah, on Saturday, a day after a Yemeni rebels attack (AFP)

he said in a statement.

The Saudi-led coalition intervened in Yemen in 2015 after the Houthis seized the capital Sanaa the year before, and it has enforced an air and sea blockade of rebel-held areas since 2016.

"We hope that on the eve of the holy month of Ramadan, by prioritising humanitarian issues and advancing the exchange of prisoners, we will see an end to the conflict and witness national reconciliation in Yemen," Khatibzadeh said.

The Yemen war has killed hundreds of thousands of people directly or indirectly and displaced millions, creating what the United Nations has called the world's worst humanitarian

crisis. The six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council this month proposed hosting talks between Yemen's warring factions in Riyadh, from March 29 to April 7.

AFP

Nigeria train attack leaves 'injuries and fatalities', says official

Kano, Nigeria - An attack on a major Nigerian railway line left 'injuries and other fatalities' after gunmen detonated a bomb on the track and opened fire on a halted train, authorities said on Tuesday.

The Monday night attack on a train linking the capital city of Abuja with the north-west city of Kaduna appeared to be another escalation by criminal gangs known locally as bandits.

Around 970 passengers were onboard the train when gunmen blew up the tracks and started shooting into the coaches before the army arrived to repel them, a security source said.

"Passengers who sustained injuries, and other fatalities, have been moved to hospitals," Kaduna State security commissioner Samuel Aruwan said in a statement on Facebook, without giving further details.

Passengers had been evacuated by the armed forces but Aruwan also said search and rescue operations continued, suggesting some people were still missing.

Nigerian Railway Corporation said services on the Abuja-Kaduna route had been 'temporarily suspended'.

Two days earlier, gunmen killed a perimeter security guard in an attack at Kaduna airport before armed forces intervened.

Gunmen also attacked the same railway line with an explosive in October.

Bandit gangs in the north-west and central Nigerian states have long terrorised communities, conducting mass kidnappings for ransom, raiding villages and stealing cattle.

But their violence has intensified. Gunmen often arrive in their scores by motorbike, sometimes striking several villages, killing and abducting residents.

Gunmen have also targeted highways for kidnappings between the capital and cities such as Kaduna and the north-western commercial hub Kano. Nigeria's military has been carrying out operations and air strikes to clear bandits out of their camps hidden in forests that straddle several states in the northwest.

Security forces are also battling a 12-year militant insurgency in the northeast that has killed 40,000 people and displaced more than two million more.

AFP

British police to issue 20 initial 'Partygate' fines

London, UK - British police announced on Tuesday they would be issuing 20 initial fines, after probing suspected breaches of COVID-19 lockdown laws by Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his staff in Downing Street.

London's Metropolitan Police said it would not be disclosing the number or identities of those being fined, but Johnson's spokesman confirmed that the UK leader was not among those hit in the first wave of sanctions.

The news nevertheless revives the so-called 'Partygate' scandal, which left Johnson fighting for political survival after a number of lawmakers from his ruling Conservatives withdrew their support for his leadership.

Opposition politicians promptly reiterated their calls for his resignation following the Met's announcement on Tuesday. "We will today initially begin to refer 20 fixed penalty notices to be issued for breaches of COVID-19 regulations," the Met said in a statement, adding that its investigation was continuing.

"We are making every effort to progress this investigation at speed and have completed a number of assessments," it added.

Because there was still a 'significant amount' of evidence to be assessed, they did not rule out further action.



British PM Boris Johnson (AFP)

We will initially begin to refer 20 fixed penalty notices to be issued for breaches of COVID-19 regulations. We are making every effort to progress this investigation at speed.

MET

has consistently rejected personal wrongdoing.

But the 57-year-old faces a fine unless he can adequately explain why he appeared to attend some social gatherings when his government was telling the public that they were illegal.

His office confirmed last month that Johnson had submitted his response to a police questionnaire on the matter, but sources have said he has not been interviewed in person by investigating officers. His spokesman restated on Tuesday that he will disclose any significant developments in the probe relating to the prime minister.

'Got to go'

The 'Partygate' revelations and a

steady stream of other scandals dating back to late 2021 had left Johnson's position as prime minister hanging by a thread at the start of this year.

The mood among some of his own MPs grew increasingly mutinous and his position was weaker than at any time since he became prime minister in 2019 on a wave of support for his populist Brexit agenda.

His opponents accused him of misleading parliament by insisting the Downing Street events were work-related and within the rules. Normally, ministers found to have misled other lawmakers are expected to resign.

A handful of Johnson's own Tory MPs publicly said they had no confidence in his leadership, and speculation grew that the 54 votes required to force a no-confidence vote to remove him as party leader and prime minister could be reached.

However, the launch of the police investigation in late January bought the embattled Johnson some time.

In recent weeks, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further eased the political pressure on him, with the international crisis replacing 'Partygate' in the daily headlines.

Johnson has tried to play a prominent role in the West's response to the war, hosting near daily calls with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and sending UK military aid to the eastern European country.

But his part in opposing the war there did not stop all the UK's main opposition parties once again calling on Tuesday for him to resign.

"Downing Street has been found guilty of breaking the law," Labour's deputy leader Angela Rayner said.

"The culture is set from the very top. The buck stops with the prime minister, who spent months lying to the British public, which is why he's got to go."

AFP

Peruvian President Castillo avoids impeachment

Lima, Peru - Peru's President Pedro Castillo avoided impeachment by an opposition-dominated Congress on Monday, bringing to a close the second bid to unseat him since he rose to power eight months ago.

Following a parliamentary debate that lasted more than eight hours, 55 legislators voted in favor of Castillo's impeachment, 54 voted against, and 19 abstained. Eighty-seven votes would have been required to impeach the leftist leader, whom the opposition accused of corruption and moral incapacity.

"The motion to declare the presidency of the republic vacant has not been approved," said opposition leader Maria del Carmen Alva, who heads Congress, after the vote held at around 11pm (0400 GMT Tuesday).

"I hail the fact that common



People demonstrate against Pedro Castillo as the parliament debates his impeachment, outside the National Congress in Lima, on Monday (AFP)

sense, responsibility and democracy have won," Castillo wrote on Twitter after the vote.

"I call on all (legislators) to turn the page and to work together to solve the great challenges the country faces," he added.

The result of the vote was not a surprise: though the conservative opposition dominates Congress, it did not have a large enough majority to force Castillo out on its own.

"To be honest we don't have the votes," said Norma Yarrow

from the right-wing Advance Country party prior to the vote.

"We don't see this as a defeat," said legislator Alejandro Munante, who had spearheaded the impeachment bid against Castillo. It was the second time in his eight months as Peru's leader that Castillo faced an impeachment bid in a country with a recent history of ousting its presidents.

It was also the sixth time since 2017 that Congress opened impeachment proceedings against a sitting president.

The right-wing Pedro Pablo Kuczynski survived one but resigned in 2018 before Congress opened a second debate.

Centrist Martin Vizcarra also survived an attempt to remove him before he was finally ousted in 2020.

AFP

Lebanon faces education 'emergency': UN

Beirut, Lebanon - Lebanon is grappling with an education 'emergency', a United Nations official said, as years of economic collapse weigh heavily on students and teachers.

"We are now in an emergency situation. Education in Lebanon is in crisis because the country is living in crisis," Maysoun Chehab of the UN education and culture body (UNESCO) told AFP.

She spoke on the sidelines of an event on Monday celebrating the completion of a US\$35mn UNESCO project to rehabilitate 280 education centres damaged by a 2020 blast.

The explosion caused by haphazardly stored fertiliser at Beirut port killed more than 200 people, destroyed swathes of the capital and disrupted the education of at least 85,000 youths.

UNESCO chief Audrey Azoulay visited Beirut weeks later, driving efforts to restore heritage sites and damaged schools.

Students and teachers now have brand new classrooms but they are still suffering from the



People gather outside Mufti Hassan Khaled School in Lebanon's capital, which was restored as part of a UNESCO project, ahead of a ceremony marking the project's completion on Monday (AFP)

twin effects of an unprecedented economic crisis in Lebanon and the coronavirus pandemic.

Since late 2019, the Lebanese pound has lost over 90 per cent of its value, pushing most of the population into poverty.

Daily power cuts lasting more than 20 hours and soaring petrol prices mean many students can neither afford to reach their classes nor study from home.

"Schools do not have enough

funds to operate as they should, teachers do not have sufficient salaries to live in prosperity, students do not have transportation means due to high fuel prices," said Chehab, UNESCO's education chief for Lebanon.

"This is all affecting the quality of education."

The minimum wage once worth US\$450 is now valued at US\$28. The crisis has forced students to quit school or university

to make ends meet.

Enrolment in educational institutions slumped from 60 per cent last year to 43 per cent in the current academic year, a UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) report found.

The cash-strapped state has been unable to enact substantial reforms, a requirement to access billions of dollars from international lenders.

AFP

Will Smith says sorry to Chris Rock over Oscars slap as Academy launches probe

Los Angeles, US - Actor Will Smith offered apologies on Monday to Chris Rock for smacking the comedian during the Oscars ceremony, as the body that oversees the awards said it was launching a formal review of the incident.

Smith - who was named best actor on the night - marched onto stage during the glitzy Hollywood ceremony and hit Rock over a joke about wife Jada Pinkett Smith's hair.

"I would like to publicly apologize to you, Chris. I was out of line and I was wrong. I am embarrassed and my actions were not indicative of the man I want to be," the *King Richard* star wrote on Instagram.

"Violence in all of its forms is poisonous and destructive. My behaviour at last night's Academy Awards was unacceptable and inexcusable," Smith said.

"Jokes at my expense are a part of the job, but a joke about Jada's medical condition was too much for me to bear and I reacted emotionally."

Pinkett Smith suffers from alopecia, a condition that causes hair loss, and had a closely cropped head at Sunday's ceremony.

The 94th Academy Awards was in its final hour when actor and comedian Rock quipped that Pinkett Smith appeared ready to star in *G.I. Jane 2* - a putative se-



In this combination of pictures, actor Will Smith (right) approaches actor Chris Rock onstage, and slaps him during the 94th Oscars at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California on Sunday (AFP)

quel to a film about a female soldier who has a shaved head.

After at first appearing to laugh at the joke, Smith walked onto the stage and smacked Rock with an open hand.

He then returned to his seat and shouted: "Keep my wife's name out of your... mouth."

Smith tearfully apologised to his fellow nominees and the Academy - but not Rock - a few

minutes later as he accepted his historic Oscar.

"Love will make you do crazy things," he said.

On Monday, he repeated that apology.

"I would also like to apologise to the Academy, the producers of the show, all the attendees and everyone watching around the world.

"I would like to apologise to

the Williams Family and my *King Richard* Family. I deeply regret that my behaviour has stained what has been an otherwise gorgeous journey for all of us.

"I am a work in progress."

Smith's mea culpa came hours after the Academy condemned his behaviour and said it was looking at possible sanctions. "We have officially started a formal review around the incident and will explore further action and consequences in accordance with our Bylaws, Standards of Conduct and California law," a statement said.

Celebrities from Tinseltown and beyond reacted with shock and stunned amazement to Smith's outburst, with some defending him and others condemning a display of 'toxic masculinity'.

"He could have killed him. That's pure out of control rage and violence," filmmaker Judd Apatow said in a tweet he later deleted.

"Stand-up comics are very adept at handling hecklers. Violent physical assault... not so much," *Star Wars* icon Mark Hamill chipped in.

'Narcissistic madman'

The comedy world was quick to rally to Rock's side, complaining that Smith's outburst could spark copycat behaviour, endangering other stand-ups.

Emmy Award-winning Rosie O'Donnell called out a 'sad display of toxic masculinity from a narcissistic madman', while Kathy Griffin added: "Now we all have to worry about who wants to be the next Will Smith in comedy clubs and theaters."

Booker prize-winning author Bernadine Evaristo suggested that Smith had not just wrecked what should have been his greatest triumph, but had also sullied his legacy.

"Only the fifth black man in nearly 100 years to win an Oscar for male lead, and the first in 16 years, resorts to violence instead of utilising the power of words to slay Chris Rock. Then he claims God and Love made him do it," she said.

Smith went from the Oscars to the Vanity Fair after party, where he and his family posed for photos. Inside, he was filmed dancing and singing along to his 1991 smash *Summertime*.

Some celebrities came to Smith's defense, with singer Nicki Minaj saying that as her husband, Smith was privy to the pain Pinkett Smith endures.

"You just got to witness in real time what happens in a man's soul when he looks over to the woman he loves & sees her holding back tears from a 'little joke' at her expense," she tweeted.

AFP

'Roll-out of vaccine against Omicron by September'

Brussels, Belgium - Germany's Health Minister Karl Lauterbach said he expected the roll-out of a vaccine specifically against the Omicron variant of the coronavirus would be delayed for months, until autumn. Speaking as he went into a Brussels meeting of EU health ministers, Lauterbach said: "September could be the target month."

The EU relies mostly on mRNA COVID vaccines, particularly the one developed jointly by German firm BioNTech with US giant Pfizer.

The delivery of Omicron-specific vaccines had been expected early this year.

Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla had said in January his company would have one available

in March. Then BioNTech founder Ugur Sahin said last month he expected it to be available in April or May.

While the European Union has seen COVID hospitalisations and deaths decline after a successful vaccination programme, confirmed new cases have been rising again, driven by the highly contagious Omicron variant.

Omicron, which was first detected in southern Africa in November last year and rapidly spread globally, is now the dominant variant, accounting for almost all new cases.

It has mutations allowing it to dodge some of the defences generated by current vaccines and from previous infections.

AFP

Empty shelves as Shanghai COVID-19 cases surge

Shanghai, China - Shanghai recorded a steep climb in COVID-19 cases on Tuesday as panic-buying in the Chinese city of about 25mn stripped supermarket shelves bare.

Millions endured a second day of lockdown after authorities effectively split the country's biggest urban area in two, with residents of the city's eastern half confined to their homes for four days and subjected to mandatory testing.

China reported 6,886 domestic COVID cases nationwide on Tuesday, with more than 4,400 of them detected in Shanghai, now the centre of the country's worst COVID-19 outbreak since the early days of the pandemic.

Images showed some supermarket shelves in the city emptied of all goods as residents rushed to stock up before being



A worker guarding the entrance to a neighbourhood in lockdown receives food from a delivery man, in Jing'an district, in Shanghai on Tuesday (AFP)

locked down. "After being unable to grab any groceries this morning, I went back to sleep, and all I dreamt about was buying food at the supermarket," one user wrote on China's Twitter-like Weibo platform.

"I'd never have thought that

society today would be worried over buying groceries."

In a bid to keep Shanghai's economy running, authorities have avoided the hard lockdowns regularly deployed in other Chinese cities, instead opting for rolling, localised restrictions.

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

Several exhibition halls in the city have been converted into mass quarantine centres, lining up row upon row of beds.

One Shanghai resident surnamed Wang told AFP that she had been in one mass centre in Pudong since Saturday after testing positive.

"The conditions of the makeshift quarantine centre I'm in are pretty tough," she said, adding that there are around 2,500 camp beds grouped together in the main hall.

"The bathroom conditions are not good enough, they are cleaned twice per day but there are too many people (using them). It's pretty bad."

The city's airports, railway stations and international shipping ports remain operational, while key manufacturers are allowed to resume production after a brief halt, state media reported.

The Shanghai government has also said it will offer some tax and rent relief to businesses affected by the lockdown in a bid to reassure employers in the important commercial centre.

China has largely kept virus outbreaks under control over the past two years through strict zero-tolerance measures including mass lockdowns of cities and provinces.

AFP

Solomon Islands PM says China security deal 'ready for signing'

Honiara, Solomon Islands - The Solomon Islands' prime minister said on Tuesday that a contentious security agreement with Beijing was 'ready for signing', denying reports that his country had been pressured to allow a Chinese naval base to be built in the Pacific island nation.

In an impassioned speech to parliament, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare offered little detail on the final deal beyond saying that there was 'no intention whatsoever... to ask China to build a military base in the Solomon Islands'.

He dismissed reports in the Australian media that his country was being pressured by China to build the base.

"Where does that nonsense come from? The security treaty... is pursued at the request of the Solomon Islands' government," he said.

"We are not pressured in any way by our new friends."

A draft version of the agree-



This undated photo released on Tuesday by the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) shows China Police Liaison Team officers training local RSIPF officers (AFP)

ment, leaked last week, sent shockwaves through Canberra because it included proposals that would allow Chinese security and naval deployments to

the Pacific nation. Asked in parliament about the status of the deal, Sogavare said: "We will finalise and finish now. The document is ready for signing."

region to our own national security'.

Morrison said he had been in contact with New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who this week called the draft deal 'gravely concerning'.

But Beijing on Tuesday dismissed all concerns, calling the pact 'beyond reproach'.

Foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said at a routine briefing that China hoped the 'relevant countries can earnestly respect the Solomon Islands' sovereignty... instead of condescendingly believing that they have the right to tell the Solomon Islands what it should or should not do'.

'Very insulting'

In his speech on Tuesday, Sogavare said existing security arrangements with Australia would 'remain intact' under the new pact with China, but added that 'to achieve our security needs, it is clear that we need to

diversify the country's relationship with other countries - and what is wrong with that?'

China's growing influence in the Pacific in recent years has fed into a tense relationship with Australia, as has Canberra's strengthened military ties with the United States and other allies.

The prospect of a Chinese naval base in the South Pacific has long been a concern for Australia and the United States because it would allow Beijing to project its power deeper into the region.

Sogavare labelled concern from 'many leaders' about China's presence threatening regional security as 'unfortunate perceptions'.

He said that it was 'very insulting to be branded as unfit to manage our sovereign affairs' by other nations and condemned those who had leaked the draft pact with China as 'lunatics and agents of foreign regimes'.

Australia's flood-hit east braces for more

Sydney, Australia - Thousands of people across eastern Australia have been told to leave their homes as storms bear down on cities and towns still recovering from record deadly flooding just weeks ago.

Multiple evacuation orders were issued for the town of Lismore, which was devastated last month when record-high 14.3-metre floodwaters engulfed homes, swept away cars and stranded locals on the roofs of their homes.

Seeing to avoid a repeat of this disaster, state emergency services said 'additional people, vehicles, boats and helicopters' had been deployed ahead of forecast storms and 'life-threatening' flash flooding on Tuesday.

AFP

Punch behind the crunch

People around the world are eating more ultra-processed food, which is having a negative impact on the earth's health as well as their own, according to new research



What are ultra-processed foods?

Unprocessed foods include fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds, grains, beans, pulses and natural animal products such as eggs, fish, milk and meat. Minimally processed foods may have been dried, crushed, roasted, frozen, boiled or pasteurised, but contain no added ingredients.

Processed foods include smoked and cured meats, cheeses, fresh bread, bacon, salted or sugared nuts, tinned fruit in syrup, beer and wine. The main purpose of the processing is to prolong the food's life or enhance its taste. However, ultra-processed foods usually contain ingredients that you wouldn't add when cooking homemade food - certain chemicals, colourings, sweeteners and preservatives.

It can be tricky to identify food that has been ultra-processed. Consider this:

Bread made from wheat flour, water, salt and yeast is processed, but add emulsifiers or colourings and it becomes ultra-processed.

Plain oats, corn flakes and shredded wheat are minimally processed, but when the manufacturer adds sugar, flavourings or colourings, they become ultra-processed breakfast cereals.

Plain yoghurt is minimally processed, but add sweeteners, preservatives, stabilisers or colourings and it becomes ultra-processed.

A global diet that increasingly includes ultra-processed foods is having a negative impact on human and planetary health, according to a recent article published in the journal BMJ Global Health.

Ultra-processed foods are wide ranging and include soft drinks, instant noodles, re-constituted meat products, pre-packaged meals, some breakfast cereals, biscuits and confectionery. They are made by assembling food substances and 'cosmetic' additives (notably flavours, colours and emulsifiers) through a series of industrial processes, for numerous reasons - one of which is to extend shelf life.

These products are the basis of a 'globalised diet' and are becoming dominant in the global food supply, with sales and consumption growing in all regions and almost all countries. Currently, their consumption is growing fastest in upper-middle and lower-middle income countries, the paper adds.

Consequently, dietary patterns worldwide are becoming increasingly more processed and less diverse, having an impact on agro-biodiversity - the variety and variability of animals, plants and microorganisms used directly or indirectly for food and agriculture - according to the nutrition experts from Brazil, US, and Australia who worked on the paper.

They said that the bad effects of ultra-processed foods on human health were 'well documented, but there was still low aware-



The rapid rise of ultra-processed foods in human diets will continue to place pressure on the diversity of plant species available for human consumption...

AUTHORS OF STUDY PUBLISHED IN BMJ GLOBAL HEALTH

ness of their damaging impact on planetary health, and ultra-processed foods were missing from international development agendas'. They also warned that global agro-biodiversity was declining, especially

the genetic diversity of plants used for human consumption.

More than 7,000 edible plant species are used for human food, but fewer than 200 species had significant production in 2014.

As much as 90 per cent of humanity's energy intake comes from just 15 crop plants, and more than four billion people rely on just three of them - rice, wheat and maize, the study highlights.

The authors warned that such a decline in biological diversity in food systems is 'disrupting and damaging biospheric processes and ecosystems that support reliable and sustainable food production, reducing diet diversity, and creating a barrier to healthy, resilient and sustainable food systems'.

They added that the production of ultra-processed foods involved greater use of ingredients extracted from a handful of high-yielding plant species (such as maize, wheat, soy and oil seed crops), which meant that animal-sourced ingredients used in many ultra-processed foods were often derived from confined animals fed on the same crops.

Another issue of concern, the authors pointed, out was that ultra-processed food production used large quantities of land, water, energy, herbicides and fertilisers, causing environmental degradation from greenhouse gas emissions and accumulation of packaging waste.

"The very rapid rise of ultra-processed foods in human diets will continue to place pressure on the diversity of plant species available for human consumption...biodiversity conventions and climate change conferences need to highlight the destruction of agro-biodiversity caused by ultra-processed foods, and to agree on policies and actions designed to slow and reverse this disaster," the authors conclude.

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RAMADAN STARTERS

Crunchy minchies

Try some new starters for Iftar or dinner this Ramadan; there are many options to choose from, recipes you've never tried before. Like these:



Paneer Cheese Toast

Ingredients

1½ cups crumbled paneer, 1tbsp oil
½tsp cumin seeds, 1 medium onion - minced
1 green chilli - minced, 1tsp ginger garlic paste
1 medium tomato - minced, ¼tsp turmeric, ½tsp red chilli powder
½tsp garam masala, salt, to taste
1tbsp butter for toasting bread (optional)
200g mozzarella cheese grated, ½tsp red chilli flakes (optional)
Small bunch of coriander leaves - chopped

Method

Heat a pan with oil and add cumin seeds. When they begin to crackle, add onions and chillies. Saute well until the onions turn golden. Add ginger garlic paste and saute till the raw smell goes away. Add tomatoes and sprinkle salt and turmeric. Cook until the tomatoes turn mushy. You can also cover and cook at this stage to speed up the process. Add garam masala and red chilli powder. Mix well until well combined. Add paneer and mix well to coat evenly. Add coriander leaves and saute for a minute. Remove from heat and set aside. Now, heat frying pan, apply butter to the bread slices on one side and place them on the pan. Add the hot paneer bhurji over the bread and add grated cheese over it. Cover the pan with a lid and toast on a low to medium heat until the cheese melts. Keep checking in between to prevent burning. Serve hot with any dip or green chutney.



Popcorn Chicken

Ingredients

For marination

1 chicken breast – cut to bite size pieces, ¾tsp chilli powder
A pinch of turmeric powder, ½tsp garam masala, salt, to taste

For the flour mix

¾ cup all purpose flour, ¼tsp ground pepper, salt - 2 pinches

Other ingredients

1 egg white, 1 cup bread crumbs, oil for deep frying

Method

Marinate the chicken pieces for 10 minutes. Then, in a bowl, combine all purpose flour, ground pepper and salt, keep aside. Whisk the egg white in another bowl. Have the bread crumbs ready in a third bowl.

Heat oil for deep frying and when it begins fuming, reduce flame to medium. Dip the chicken pieces in the flour mixture, then in the egg white and finally roll in the bread crumbs to coat well. Immediately add them to the hot oil, one by one, and fry evenly till they turn golden in colour.



Tunisian Fatima's Fingers

Ingredients

2tbsp olive oil
1 boneless, skinless chicken breast - cut into small cubes
½ onion – chopped small
1 garlic clove - minced
½tsp ras el hanout (allspice mix)
A pinch of ground turmeric
¼tsp kosher salt
¼tsp black pepper
2 small white potatoes - cut into small pieces
2 eggs
1 cup shredded mozzarella
2tbsp chopped fresh parsley

For the rolls

12 square spring roll sheets
1 egg, beaten for eggwash
About 2 cups oil for frying
1 fresh lemon - for garnish

Method

Bring a pot of water to a boil over high heat. Meanwhile, prepare the filling - heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high. Add the chicken and sauté until golden brown, about 4 minutes. Add the onion and garlic and sauté until the onion is translucent, about 2 to 3 minutes. Add the ras el hanout, turmeric, salt and pepper to the pan and cook, stirring occasionally, for another 2 minutes. Transfer mixture to a large bowl and set aside to cool.

Once the water comes to a boil, add the potatoes and cook until tender. Using a slotted spoon, transfer potatoes to another bowl to cool. Let the water continue to boil. Add 1 egg to the boiling water, reduce the heat to medium and let it cook for 10 minutes. Remove the hard-boiled egg, cool, peel, and chop it into small pieces.

To the chicken mixture in the large bowl, add the cooled potatoes, chopped egg, mozzarella, parsley and the remaining 1 uncooked egg. Stir to combine the filling.

Now, prepare the rolls: working with one at a time, place one spring roll sheet on a flat surface. Add about 1/4 cup of the chicken filling on the sheet in one corner, like a log. Starting from the same corner, roll the sheet twice around the filling. Fold in the sides and continue rolling toward the furthest corner. Brush egg wash on the last corner to seal, then roll until the parcel is fully sealed and forms a tight cylinder.

Heat oil for deep frying and add about 3 rolls to the oil at a time. Cook, rotating frequently until golden brown and cooked through - 4 to 5 minutes. (you can also bake the rolls until golden brown). Remove on paper towels before serving on a platter with fresh lemon wedges to squeeze on top.

Persian Salad-e-Shirazi

Ingredients

3 Persian or Lebanese cucumbers, 2 tomatoes, ½ red onion

For dressing

3tbsp extra virgin olive oil, juice of 1 medium lemon,
Small bunch of fresh mint/parsley, salt, to taste

Method

Dice cucumbers, tomatoes and onion into small cubes. Soak the diced onion in some water for 10 minutes, if you want to reduce its strong taste and odour. Add all ingredients to a bowl and pour the olive oil and lemon juice. Season with salt and toss. Top with fresh mint/parsley and let it sit for 10 minutes. For more crunch, add a few crushed tortilla chips before serving.



Osaka into quarters, Swiatek cruises

MIAMI OPEN

Miami, United States - Naomi Osaka will face American Danielle Collins for a place in the semi-finals of the Miami Open after the Japanese star beat Alison Riske 6-3, 6,4 on Monday.

Osaka has responded strongly in Florida, advancing to the quarter-finals after leaving Indian Wells in tears earlier this month after being heckled by a fan.

The four-time Grand Slam champion, who received a walkover in the previous round, is yet to drop a set and remains one of the favourites to land the title.

"I am definitely happy," Osaka said afterwards.

"Last year I got to the quarters in Miami after winning in Australia and I am winning matches here this year too but I feel more grateful -- this is one of the funniest times of my life."

"There were a lot of things running through my mind last year," added Osaka who was able to stay firmly on the front foot against American Riske while saving seven of eight break points faced.

"Maybe it was trying to return to number one or other things which aren't that important but at the time was so heavy in my head. I am just happy to be healthy," added Osaka, who recently revealed she has benefited from therapy to address her mental health issues.

Ninth seed Collins, who reached the semi-finals in Miami in 2018, beat Ons Jabeur 6-2, 6-4 earlier in the day.

Newly minted world number one Iga Swiatek also advanced comfortably on Monday, sweeping aside the 14th-seeded Coco Gauff 6-3, 6-1 in 1hr 16mins.

The second-seeded Swiatek, who took over the top ranking on



Naomi Osaka of Japan celebrates after defeating Alison Riske of United States during the Women's Singles of Miami Open (AFP)



Iga Swiatek of Poland returns a shot to Cori Gauff of United States during the Women's Singles match on Day 8 of the 2022 Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium on March 28 in Miami Gardens, Florida (AFP)

Friday in the wake of the shock retirement of Ashleigh Barty, is now on a 14-match unbeaten streak.

The 20-year-old Pole won the WTA 1000 event in Doha and then took victory at Indian Wells earlier this month.

She is bidding to become only the fourth woman to win Indian Wells and Miami in the same

Maybe it was trying to return to number one or other things which aren't that important but at the time was so heavy in my head. I am just happy to be healthy

NAOMI OSAKA

season after Steffi Graf, Kim Clijsters and Victoria Azarenka.

Swiatek believes she is a more complete competitor now

than when she triumphed in the pandemic-delayed French Open in 2020 for her maiden Grand Slam win.

"Right now I feel more prepared and I feel like I'm in a better place," Swiatek said. "So there is more excitement and more like satisfaction and actually like positive thoughts and emotions."

"Because after Roland Garros, it was really a mess... I have been doing well like cutting off the expectations from the outside. It was always, for me, harder to deal with my own expectations that I had for myself."

While Swiatek is looking to extend her winning streak, Czech teenager Linda Fruhvirtova's impressive run came to an end in the last 16.

The 16-year-old - the youngest player to reach the fourth round since 2004 - was eliminated by fifth seeded Spaniard Paula Badosa.

Badosa powered to a 6-2, 6-3 victory in 1hr 22mins to advance to the last eight.

AFF

Southgate's penalty plan part of World Cup dream

London, United Kingdom - Gareth Southgate has told his England stars to place extra focus on penalty practice as he sets his sights on winning the World Cup.

Southgate's side were beaten on penalties by Italy in the European Championship final last year. Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka all missed from the spot in the painful defeat at Wembley.

Southgate, who missed the key spot-kick in the Euro 96 semi-final shoot-out loss to Germany, believes the key to penalty success is skill learned by repeated practice.

Speaking ahead of Tuesday's friendly against Ivory Coast at Wembley, the England boss made it clear that small details will be decisive when the World Cup gets underway in Qatar in November.

"We have gone into various details with the players of where we can improve upon to be world champions," Southgate told re-



England's manager Gareth Southgate puts on his shoes as he leads a training session of England's football team in Enfield, near London

porters. "We didn't have a chance to do that in such detail in the autumn as we had to get straight on to the focus of qualifying, so we felt this camp was a good time to start that. Penalties has been part of that."

"What is apparent, in terms of regular penalty takers for their club, we really only have Harry Kane, James Ward-Prowse.

"When we played Italy, their top five had taken more than 40 penalties in competitive matches. Kane is at that level and Rashford is next at 20."

"So we will have to view that differently than just accept they are going to get practice at their clubs and they will be able to come in and that is the challenge we have set with some individual

work. We think that is the right thing to do and, yes, it feels maybe they would think it is a bit early to do that, but essentially, if you take matchdays out and the day after a match, you are probably talking about 20 training days between now and that situation of a knock-out stage."

England were World Cup semi-finals in 2018 and Euro 2020 runners-up, but they remain without a major trophy since the 1966 World Cup.

Southgate says he and his backroom team are analysing everything they can in pursuit of glory in Qatar.

"We have been consistently in the top five in the world for the last three or four years," Southgate said. "We want to go further, but there are people right on our tail. That is the way it is going to be. "We have got to make sure we are on point with everything and open-minded enough to anything that might make us better."

AFF

World Cup-bound Japan end on flat note with Vietnam draw

Saitama, Japan - Japan manager Hajime Moriyasu warned his team they will need to shape up if they are to meet their target of reaching the World Cup quarter-finals after drawing 1-1 with Vietnam in their final qualifier on Tuesday.

Japan booked their place at a seventh straight World Cup with a win against Australia last week, but they ended their campaign on a flat note at home to a Vietnam team that had taken just three points from nine games in Group B.

Moriyasu said he wants his side to reach at least the last eight for the first time in Qatar, but he is looking for improvement after fielding an experimental line-up against Vietnam.



"I have to look at the future but I also need to make sure that we take each game as it comes," said Moriyasu, who watched his captain Maya Yoshida miss a gilt-edged chance late in the game.

"We clinched our World Cup place last week in Australia but there are still things that we need to work on. We have a target but that doesn't mean that we won't look at the things in the near future."

Vietnam went in front in the 19th minute when Nguyen Thanh Binh headed in direct from a corner, and the visitors held their lead going into half-time.

Yoshida equalised in the 54th minute but Japan could not find a winner despite fierce

second-half pressure, and had a goal disallowed by the video assistant referee.

"The players did their best but we needed to function as a team," said Moriyasu.

"It was a little bit difficult for the players on the pitch today. We didn't really have much time to prepare with this line-up, but all the players need to be ready."

Japan and Saudi Arabia had already clinched the two automatic qualification spots in Group B going into the final round of matches, with Australia assured of the playoff place.

Vietnam had lost all of their previous games with the exception of a home win over China, and manager Park Hang-seo said drawing with Japan had "real significance".

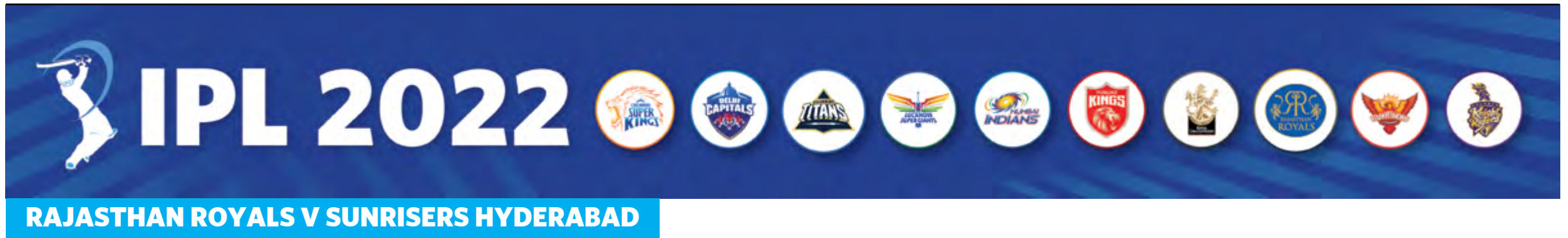
"I have nothing but appreciation for the players," said the South Korean.

AFF

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Prasidh, Chahal leave Sunrisers in disarray, Samson shines



BRIEF SCORES:

Rajasthan Royals 210/6 in 20 overs (Sanju Samson 55 (27) 3 x 4, 5 x 6; Devdutt Padikkal 41 (29) 4 x 4, 2 x 6; Umran Malik 39/2) beat Sunrisers Hyderabad 149/7 in 20 overs (Washington Sundar 40 (14) 5 x 4, 2 x 6; Yuzvendra Chahal 22/3; Prasidh Krishna 16/2) by 61 runs

TODAY'S MATCH (6PM)



Who is Ayush Badoni of LSG?

Who's this 22-year-old who slog-sweeps Rashid for a six and hooks Ferguson for another?

Mumbai, India - The first thing Harsha Bhogle asked him in the mid-match interview was, "where have you been hiding?". It was, of course, a valid question. Just eight runs to his name in T20 cricket and no List A or first-class cricket under his belt, the 22-year-old comes in and scores a fifty during which he, among other things, slog-sweeps Rashid Khan for a six and hooks the searingly quick Lockie Ferguson for another. So where had Ayush Badoni been hiding?

"How do I answer that question?" Badoni said. How can a 22-year-old answer that?

Those who follow Delhi cricket ask the same question: why has he not played more games for Delhi after impressing at India Under-19 level, scoring an unbeaten 185 in a youth Test against Sri Lanka Under-19 and also scoring a 28-ball 52 in the Asia Cup final? A video of his hitting during that innings can be found on Twitter. He comes from



Ayush Badoni made heads turn with his 54 runs against Gujarat Titans

the same stable as Rishabh Pant, Tarak Sinha's Sonnet club.

Enter Gautam Gambhir, the mentor at Lucknow Super Giants (LSG). He is a leader who backs his instinct, somebody who has brought players from outside Delhi to Delhi and has fought the establishment for them. And

Badoni is not just picked up, but given a game in the first match and sent in ahead of Krunal Pandya.

You get one hit in three years for reasons you don't know, and then boom - someone from Delhi cricket takes you to the big time.

"Gautam bhaiya backed me a

lot," Badoni said after the match. "He told me to play just my natural game. He told me you won't get the one-odd match, but you will get a proper run. He also told me, 'you don't need to play according to the situation. There

Gautam bhaiya backed me a lot. He told me to play just my natural game

AYUSH BADONI

are senior players to do that. You show us your natural game."

It has been a bit of a wilderness for him since the Under-19 days. India's NCA and Under-19 programmes aim to prepare the young players to establish them in their states' first-class sides straightaway after their Under-19

stints, but they can't do much if the state selections don't work out for the players. Badoni seems to be one of those cases.

"I have been in the auction for three years and have gone unsold," Badoni said of the intervening three years. "I have been to trials for two-three teams but nobody picked me at the auction eventually. So I am grateful to Lucknow for picking me.

"The last three years have been a bit of a struggle. I didn't get much of a chance with Delhi either. I played only one season, and got to bat only once. For that I have enhanced my game, I have added more shots, which has helped me a lot."

Once he got picked up by Super Giants, Badoni managed to impress all the coaches. "In the practice matches for Lucknow, I scored fifties in both the games," Badoni said. "Gautam bhaiya liked that, and the other coaches were impressed too."

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