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24-PAGE MOTORING SUPPLEMENT WITH THIS EDITION

SAYYID ASAAD BIDS FAREWELL TO JAPANESE, BANGLADESHI AMBASSADORS



On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received the ambassadors of Bangladesh and Japan separately, on Wednesday, to bid them farewell at the end of their tenure in the sultanate (ONA)

Divorce rate down, marriages up

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The number of divorce cases went down while marriages registered went up in the sultanate in 2020, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

NCSI data shows that the total number of divorce certificates issued in the sultanate in 2020 were 3,426 (9.4 cases a day), marking a decline of 8.1 per cent compared to 2019.

'The number of divorce cases



among Omanis fell by 192 cases, and by 17 cases between GCC citizens and Omani women,'

NCSI stated. The Governorate of Muscat recorded the highest number of

divorce cases - 796 - followed by North Batinah (672). Musandam recorded the lowest with 18 divorce cases.

The data indicated that the number of marriage certificates issued increased by 2.1 per cent in 2020; 18,621 marriage certificates were issued in the year.

North Batinah topped the list with 3,938 marriages, accounting for an 11 per cent increase over 2019. Muscat was second with 3,354 marriages registered - an increase of 1.9 per cent compared to 2019. Musandam recorded the

least number of marriages - 104 - in 2020, which was 31.1 per cent less than 2019.

NCSI data also indicated a decrease by 180 cases in the number of Omanis married to expatriates in 2020. The number of Omanis married to GCC women also declined by 49 cases compared to 2019.

Additionally, the number of Omani women married to GCC citizens went down by 65 cases. The number of Omani women married to expatriates also fell by 53 cases in 2020.

Omani breaks Asian free diving record

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's Ibrahim al Salatni has broken the Asian record for free diving, clocking a time of nine minutes and 13 seconds. The previous record of eight minutes and 45 seconds was held by a Chinese national.

Salatni's record was set at a tournament organised in Egypt held under the umbrella of the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI).

Salatni's success follows intensive training over five years and he now aims to be among the top ten free divers in the world.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, he said, "The event was held exclusively for me over two days on December 27 to 28 to break the previous record. I'm so happy to break the previous record. I dedicate this achievement to my country.

"It was not easy to set this record. Ever since I began free diving as a hobby in 2014, my aim was to achieve a record for Oman, and now I have achieved that goal. I am looking for even more."

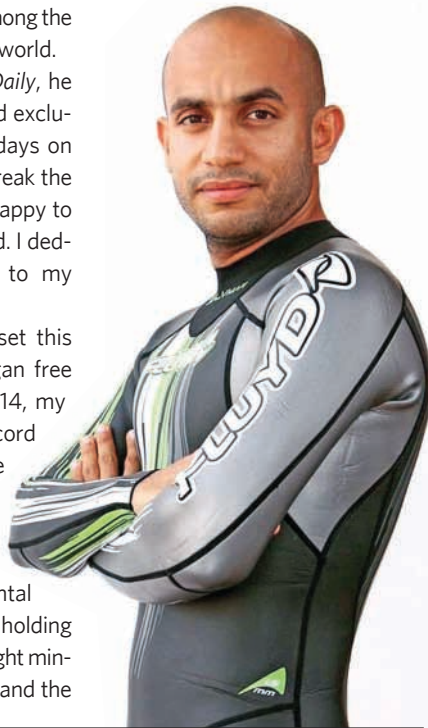
He also holds the national, Arab and continental records in static apnea - holding breath under water - of eight minutes and seven seconds, and the

national and GCC record in dynamic apnea (dynamic with fins and dynamic without fins), diving 150m underwater in one breath.

Salatni described the sport as one that requires "immense concentration and determination".

Free diving is practised without the use of any breathing apparatus. "You dive holding your breath to save oxygen."

His future plans include participating in the World Free Diving Championship that will be held in Bulgaria in 2022 where he aims for a podium finish.



COVID-19 UPDATE



2 deaths reported

Muscat - According to figures released by the Ministry of Health, 104 new cases of COVID-19 and two related deaths were registered in a 24-hour period on Wednesday. This takes the total number of cases to 305,307 and the total COVID-19-related deaths to 4,116.

The ministry stated that 14 patients recovered, accounting for a total of 300,355 recoveries. A total of eight COVID-19 patients are in healthcare institutions, including two in intensive care units and four new cases admitted on Wednesday.

Housing Ministry offers 9 sites for private investment

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To stimulate the real estate sector, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning will open nine investment sites for usufruct contracts in the new city of Liwa in North Batinah governorate soon.

The initiative aims to achieve the objectives of population and economic growth, including commercial and industrial real estate units. It also aims to enable the private sector to attract investments in various governorates to contribute to the development of integrated and sustainable urban communities.

According to an official, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning will offer land measuring between 1,000sqm and 5,000sqm for usufruct contracts

Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning will offer land measuring between 1,000sqm and 5,000sqm for usufruct contracts through public auction

through public auction.

Bidders must be Omani and his/her age at the time of bidding should not be less than 23 years. The bidding company must have at least 30 per cent stake of Omani or GCC nationals, the ministry official informed.

Additionally, bidders must be

registered through the electronic system - Real Estate Development Services Centre - using ID number or the commercial register.

New residential city of Liwa

New investment projects will be implemented in the new residential city of Liwa. The city is spread over an area of 8sqkm close to the Al Batinah Expressway. It will accommodate about 30,000 people and provide all services and public utilities, and include 2,500 to 3,000 housing units.

The city will have complete infrastructure, including roads, eight schools of various educational levels, an integrated health centre, and 13 mosques with facilities such as public halls and Holy Quran memorisation school.

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OCEC to host Oman Perfumes 2022 starting Feb 1

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Hong Kong media outlet closes after police raid, arrests

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WINGED WONDERS AT MUTTRAH CORNICHE



Muttrah Corniche is the new home of seasonal birds during the winter season. Colonies of seagulls flying over Riyam Park and Muttrah fish market make a spectacular sight. The birds are seen grooming and soaking in the winter sun at the corniche most days (Syed Fasiuddin/Muscat Daily)

OCCI announces support for 'Made in Oman' campaign



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) has announced its support to the 'Made in Oman' campaign with a sum of RO5,000 annually.

OCCI held its sixth annual general meeting on Wednesday with Redha bin Juma al Saleh, chairman of the board of directors of the chamber, in attendance.

At the meeting, it was agreed to provide RO5,000 annually for the 'Made in Oman' campaign with the objective of supporting and promoting Omani products to compete locally, regionally and internationally.

Also on the agenda was a study on the fees imposed on the private sector and comparing these with those in other Gulf Cooperation Council states and presentation of several proposals to strengthen the economy and

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry's board of directors approved the establishment of a joint Omani-Bahraini company with a capital of RO10mn

empower the private sector for submission to concerned authorities. The meeting also discussed the need of creating an integrated centre for exhibitions and conferences in the Governorate of Dhofar, and a public tender to conduct studies and consultations for the project.

The 'Made in Oman' national campaign has contributed to creating marketing outlets for Omani products in all gover-

norates of the sultanate. The campaign is run by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion in partnership with the Authority of Small & Medium Enterprises Development, Consumer Protection Authority, Madayn and OCCI, as well as representatives from the business community.

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion launched the campaign as part of its activities to encourage consumers to buy local products. The campaign promotes and raises the profile of a wide range of products grown and made in the sultanate.

At its sixth annual general meeting on Wednesday, OCCI's board of directors also approved the establishment of a joint Omani-Bahraini company with a capital of RO10mn. The company will include chambers of commerce and businessmen from both countries.

OCEC to host Oman Perfumes 2022 starting Feb 1

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) has announced an exhibition, titled Oman Perfumes 2022, starting February 1, 2022.

Specialising in perfumes, incense and frankincense products, the exhibition is a five-day event.

Announcing the exhibition, Said bin Salim al Shanfari, CEO of OCEC, spoke of the sultanate's famed tradition of perfumes.

He explained that Oman Perfumes 2022 is an excellent plat-



form for perfume retailers to showcase their brands in the local, regional and international

markets. "There is also a great opportunity for sponsors to promote their brands at the event."

According to Shanfari, the exhibition will host more than 100 local, regional and international perfume brands, retailers and distributors of luxury goods, beauty professionals and more.

"It will attract more than 5,000 visitors to enjoy a range of wonderful perfumes, incense products, frankincense and other luxurious aromatic products. Oman Perfumes 2022 will also witness a fashion show and various live events organised by OCEC," Shanfari informed.

OCEC held the first Oman Perfume Fair in 2019.

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MoH and PDO ink deal for equipment for SQH, Salalah



Salalah - The Ministry of Health (MoH), represented by the Directorate General of Health Services in the Governorate of Dhofar, signed an agreement with Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) to provide medical equipment for Sultan Qaboos Hospital (SQU) in Salalah on Wednesday.

As per the agreement, the hospital will be equipped with

oxygen generating machines for patients suffering from respiratory diseases, including COVID-19.

The agreement was signed by Dr Khalid Mohammed al Mashikhi, Director General of Health Services in Dhofar, and Mohammed Ahmed al Ghareebi, PDO's external affairs and communications manager.

ONA

REGIONAL WEATHER			PRAYER TIMINGS	
	Max	Min	Fajr	5.28am
Abu Dhabi	27	17	Sunrise	6.48am
Doha	25	17	Duhr	12.14pm
Kuwait City	18	13	Asr	3.15pm
Manama	21	17	Maghrib	5.35pm
Riyadh	23	11	Isha	6.51pm

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Over 3 tonnes of lobsters seized

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Over three tonnes of lobsters caught outside the fishing season have been seized, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR).

A statement issued by MAFWR said, 'The fisheries control team in Muscat governorate seized more than three tonnes of lobsters caught outside the season on December 29.'

The ministry informed that legal action has been taken against the violators.

"The lobster fishing season in the sultanate is from March to May. Lobsters are an important marine resource due to their high value and increasing demand in local and international markets. We have conducted several



awareness campaigns through lectures and programmes for artisanal fishermen, educating them on the laws and regulations and ways to preserve this natural resource," a ministry official said.

According to the official, MAFWR ensures fishermen follow the lobster season and comply with the fishing ban during the crustaceans' fertilisation and breeding period from May to February each year.

"The ministry urges individuals and companies to abide by the Living Aquatic Resources Law. The law punishes violations of fishing and possessing lobsters during the ban period with a fine ranging from RO300 to

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources ensures fishermen follow the lobster season and comply with the fishing ban during the crustaceans' fertilisation and breeding period from May to February each year

RO5,000 and/or imprisonment for a period of one to three months with confiscation of the catch and equipment used and temporary or permanent suspension of fishing licence," the official said.

RIHANNA LOOKALIKE IN TOWN



Barbadian singer and actress Rihanna lookalike Rose Cohen will perform live at Fresco restaurant and lounge in Marina Bandar al Rowdha on New Year's eve. The show is being organised by La Nuova Vita (Supplied photo)



EA releases rescued barn owl

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Environment Authority (EA) released an owl in its natural habitat in Dhofar on Wednesday.

A statement issued by EA said, 'Specialists of a veterinary clinic affiliated to Royal Court

Affairs and the General Directorate of Environment in the Governorate of Dhofar released an owl called Boumat al Makhazin, or barn owl, in its natural environment after it received necessary care and treatment.'

The barn owl is the most

widely distributed species of owl in the world and one of the most widespread of all species of birds, being found almost everywhere in the world except for the polar and desert regions, in Asia north of the Himalayas, most of Indonesia, and some Pacific Islands.

RAFO marks graduation of new recruits

Muscat - Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) celebrated the graduation of a new batch of recruits at Adam Air Base on Wednesday after completion of their military training and qualification process.

The ceremony was held under the auspices of Air Commodore Ali Mubarak al Ameri, Commander of Ghala Air Base and Commandant of Sultan Qaboos Air Academy.

The graduation ceremony was attended by a number of senior RAFO officers, commissioned and non-commissioned officers and the graduates' parents.

ONA



TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

THE TENDER COMMITTEE ANNOUNCES THE FOLLOWING TENDER:

Tender No.	Subject	Document Fees	Tender Bond	Closing Date
MJN-KWM-PM-TED-00018	Invitation for the submission of bids for a freight forwarding service & insurance of 100 buses from Oman to Qatar	OMR 100/-	1% of Bid Value	16 th January 2022

CONDITIONS:

- The tender documents package can be obtained from the Finance Department of the company from the 2nd to the 9th of January 2022 from 9:00 AM - 3:00 PM, upon payment of a non-refundable document fee to the following bank account and providing proof of deposit and signed authorisation letter to collect the tender document, with a company stamp.
- Payment should be processed by bank transfer or deposit to the following bank coordinates or by cash:
Account Name: **Karwa Motors**
Bank Name: **Meethaq Islamic Banking**
Bank Branch: **Al Khuwair Islamic Branch**
Account Number: **0625500193570001**
Swift Code: **BMUSOMRXISL**
- KEY DATES:**
 - Issue Tender Package - 2nd January 2022 - 9th January 2022
 - Last Date for Queries - 12th January 2022
 - Last Date for Submission - 16th January 2022
- Tender should be submitted not later than 12:00 Noon on the closing date and must be deposited at Karwa Motors Tendering Office located at Office No 5-25, 2nd Floor, Finaa Al Fardan Building No.254, Way 4204, Plot No 836, North Al Ghubra, Postal Code: 1115, Muscat, and should be in a sealed envelope addressed to 'Tender Committee, Karwa Motors', quoting the Tender No. and subject.
- Offers arriving after the closing date and time shall not be accepted.
- For queries please e-mail: tendercommittee@karwamotors.com

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FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)	
Indian Rs	193.58
Pakistani Rs	462.76
Bangladeshi Taka	222.95
Philippine Peso	132.65
Sri Lankan Rs	526.88

*Rates as on December 29
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Sri Lanka downplays default fears

Sri Lanka's central bank sought Wednesday to downplay fears of a debt default, saying its foreign currency reserves had almost doubled and would remain 'comfortable' throughout 2022.

Earlier this month, ratings agency Fitch downgraded Sri Lanka, seeing an 'increased probability of a default event in coming months' on the country's US\$26bn in foreign debt.

The central bank said on Wednesday, however, that its foreign currency reserves had almost doubled to US\$3.1bn from US\$1.6bn last month, a level that was only sufficient to pay for a month's imports.

'Accordingly, the government and the central bank are confident that the reserve position will remain at comfortable levels throughout the year 2022,' the bank said in a statement.

It also hit out at the 'hasty and inexplicable decisions' of rating agencies.

Russia says ready to boost gas production

Russia is ready to increase the volumes of gas production and supplies in any amount to meet the demand in Europe, but this requires long-term contacts, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak told the RBC media outlet on Wednesday.

"In physical terms, we are ready to increase production and supply volumes. Russia's resources make it possible to meet the demand of European consumers in any amount," Novak said.

"But, of course, this is not a quick process, since the EU policy sought to reduce the demand. Gazprom needs long-term contracts, as the growth in production requires large investments, which should pay off over the longer term," the Deputy Prime Minister noted. "Make long-term contracts, and we will be ready to supply more. This offer is always open," he added.

Ras Markaz Oil Storage Terminal to start operations by Q2 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The crude storage terminal at Ras Markaz in Duqm will come onstream by the second quarter of 2022 with an initial capacity of 26.7mn barrels. Ras Markaz Oil Storage Terminal is a vital project undertaken by Oman Tank Terminal Company (OTTCO), a subsidiary of OQ.

The project seeks to manage and maintain an integrated network of tanks for different types of energy derivatives in the Sultanate of Oman, notably in Duqm.

"The infrastructure of the first phase of the oil storage project is ready to operate by the second quarter of 2022," said Eng Salim Marhoon al Hashmi, director-general of the project.

"The project consists of two streams: The first caters to maritime business. It is completed and it comprises an import-export floating station situated 7km from the beach, in addition to two 42-inch pipelines," he explained.

Hashmi added that the second stream (80 per cent completed) features a variety of civil tasks, mountain demolishing, oil



pumping systems, water treatment, installing tanks, building a power grid and adding associated systems.

"The Ras Markaz Oil Storage Terminal is owned 100 per cent by the government of Oman, represented by OTTCO," he said.

The director-general of the project pointed out that the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) granted OTTCO a 40-year usufruct rights to set up an oil storage facility at Ras Markaz

with effect from the date of signing the said contract on 5 July 2017.

Hashmi told Oman News Agency (ONA) in a statement that the Raz Markaz agreement provides for a storage capacity of 26.7mn barrels of oil in the first phase. The company will increase its capacity in tandem with the growth of demand from investors, said Hashmi.

Ard Van Hoof, CEO of OTTCO, said that the company

has clear-cut vision aimed to provide high-level storage services for liquid and gas products, including renewable energy products.

OTTCO boasts an infrastructure that is capable of meeting the requirement of the local and international markets.

Hashmi added that Ras Markaz station has been connected via an 80km pipeline and that the facility constitutes a source of supplies for Duqm Re-

finery, where eight mega tanks are dedicated for the purpose.

The project has a construction area of 10sqkm, while the total area stands at 40sqkm, which means the facility has a storage capacity of 200mn barrels of oil.

The floating terminal can receive very large crude carriers (VLCC) from around the world and it has been connected with four main stations to pump crude upwards, said Hashmi.

"The Sultanate of Oman is

currently leaning heavily on Mina Al Fahal for the export of crude oil, so the Ras Markaz station will add a strategic dimension to out-bound crude export," he said, adding that the facility's existence outside the Strait of Hormuz area will encourage many investors to store oil there and engage in import, export and oil blending operations.

Hashmi said that OTTCO envisages making Ras Markaz the largest oil storage facility of its kind the Middle East and a global hub in the Arabia Sea and Indian Ocean zones.

"The project will generate 130 direct and indirect jobs, 90 of which will be occupied during the period of operation," said the director-general, noting that more employment opportunities will be provided as the facility's capacity keeps expanding.

Hashmi said that OQ Group and Aramco company of Saudi Arabia had signed a memorandum of understanding for the storage of their products at Ras Markaz, besides exploring other areas of cooperation related to the import, procurement, production and storage of crude and petroleum products at Duqm Refinery and Ras Markaz.

Bank Nizwa extends its financing facilities to Khazaen Dry Port

Muscat - The sultanate's leading Islamic bank, Bank Nizwa on Wednesday celebrated and marked the official opening of the Khazaen Dry Port, which falls under the pillars of the National Logistics Strategy 2040. Bank Nizwa has recently extended financing facilities to help build the dry port.

An agreement in this regard was signed by Khalid al Kayed, CEO of Bank Nizwa and Ahmed Mohammed al Abri, chairman of Khazaen Dry Port, according to a press release.

The signing ceremony was held in the presence of senior members of Bank Nizwa including general manager - Wholesale Banking Narasimhan. From Khazaen Dry Port, the ceremony was attended in-person by Issam al Lawati, GM of Khazaen Dry Port.

Commenting on the financing of this national initiative, Kayed said, "Offering exceptional connectivity, the Khazaen Dry Port is set to serve as a trans-shipment



point and will be a logistics hub that will link the sultanate to a number of countries. At Bank Nizwa, we view this as an opportunity to contribute to the socio-economic and infrastructural development goals of the country as the establishment of this dry port will have numerous positive implications on the economy."

"By supporting large-scale projects that offer tangible added value to the national economy, Bank Nizwa seeks to highlight the growing preference of Sharia'a-compliant financing while also establishing its distinct

footprint in the country's journey of progression," he added.

The primary objective of Khazaen Dry Port would be to serve the Sohar Port while focusing on the trade activities in Muscat and nearby areas such as Nizwa, Sur and Ibra. After its development, the movement of empty containers will be significantly minimised, resulting in lower transportation costs for consignees and empty container storage costs for shipping lines.

"With most of the sultanate's trading activities being routed through Muscat and the adjoining areas, the establishment of

the Khazaen Dry Port will be instrumental in facilitating trade activities and developing an integrated logistic system that will enhance performance, drive economic growth and position Oman as a global logistics hub," said Abri.

"We appreciate Bank Nizwa's efforts in playing an integral role in the development of Oman's critical infrastructure," he added.

Bank Nizwa is in strong alignment with the country's diversification plans and has taken several initiatives to contribute to the development of various sectors in Oman.

EDO names Mazin al Lamki as CEO

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Energy Development Oman (EDO) - the newly established state-owned energy firm to fund the expansion of the Petroleum Development Oman operated Block 6 concession area and the sultanate's energy offerings, including renewables - has appointed Mazin al Lamki as the chief executive officer.

Lamki, who is currently serving as the chief operating officer of Mubadala Petroleum will start his tenure as the CEO of EDO in the first quarter of 2022.

EDO's interim CEO Haifa al Khaifi congratulated Lamki in a statement on her twitter handle. "Congratulations to Mazin Al-Lamki, currently COO of Mubadla, who will be taking over from me as the permanent CEO of Energy Development Oman during the first quarter of 2022," she said.

"It has been an absolute pleasure setting up EDO over the



Mazin al Lamki

past two years, and serving as its interim CEO," Haifa added.

EDO recently launched its new brand identity by unveiling its corporate vision and logo.

Lamki has over 22 years of global experience in diverse technical, managerial and operational roles in the oil and gas industry.

He holds a Bachelor's Degree in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Manchester, Institute of Science & Technology, UK.

Slow progress as Lebanon awaits economic deal from IMF

Beirut, Lebanon - Lebanon is mired in an economic crisis branded by the World Bank as one of the worst in modern times, but officials are yet to strike an international bailout deal.

The financial meltdown began in 2019, and Lebanon defaulted on its debt last year.

Politicians have failed to enact significant reforms to rescue the Mediterranean country, and many blame the ruling class and central bank policies for the crash.

What is delaying progress on talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to strike a deal and unlock crucial donor funds?

How bad is the crisis?

Lebanon's GDP has plummeted from about US\$55bn in 2018 to a projected US\$20.5bn in 2021, a 'brutal contraction' that the

World Bank says 'is usually associated with conflicts or wars'.

Negotiations with the IMF opened in May 2020, but after two months they stalled amid arguments over the size of financial losses. Talks resumed in September this year after the formation of a new government headed by Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

Lebanese officials have yet to submit a plan for negotiation.

But they have since agreed that financial sector losses amount to around US\$69bn, according to Deputy Prime Minister Saade Chami, who is leading Lebanon's IMF negotiation team. The Lebanese pound has lost more than 90 per cent of its value in two years, and four out of five Lebanese are living under the UN's poverty threshold.

Even though the official value of the pound still stands at 1,507



to the dollar, the central bank has adopted multiple exchange rates to try to combat its devaluation on the black market.

A unification of the different rates 'would not be possible' without an IMF deal and political consensus, central bank governor Riad Salameh said this month, adding that US\$12-15bn was needed

to kickstart recovery.

What's on the table?

Lebanese officials met IMF delegates in early December to discuss 'economic policies that will be an integral part of the funding programme that Lebanon could receive', Chami told AFP.

Restructuring Lebanon's banking sector - a longstanding

demand of donors - was among the topics discussed, he added.

"We need to prepare, in cooperation with the IMF, a comprehensive economic recovery plan that will be sent to the [IMF's] funding board for approval," Chami said.

The Lebanese government - which has not met since October due to a political dispute over the fate of investigations into the August 2020 Beirut port blast - must also sign off on a deal, Chami added. He said Lebanon could see 'concrete results' as soon as January, but warned that the government must 'show it is committed to reforms' before any agreement is reached.

Lebanon's Prime Minister said on Tuesday that the first official meeting with the IMF would take place on January 15.

The visiting IMF delegation will review the progress the gov-

ernment has made, and may return in early February to finalise a deal, Mikati added.

To audit or not?

A financial audit of the central bank is among the top demands of international donors, and is widely viewed as a precondition for an IMF agreement.

The Alvarez & Marsal (A&M) firm launched an audit in September 2020, but was forced to pull out two months later because the central bank failed to hand over necessary data.

In October this year, Lebanese President Michel Aoun said the company would resume its work, and it is due to submit its report to the government next month.

Former vice governor of the central bank, Nasser Saidi, suggested the IMF would want to examine the audit, but Chami said no demands had

yet been made.

"We don't know if a forensic audit, or any audit, will be part of a potential IMF programme," Chami said.

But according to Saidi, a potential IMF agreement will ultimately bring in other donors, such as the World Bank and Gulf Arab states, who may demand it as a precondition for support.

"We need to understand what is going on inside the central bank," Saidi said. "There is a total lack of transparency."

For Saidi, a key question is the actual value of central bank reserves and the real value of financial sector losses.

"There seems to be no willingness to undertake a forensic audit," he said, but added that the "bottom line is the IMF will be looking - before anything - for promises of good governance." AFP

NBO launches its new digital bank accounts

Bringing banking closer to customers, National Bank of Oman (NBO) launched its new digital accounts, allowing customers to digitally open a new account without having to set foot at the bank. Just download the NBO mobile banking app, enter your details and select the type of account, then the bank will do the rest.

The digitally opened account's debit card can be sent directly to customers or collected from any NBO multi-functional kiosk 24/7, or visit any NBO branches. It can alternatively also be delivered to you, or collected from the closest branch.

Tariq Atiq, chief retail and digital banking officer at NBO, said, "We aim to make banking with NBO as easy, simple and straightforward as possible. The new service allows customers to open new accounts digitally when and where it suits them through our award-winning app without the customer needing to visit a branch."

"We have also added a host of exclusive benefits for new customers to show just some of the many ways NBO makes banking a rewarding experience." he added.

The first 100 customers will



also receive an exclusive cash back offer of RO20, while all new customers will benefit 1 per cent interest rate per annum in addition to free local transfers for two transactions per month and a fee-free Debit Card issuance. An additional exciting perk is a chance to win tickets to FIFA

World Cup Qatar 2022 for customers transferring their salaries through digital onboarding. New customers will also receive 2,000 Nuqati points, subject to maintaining a minimum balance of RO100.

These points can be redeemed for utility bill payment,

Credit Card outstanding payment, flight tickets, hotel bookings, car rental and purchases at partner retailers.

NBO serves its customers in Oman through 60 branches, more than 180 ATM/FFM/CCDMs as well as two Branches in the UAE.

MG Motor continues to make its mark on Middle East region

MG Motor has marked yet another remarkable milestone, with the British-born brand, opening 12 showrooms and other new facilities in 2021 as it continues its swift growth in the Middle East. The demand for MG cars has been steadily increasing – as a result the brand registered a record number of sales in the first three quarters of 2021, with outstanding growth of 60 per cent in sales, and witnessing its highest recorded growth in market share to reach 3.8 per cent.

The brand registered particularly strong growth in the Sultanate of Oman with sales up by 131 per cent to help it to a solid market share of 5 per cent, and ranking it fourth amongst the top 10 brands. Saudi Arabia has been the brand's highest contributor in terms of sales volume in the Middle East, contributing 60 per cent of MG's overall sales in the region, with a market share of 4.6 per cent.

While the world is still recovering from the pandemic and ongoing global uncertainty, MG has focused on an intensive network development and expansion plan to reinvigorate the brand's strategy, partnerships and objectives and to maximise its accessibility to customers across the nine countries.

MG, along with its partners in the Middle East, has been committed to offering a captivating



experience for its current and future customers. With its partners' support, it has succeeded in expanding its network in the region by increasing the number of showrooms from 28 in 2020 to 40 today, with plans to reach 41 before the end of 2021, whilst simultaneously increasing the number of service and spare parts centres.

Tom Lee, managing director of MG Motor Middle East, said, "I am so proud to watch MG Motor's extraordinary growth in the region and I can attribute this to the efforts of the MG team as well as our partners who have been key in the continuous building, investment and development of the MG brand in the Middle Eastern region. We pride ourselves on delivering quality products and services through an attentive approach, which comes

as a result of strong staff training and loyalty. I'm excited to see what is in store for MG and to watch the brand continue to grow and thrive in the Middle East".

So far in 2021, MG's distributor in Kuwait, Adel Alghanim, has invested US\$20mn in opening the brand's flagship and largest showroom and service facility in the region. In Oman, MG's exclusive retailer, Mohsin Haidar Darwish, has inaugurated a total of six showrooms in 2021 alone, increasing its total number to 11. In the United Arab Emirates, MG Motor's new official distributor, Inter Emirates Motors, opened three new showrooms in three Emirates – Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Ras Al Khaimah – during March and April. A further showroom was recently opened in Al Ain City.

Ooredoo boosts efforts to combat scammers

As part of ongoing efforts to protect customers, Ooredoo is proactively tackling fraud and scams through its social media channels. Focused on Phishing, a cybercrime attack that involves soliciting and stealing personal and banking information over the phone, hoax SMS, malicious software, scam phone calls and phony online groups masquerading as Ooredoo Oman, Ooredoo's Fraud Awareness Campaign aims to safeguard customers against all forms of data and financial theft.

Ooredoo is reminding people to be wary of unsolicited or unknown phone calls and SMS, never to share personal information such as their bank card PIN number or mobile banking password, never to transfer money to another account on their request, and don't assume they are genuine because they have personal information, because they may have obtained it from social



media or other sources.

It is also very important that customers do not click on URLs contained within these unsolicited SMS, do not reply and do not call the numbers. Ooredoo will never ask for your personal information over the phone and will not call you regarding a service or technical matter unless you initiate the contact first.

If you are contacted, it is recommended that customers hang up and contact Ooredoo using an official means of communication. Customers are encouraged to delete suspicious SMS, block unknown calls and to report bogus calls to the authorities.

Nissan Navara: Designed to perform in all terrains

Raising the bar for style and performance in the pickup market, the award-winning Nissan Navara combines the best of Nissan's crossover leadership with many years of experience in designing and manufacturing robust and dependable pickups. The versatile and efficient next generation Nissan pickup is tough as always and smarter than ever.

In Oman Nissan Navara is a preferred vehicle in the oil, gas and construction industry. Merging a tough, working pedigree, with premium ride comfort, smart technologies and modern styling, the economical Nissan Navara pickup pushes the boundaries of innovation further. Adding to this, Nissan Navara pickup delivers an enhanced level of safety, comfort and driving pleasure, while continuing to bring durability, reliability, and versatility.

A durable and all-terrain vehicle it is perfect for a tough week



at work followed by an adventurous weekend outdoors, Nissan Navara is an outstanding performer both on and off the road. With its go anywhere capabilities and built-in technology, the Nissan Navara is built on over 80 years of Nissan pickup heritage and reliability.

Owners of Nissan Nissan Navara vouch for the high stan-

dards of the world class after-sales service centres that are available across the Sultanate.

A senior official of Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) said, "The multi-award-winning Navara has set a new benchmark in the pickup sector. Nissan Navara is a combination of the powerful, square design of a tra-

ditional pickup and sophisticated and modern details, meeting all customer demand, off-road to urban mobility."

A dependable partner for work or travel, the Nissan Navara comes with many best-in-class technologies, including an array of Nissan Intelligent Mobility features and safety systems, making it among the most advanced yet. Nissan has a long history of building strong, dependable pickups. With each new model the boundaries of innovation have been pushed, providing drivers with everything they need to get the job done. Nissan Navara pickup helps get the job done.

The Nissan Navara is powered by the latest generation of Nissan engines and is designed to give the right amount of power when and where you need it most. The legendary Nissan Navara is available with two transmission options with both 2-wheel drive and 4-wheel drive options. The 2.5ltr engine used in

the Navara has a displacement of 2488 cc producing upto 168hp/244nm torque.

Reliability and durability

Navara also comes with a diesel engine option. This has been developed for excellent fuel efficiency and emissions ratings, yet with impressive power output and acceleration. Diesel engine option is available with YD25 engine, a 2.5ltr unit producing 161hp/403nm torque. This variant comes with PDO specifications for use in desert operations.

Being a pickup one can trust right down to its core, Nissan Navara's full-length fully boxed ladder frame provides solidity and strength one can rely on. With its steel double-wishbone front suspension and rigid leaf suspension, drivers and owners are sure to experience a smooth and comfortable ride on and off the road.

MoSD, Bank Muscat celebrate International Day of Persons with Disabilities

Celebrating the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, Bank Muscat participated recently in the event the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) organised on this occasion. Bank Muscat is keen to support persons with disabilities through CSR programmes and initiatives in partnership with government institutions and NGOs. During the event, MoSD honoured Bank Muscat for its constant support. The event was held under the patronage of H H Dr Mona bint Fahad bin Mahmoud al Said, Assistant Vice Chancellor for International Cooperation at Sultan Qaboos University, where Afaf Ali Moosa, assistant general manager - Large Corporates, Bank Muscat, received the honour from H H Dr Mona.

On this occasion, Afaf said, "We are proud of all the tremendous efforts that various government and private institutions, NGOs and individuals are keen to put for the development of

services and facilities for persons with disabilities. The bank values its longstanding partnership and cooperation with the Ministry of Social Development to best serve the community."

"The bank pays great attention to activities, events and social responsibility programmes especially those targeted at developing facilities and services for persons with disabilities. This recognition of the bank's efforts further motivates us to continue working on developing sustainable programmes that provide support to the community in general and ensure the welfare of persons with disabilities," she said.

Afaf expressed her happiness to participate in this celebration, adding that, "We are proud of all the efforts made by various government and private institutions, NGOs and individuals in service of our brothers and sons with disabilities."

In line with its commitment to



deliver long-term benefits for the disabled and helping them integrate into mainstream society, the bank contributed this year a number of wheelchairs, including powered and non-powered ver-

sions, electric beds, laptops and BrailleSense devices to visually-impaired students, and hearing aids.

Bank Muscat had earlier supported the construction of a

playground at the Al Aman Rehabilitation Centre for children with severe disabilities, and is also at present helping provide a sports field at the Al Wafa Centre for the Rehabilitation of Per-

sons with Disabilities.

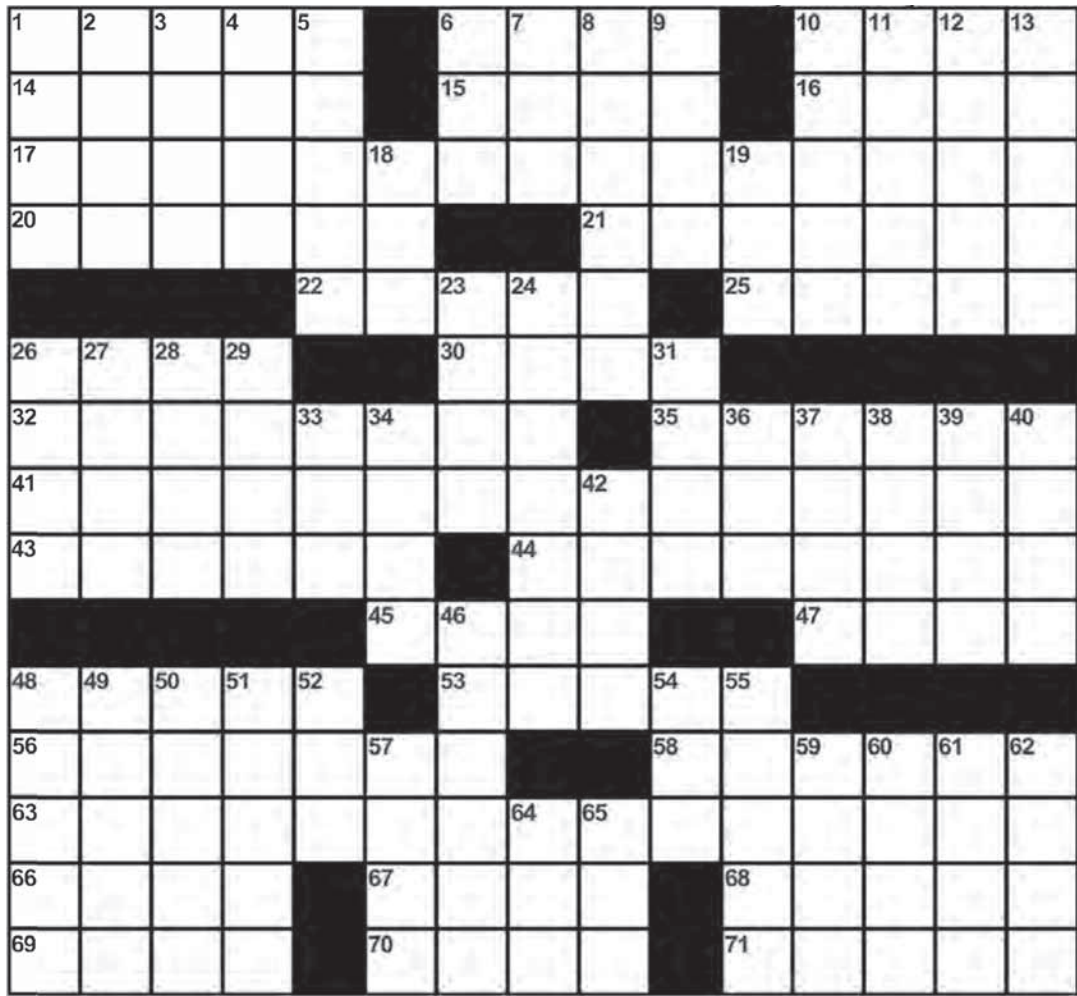
Bank Muscat has taken many measures for the inclusion of persons with disabilities into mainstream society. The bank's efforts in this regard include the

operation of a special ATM with a special transaction flow for blind and visually-impaired people. Also, special access ramps and other arrangements for easy access have been made available at different branches and ATMs in Oman. The bank has also trained a number of its branch employees in sign language to facilitate easy communication with the hearing impaired.

Every year, Bank Muscat continues its CSR and sustainability programmes and activities that serve various segments of society including the youth and children, people with disabilities, social welfare families, entrepreneurs, students and communities across the country.

Apart from numerous one-off projects, the bank continues to run over 10 long-term CSR programmes. The bank's CSR and sustainability programmes have been well appreciated by society, and it has been honoured in the past too by the MoSD.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Eight ball's rebound
6) Shower with affection (with "on")
10) Dillon on "Gunsmoke"
14) Long way from slim
15) Dress, as in one's Sunday best
16) Miscellaneous collection
17) Cope
20) Nice leisurely walk
21) Like some positions
22) "To your health!"
25) Took a stab at
26) Common '70s hairstyle
30) Common one of ancient Rome
32) Type of trial or diagnosis
35) Rub the wrong way
41) Coroner
43) Resurrection Day
44) Makes larger in stature
45) "Normal" starter
47) Ushers do it
48) Papas' counterparts
53) Aquatic South

- American rodent
56) Paper-folding art
58) Like a proper marching band
63) Certain crime solver
66) Features
67) Brother of La Toya
68) Laptop instruments of yore
69) Saucy or spirited
70) Dental woe
71) Exercise, as influence
DOWN
1) Oft-filleted fishes
2) Help in the wrong way
3) Caboose place
4) Norway's biggest city
5) Cries weakly
6) Banned insecticide's letters
7) Sound of admiration
8) Aquarium reptile
9) Certain sword
10) Wisdom tooth, e.g.
11) It can keep you out of jail
12) What every film has
13) Monkeyed around (with)
18) Sort or type
19) Red, carpenter or

- velvet
23) Certain gem
24) Quickly, musically
26) Cartoon coyote's favourite company
27) Circus bug
28) Frees (of)
29) Tending to a problem
31) Hillside, to the Scottish
3 3) Rocks in a glass
34) Bellyache
36) Anti-smoking org.
37) Picky criticisms
38) You can get down on one
39) Chanteuse Home
40) Formerly, in days of yore
42) Revealing photo?
46) Like vinegar
48) Finish a wet, messy job
49) Ceased lying?
50) Athlete running 5,280 feet
51) Feed livestock
52) _ fly (RBI source)
54) A la mode item, sometimes
55) Family man
57) Prefix with "physical"

- 59) Underworld river
60) Spare item
61) Lasting starter?

- 62) Mosquito, gnat or fly
64) Bible verb ending
65) Stocking stuffer?

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Why limit yourself? Today offers wonderful experiences for every one of your senses, including your sixth. Take full advantage of every opportunity and keep your eyes and ears open. Not only will you be handsomely rewarded, but you'll discover a few new playful obsessions. The best way to find new stimulation is by experimenting, so step outside your comfort zone and investigate some intriguing new flavours and sights.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Fanciful ideas and romantic wishes have been blooming inside your head. They're all so pretty, and it's a waste that no one sees them but you. The time is right to share them with a person who loves you the most: They really want to know more about what makes you tick, and they can tell you've been working on something in your mind. Give them a glimpse of what you're thinking.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Everyone doesn't have to be your favourite person, but right now you should get to know a difficult personality a little bit better. Observe their actions closely and you may notice that they're much more complicated than you initially thought. Their odd behaviour has some reasonable explanations. Accepting the people you don't like will ultimately free you from their influence. Treat others as you would like to be treated.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

It might be slow going at the start of the day, but don't let yourself get discouraged too easily. The people around you have some excellent ideas to share with you and will be looking to you to put the finishing touches on things. It's collaboration that will give you the energy you need, not going off on your own. Stick close to controversial folks who always get a reaction. They might inspire you to take risks. You're entering a lucky phase.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

An exciting opportunity could be coming your way soon, but are you prepared to take it on? Clear out your busywork to make sure. Run those errands and take care of the little things you've been putting off. You need to get ready to move into a massive planning stage. A lot of research and scheduling will be required. Don't fret if you're dealing with conflicting dates. Things are all going to settle down later.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

A work or school drama is carrying over into your free time, and this is growing into a problem. The fact is people are demanding too much of you right now. It's time to be clear about what you can and can't do for them. This applies to both your personal and business lives, but it's much more relevant to work or school right now. Shocking, thoughtless remarks could come from a surprising source, but don't take them personally.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

There's no time like the present to grab the bull by the horns. Whether you need to move things forward at work, school, or in a relationship, now is the time to give it your best shot. Temper your passion with a subtle dose of sweet charm and you'll have a much better chance of getting exactly what you want. As the saying goes, you can attract a lot more flies with honey than with vinegar, so step up into a more powerful position.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

There has been a steady progression of your passions: First they started in your rational brain. Then they took up residence in your heart, growing into something that you truly believed in. But they will move into your gut. Now, more than ever, what you believe in will give you the sense of direction you're looking for. Use your voice to inspire others to action. A stronger power is coming into your life soon, someone who can help you.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Every choice you've made in the past has helped create the wonderful person you are, so be proud of the lessons you've learnt. Show that pride by sticking to your guns and living up to the reputation you've created. People always rely on you to do the right thing, and that's incredibly valuable and flattering. Don't dilute your point of view to appease other, more powerful people. They'll respect you more for being true to yourself.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You're all about giving, or at least you should be if you want all the joy that's due you. People will be reaching out for some advice or help that's easy to give, so give it. Your words of encouragement, extra few dollars, or donated items will make a big difference in someone else's life. The sense of accomplishment you feel will be unlike anything you've ever felt before, and you might just get bitten by the altruism bug.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Today is all about feeding your brain, so explore the things you don't know much about. If a conversation drifts toward political issues or world events, keep up with it. Even if you're not exactly current, that doesn't mean you don't have opinions to offer and new things to learn. The brain is a muscle, and yours is capable of getting a bodybuilder's physique. You just need to feed it nutritional things and make it work out on a regular basis.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

The pace of the day might be fast, but you'll love every minute of it. For a while now you've been itching for the people around you to pick up the pace, and you could get your wish now. You'll be in the middle of the action, playing conductor to a mad bunch of musicians who won't always follow your lead. Humour is a useful tool for getting what you want from people who don't want to appear to be under your thumb.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The range of missile Agni is approximately

- a. 150 km
b. 1200-2000 km
c. 500 m to 9 km
d. 4 km

2. The process of revival of learning that swept across Europe in 15th and 16th centuries is called

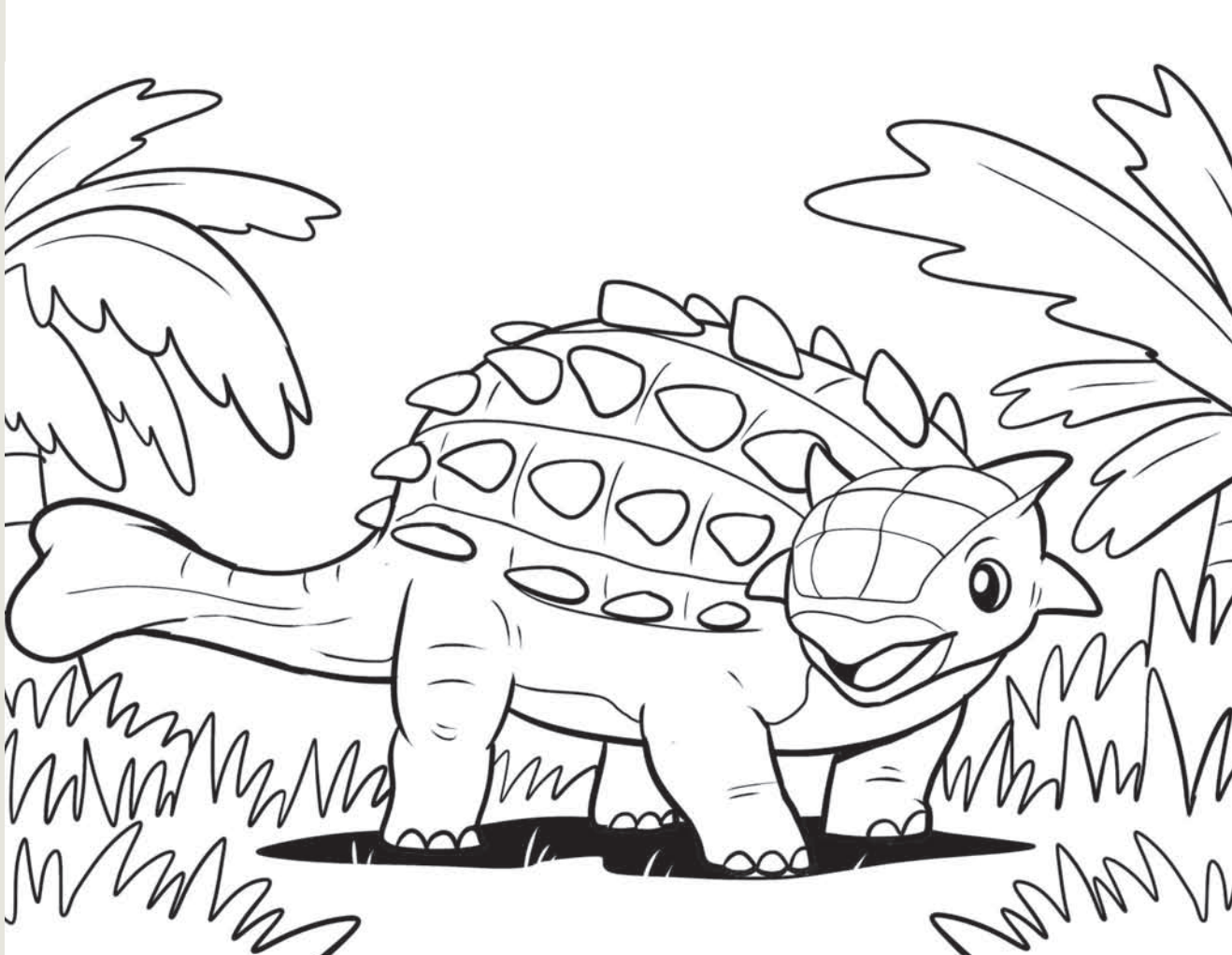
- a. feudalism
b. crusade
c. renaissance
d. communism

3. The red blood cells are in the

- a. heart
b. liver
c. lymph nodes
d. bone marrow

Answers: 1. b 2. c 3. d

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

C	V	E	T
R	G	O	R
K	S	A	E
O	G	A	H

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Palestinian President makes rare Israel visit for talks

After talks with Mahmud Abbas, Israel's defence ministry announces 'confidence-building measures'

Jerusalem - Israel unveiled a package of 'confidence-building measures' for the occupied West Bank on Wednesday, after Defence Minister Benny Gantz hosted talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas on his first visit in years.

Abbas, leading a high-ranking delegation on his first visit to Israel for an official meeting since 2010, held talks with Gantz at his home in the central town of Rosh Haayin, according to Israeli sources and media.

"We discussed the implementation of economic and civilian measures, and emphasised the importance of deepening security coordination and preventing terror and violence - for the well-being of both Israelis and Palestinians," Gantz said after the meeting on Tuesday evening.

On Wednesday, Israel's defence ministry announced 'confidence-building measures' with the Palestinian Authority (PA).

These included a US\$32mn advance payment to the PA in taxes collected on its behalf by Israel, and the granting of 600 extra permits allowing Palestinian businessmen to cross into Israel.

It also announced the regularisation of 6,000 more Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank, which has been under Israeli control since the Six-Day War of 1967.

Israel had already announced in October - for the first time since 2009 - the regularisation



Palestinians are blocked by Israeli security forces as they try to stop the demolition of their home, located within the 'Area C' of the occupied West Bank, where Israel retains full control over planning and construction, in the town of Hebron on Tuesday (AFP)

of the status of 4,000 Palestinians living in the large swathe of the West Bank known as Area C, where Israel exercises civilian as well as military control.

'Tense conditions'

"The meeting dealt with the importance of creating a political horizon that leads to a political

solution, in accordance with international resolutions," Palestinian Civil Affairs Minister Hussein al Sheikh said on Wednesday.

Excluding annexed east Jerusalem, the West Bank is home to nearly 500,000 Jewish settlers, living in communities regarded as illegal under inter-

national law.

The talks also covered 'the tense conditions on the ground due to the practices of settlers' as well as 'many security, economic and humanitarian issues', Sheikh added.

After Israel's coalition government led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was formed in

June, Gantz had visited the PA's headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah in August for talks with Abbas, the first official meeting at such a level for several years.

But after those talks, hawkish Bennett, the former head of a settler lobby group who opposes Palestinian statehood, under-

The meeting dealt with importance of creating a political solution in accordance with international resolutions. The talks also covered tense conditions due to the practices of settlers besides security, economic and humanitarian issues

HUSSEIN AL SHEIKH

lined that there was no peace process under way with the Palestinians, 'and there won't be one'.

Right-winger Bennett leads a motley coalition of parties ranging from the Jewish nationalist right to the left and centre.

Israel's right-wing opposition Likud party condemned the latest meeting, saying that 'concessions dangerous for Israel's security are only a matter of time'.

The party added a dismissive reference to Bennett's governing coalition, which includes an Israeli Arab party for the first time.

"The Israeli-Palestinian government has put the Palestinians and Abbas back on the agenda...

it is dangerous for Israel," the Likud said.

'Deepens Palestinian divide'

Gantz's meeting with Abbas follows a recent visit to the region by US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, with the administration of President Joe Biden seeking to reboot relations with the Palestinians that were broken under Donald Trump.

Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, also condemned the visit. It went against the 'national spirit of our Palestinian people', a statement said.

An 11-day conflict in May between Israel and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip marked the worst hostilities in the area since 2014, and unrest has persisted despite an Egypt-brokered ceasefire.

"This behaviour by the leadership of the Palestinian Authority deepens the Palestinian political divide, complicates the Palestinian situation, encourages those in the region who want to normalise relations with the occupier, and weakens the Palestinians' rejection of normalisation," Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said.

Qassem was alluding to Gulf Arab states Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Morocco and Sudan, which signed US-brokered normalisation deals with Israel during the presidency of Trump.

AFP



Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr (AFP)

Iraq vote victor Sadr meets pro-Iran rivals

Najaf, Iraq - The winner of Iraq's October parliamentary election, Shiite Muslim cleric Moqtada Sadr, met on Wednesday with rivals from the pro-Iran Hashed al Shaabi former paramilitary alliance ahead of the opening of parliament.

The October 10 vote was rejected by the Fatah (Conquest) Alliance, the political arm of the pro-Tehran Hashed, but Iraq's top court on Monday dismissed their allegations of voter fraud and ratified the results.

It paves the way for parliament to meet and elect a president - who will then name a prime minister tasked with forming a new government.

In multi-confessional and multi-ethnic Iraq, the formation of governments has involved complex negotiations ever since the 2003 US-led invasion toppled dictator Saddam Hussein.

On Wednesday, leaders including Fatah Alliance chief Hadi al Ameri, senior Hashed official Faleh al Fayyad and Qais al Khazali, head of the Asaib Ahl al Haq force - a key component of the Hashed - were hosted by Sadr at his home in the Iraqi shrine city of Najaf, according to state news agency INA.

The leaders discussed 'the political situation' and the 'forma-

tion of the next government', INA reported.

Sadr, a former anti-US militia leader who opposes all foreign interference, had already met leaders from pro-Iran parties earlier this month.

Iraq is trying to recover from years of war and extremist violence but remains hobbled by political divisions, corruption and poverty. Parties from Iraq's Shiite majority have previously struck compromise deals to work together, but Sadr is insistent he wants to forge a coalition capable of forming a parliamentary majority.

Sadr's movement won more than a fifth of the seats, 73 out of the assembly's total of 329. The Fatah Alliance took 17 seats, sharply down from its 48 seats in the past assembly, and Hashed leaders rejected the result.

Sadr, a self-styled defender against all forms of corruption, has repeatedly said that the next prime minister will be chosen by his movement.

The scion of an influential clerical family who led a militia against the US-led occupation of Iraq, Sadr has distinguished himself from other Shiite factions by seeking to distance himself from both Iranian and US influences.

AFP

Kuwait swears in fourth government in two years

Kuwait City, Kuwait - A new Kuwaiti government was sworn in on Wednesday, the oil-rich Gulf emirate's fourth in two years, after the last one resigned in November amid political deadlock.

Kuwait has been shaken by disputes between elected lawmakers and successive governments dominated by the ruling Al-Sabah family for more than a decade, with parliaments and cabinets dissolved several times.

The last government called it quits in November in the face of a standoff with parliament over reforms.

The cabinet was sworn in be-



The last government called it quits in November in the face of a standoff with parliament over reforms (AFP)

fore the crown prince, the official KUNA news agency reported.

It is the fourth government

that Sabah al Khaled al Sabah has formed since his appointment as prime minister in De-

cember 2019.

Kuwait is the only Gulf Arab state with a fully elected parliament, which enjoys wide legislative powers and can vote ministers out of office.

Oil Minister Mohammed al Fares and Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmed Nasser al Mohammed al Sabah retain their posts in the reshuffle.

However, the new lineup includes a critical voice in Finance Minister Abdulwahab al Rushaid, who earlier this month called on government to 'focus on a sustainable economy rather than on the fluctuations of oil prices'.

Like most Gulf countries, Kuwait's economy and public finances have been hit by the coronavirus pandemic and the slumping price of oil.

In last year's elections, the opposition and its allies won nearly half of parliament's 50 seats.

The polls were the first since the new emir, Sheikh Nawaf, took power on the death of his half-brother, Sheikh Sabah, at the age of 91.

In recent years there have been mounting calls for reform in Kuwait, where expatriate residents make up 70 per cent of the 4.8mn population.

AFP

Hong Kong media outlet closes after police raid, arrests

Hong Kong, China - Hong Kong pro-democracy media outlet Stand News said on Wednesday it will close after a police raid and arrests of seven current and former staff members, in the latest blow to the city's rapidly shrinking press freedoms.

Suppression of the semi-autonomous Chinese city's local press has increased in the wake of 2019's huge and often violent democracy protests and Beijing's subsequent imposition of a sweeping national security law.

On Wednesday morning, police officers burst into Stand News' office, seizing phones, computers, documents and thousands of dollars, while hauling its acting editor-in-chief into the headquarters in handcuffs as it was searched.

"Because of the current situation, Stand News will stop operating immediately," the outlet said later in a statement on Facebook.

Stand News said its website and social media would no longer be updated and would be taken down soon. It added that acting editor-in-chief Patrick Lam, who was among those arrested, had resigned and all em-



A Hong Kong national security police officer (left) and a worker carry boxes of evidence from the offices of Stand News in Hong Kong on Wednesday, after police raided the local media outlet and arrested six staff (AFP)

ployees were terminated.

Steve Li, senior superintendent of the national security police, accused the media outlet of publishing news articles and blog posts between July 2020 and November 2021 that incited hatred towards the Hong Kong government, among other alleged crimes.

"They described Hong Kong protesters as 'being disappeared' and 'violated'... These are malicious allegations without any

factual basis," Li said.

The seven individuals were arrested under a British colonial-era law for 'conspiracy to publish seditious publication'.

More than 200 officers were deployed to search the outlet's newsroom with court authorisation to seize journalistic materials, police said.

Around lunchtime on Wednesday, they could be seen hauling boxes from the office.

Li said they seized about

HK\$500,000 (US\$64,100) in cash. The national security unit froze about HK\$61mn (US\$7.8mn) worth of the outlet's assets, one of the largest sums it has ever frozen, Li said.

'Editorially independent'

Police also arrested former editor-in-chief Chung Pui-kuen, as well as four board members who resigned in June - Hong Kong pop star Denise Ho, barrister

Margaret Ng, Christine Fang and Chow Tat-chi - according to local media. Former Apple Daily editor Chan Pui-man, the wife of Chung, was the seventh person arrested under the law, police confirmed later in the day.

Li would not rule out further arrests, and said some individuals not in Hong Kong had been put on a wanted list.

Announcing its closure, Stand News thanked its readers, saying it was established as a non-profit in December 2014 to 'take a stand in Hong Kong'.

'Stand News was editorially independent, and was dedicated to protecting Hong Kong's core values such as democracy, human rights, freedom, rule of law and justice,' it said.

But Hong Kong's chief secretary John Lee, commenting on the arrests, told reporters those detained were 'evil elements' and 'bad apples abusing the position... of media worker'.

The Committee to Protect Journalists described the raid as 'an open assault on Hong Kong's already tattered press freedom' and called for charges to be dropped.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

World hits record cases in a week; WHO says Omicron risk very high

Paris, France - The world hit a record number of COVID-19 infections in a week, an AFP tally revealed on Wednesday, as the WHO warned that Omicron poses a 'very high' risk and could yet overwhelm healthcare systems.

The highly transmissible variant has seen case records in multiple countries and registered infections were up 37 per cent globally from December 22-28 compared to the previous seven-day period, according to the AFP tally based on national databases. A total of 6.55 mn cases were detected between 22-28 December, the highest figures since the World Health Organisation declared a pandemic in March 2020.

The surge, currently worst in Europe, has forced governments to walk a tightrope between reimposing restrictions designed to stop hospitals becoming overwhelmed and the need to keep economies and societies open two years after the virus first emerged in late 2019.

Studies suggest Omicron, now the dominant strain in some countries, carries a reduced risk of being admitted to hospital, but the World Health Organisation still urged caution. "The overall risk related to the new variant of concern Omicron remains very high," the UN health agency said overnight.

"Consistent evidence shows that the Omicron variant has a growth advantage over the Delta variant with a doubling time of two to three days."

More than 5.4mn people around the world have died from COVID-19, but the number of deaths declined to an average of 6,450 a day in the last week, the AFP tally said, the lowest since late October 2020.

The WHO warned further data was needed to understand Omicron's severity.

Its rapid growth 'will still result in large numbers of hospitalisations, particularly amongst



Self testing kits to detect COVID-19 on display at a Leclerc supermarket, in Saint-Herblain, western France (AFP)

unvaccinated groups, and cause widespread disruption to health systems and other critical services', warned WHO Europe's

Omicron coronavirus variant continues to spread.

Veran told a parliamentary hearing that 208,000 positive

Germany, Europe's biggest economy, has forced sports competitions behind closed doors and also shut nightclubs, limiting private gatherings to 10 vaccinated people - or two households where any unvaccinated people are present.

New Year's Eve cancelled

On Wednesday, Vietnam, an export-reliant economy long seen as a success story in Asia, reported economic growth for 2021 at a 30-year low of just 2.58 per cent, as the pandemic continues to take a toll.

Armed police in Jingxi in southern China, near the border with Vietnam, paraded four alleged violators of COVID rules through the streets, state media reported, a practice that was banned but which has resurfaced in the struggle to enforce a zero-COVID policy.

COVID spikes caused severe travel disruptions over the holidays, with thousands of flights

cancelled worldwide and Finland on Tuesday saying it would bar unvaccinated foreign travellers from entering.

They are also threatening sports events again.

Mexico City's mayor on Tuesday cancelled the capital's massive New Year's Eve celebrations as a preventative measure after a rise in COVID-19 cases. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control has halved the isolation period for asymptomatic cases to try and limit disruptions and mass labour shortages, despite the country battling its own surge fuelled by Omicron.

"I want to get rid of COVID and quarantines," said teacher Robin Myers as New Yorkers marked 'Good Riddance Day' - burning pieces of paper representing their worst memories of 2021.

"So that my kids can be normal again and see their friends and be out and be social."

AFP



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (left) at a vaccination centre in Walton Hall, in Milton Keynes on Wednesday (AFP)

British PM says 90% in ICUs have not had booster jab

London, UK - Around 90 per cent of coronavirus patients in intensive care units have not had a booster jab, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Wednesday, defending his decision not to tighten virus curbs in England.

Speaking at a vaccination centre, Johnson urged people to get 'vital' booster jabs, saying 'the overwhelming majority' of those currently going into intensive care in our hospitals have not had the booster jab.

"I've talked to doctors who say the numbers are running up to 90 per cent of people in intensive care who are not boosted," the Prime Minister added in Milton Keynes in central England.

Those who have not been vaccinated are 'eight times more likely to get into hospital', he warned.

The UK has been hit by a huge surge of the new Omicron variant, with England and Wales reporting record case numbers on Tuesday. The UK has been one of Europe's worst hit with a death toll of 148,021.

So far more than 32.5mn people have had booster jabs in the UK, Johnson said.

He urged the 2.4mn people who had two jabs more than six months ago but no booster to come forward.

Those who have not been vaccinated are eight times more likely to get into hospital

BORIS JOHNSON

While Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have limited social contacts and closed nightclubs ahead of New Year's Eve celebrations, Johnson justified his decision not to do so in England.

The high take-up of boosters in England 'is allowing us to go ahead with New Year in the cautious way that we are', he said.

The government held back on further curbs because 'we can see the data about the relative mildness of Omicron', Johnson said.

He also stressed the 'very, very clear effect of getting those jabs, of boosters in particular', saying 'that's what's making a huge difference'.

Johnson had set a target of offering a booster jab to all adults by the end of the year. "What we need to do now is really finish off that work," he said on Wednesday.

AFP

China admits trouble providing supplies in locked down Xi'an

Beijing, China - Chinese officials admitted on Wednesday they have faced challenges getting enough supplies to residents in locked-down Xi'an, after the city's inhabitants took to social media to complain they didn't have enough food and call for help.

Thirteen million residents in northern Xi'an are in their seventh day of home confinement, and national health officials have called for measures to be strengthened further as China battles its worst virus surge in months.

Beijing has followed a strict 'zero COVID' strategy involving tight border restrictions and targeted lockdowns since the virus first surfaced in a central city in late 2019.

But officials admitted at a press conference Wednesday that 'low staff attendance and difficulties in logistics and distribution' had led to trouble providing essential supplies as the country faces a resurgence in infections.

A day before, many residents asked on social media for help acquiring food and other essentials, with some saying their housing compounds would not let them out even though they were running out of food.



A resident undergoes a nucleic acid test for the virus in Xi'an in China's northern Shaanxi province on Wednesday (AFP)

Xi'an official Chen Jianfeng told reporters that the local government has mobilised enterprises to step up community distribution, with cadres supervising wholesale markets and supermarkets.

"We're trying our best to assist in the problem of staff turnout, and are issuing passes for vehicles that guarantee the supply of necessities," he said.

But some were still struggling with supplies.

"How do we live? What do we eat?" one user wrote on the Twitter-like Weibo platform.

'Days ago, we could go out once to buy groceries but that's been cancelled... all online grocery apps are either sold out or beyond the delivery range,' the user added.

The city stepped up confinement measures on Monday,

with many residents told not to leave their homes except for virus testing - after previously being told they could go out once every three days to buy supplies.

Authorities had previously insisted that supplies remain stable as they maintain strict controls of movement into and out of Xi'an. The city has logged over 960 domestic virus cases since December 9.

Although the surge in China is low in comparison to cases in Europe and the US, Chinese officials imposed 'strictest' possible curbs in Xi'an.

Authorities have also detained at least seven people in the city over attempting to skip quarantine, disrupting order and spreading rumours, local media said.

AFP

Mongolian vaccinators walk to cover herders

Dundgobi, Mongolia - Nurse Sodkhuu Galbadrach clutches a box of COVID-19 vaccines on his lap as he journeys along a bumpy track through a remote region of the Mongolian steppe, going home-to-home to offer booster doses to herders.

The country of three million has taken some of the world's toughest and most enduring measures against the coronavirus pandemic, shutting schools for much of the last two years and closing borders.

Its vaccination programme has seen huge take-up with more than 90 per cent of adults receiving two jabs.

But the booster programme is seeing patchier success among nomadic communities thanks to both online misinformation and the sheer logistical challenge that comes with reaching remote communities in such a vast nation.

Mongolia is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world and about one-third of the population are nomadic.

"During the first wave, people were queuing outside (for vaccines) and I was working until 9.00pm," said Sodkhuu. "There were days I didn't go home. Now, only five to six people come to get the booster shot per day."

He said he calls herders daily to try and arrange the third shot



This file photo shows health workers Enkhjargal Purev (right) and Sodkhuu Galbadrach carrying vaccines for herders in Delgertsogt county, in Dundgobi province of Mongolia on December 13 (AFP)

but often can't get through, especially with poor phone reception in pastureland.

This meant health officials had no choice but to go to the herders, he added.

Mixed results

After finding several ger homes empty, Sodkhuu - accompanied by doctor Enkhjargal Purev - met 37-year-old herder Enkhmaa Purev, who received the booster.

"I was planning on getting my booster shot the next time I visited the soum (town) centre," the herder told AFP, saying she had driven 160km earlier this year with her husband to get their first doses.

Another herder, named Badamkhuu, couldn't get the

jab due to high blood pressure - a common problem among herders due to a high cholesterol diet.

"I had extremely high blood pressure after the second dose [of Sinopharm], so I don't want any more vaccines," said 65-year-old herder Dulamsuren Gombojav, who also declined the jab when offered by Sodkhuu.

According to Mongolia's health ministry, there have been 667,391 COVID-19 cases and nearly 2,000 deaths.

Cases have plummeted since vaccines were rolled out, and Ulaanbaatar is anxious progress is not lost through jab hesitancy.

Only around 45 per cent of adults have had a booster vaccine. "Young people spread ru-

mours or have a perception that COVID is just like flu, and they can recover easily, like the flu," Sodkhuu told AFP on the outreach drive.

"(They) think that they don't need vaccines or boosters."

On the day AFP joined the medical team, they had hoped to administer booster shots to six herder families. Only three accepted.

But Batbayar Ochirbat, the official leading the vaccination programme, said trust is gradually improving in the third jab.

Since September when daily cases peaked at more than 3,000, numbers have rolled down to an average of 200 daily cases, which he says is partly down to boosters.

AFP

'Hamstrung' Europe searches for a new leader

Merkel's departure opens door to her successor Scholz, French President Macron and Italian PM Draghi

Berlin, Germany - Angela Merkel's departure from the political stage after 16 years as chancellor has not only ushered in a new era in Germany but also shaken up the power balance in the EU.

Potential candidates to take over Merkel's mantle as the leader of Europe include her successor at the helm of Europe's biggest economy, Olaf Scholz, as well as France's President Emmanuel Macron and Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi.

But analysts warn that none may be immediately capable of assuming the task, given the European Union's unresolved challenges - ranging from an internal dispute over the rule of law, to marginalisation in global geopolitics, to the aftershocks of Brexit.

Lauded for her steady hand in steering the bloc through crisis after crisis, Merkel left the stage while still immensely popular at home and abroad, although there were some vocal opponents among her European colleagues.

'Angela Merkel is perceived as one of the most significant politicians in a generation, as the de facto leader of the European Union and the 'leader of a free world', wrote Sebastian Reiche of the IESE Business School in Spain.

In a recent survey by the think-tank European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 41 per cent of EU citizens said that if they could, they would vote for Merkel. Comparatively, only 14 per cent picked Macron.

'Sovereign Europe'

Yet critics say Merkel's tactics of sitting out crises and prioritising economic interests, even in dealings with Russia or China, have fuelled inertia and stifled further European integration.

Her exit may well open the door for the other half of the European engine - Macron - to slide into the driver's seat.

The stars appear to be aligning: France holds the EU's presidency from January and Macron has said he aims to forge a Europe that is 'powerful in the world, fully sovereign, free in its choices and in charge of its own destiny'.

And with Germany's new Social Democrat-led coalition



In a recent survey by the think-tank European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 41 per cent of EU citizens said that if they could, they would vote for Merkel (AFP)



L-R: Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi (AFP)

seemingly bent on spending its way out of the pandemic, the age-old German budgetary rigour appears to be wavering.

Likewise on defence, Germany, once comfortably ensconced under the 'US shield', is no longer so sure after Donald Trump's presidency forced the political classes in Berlin to bury their old certainties and begin a mindset shift.

Illustrating the change, Scholz's government of his Social Democrats, ecologist Greens and liberal FDP declared in their

coalition pact that it was their 'task as an economically strong and populous country in the heart of Europe to enable, promote and advance this sovereign Europe'.

Merkel's departure 'can allow France's vision of a powerful Europe to develop, it is an ambition that Macron has championed since his arrival in power', said Alexandre Robinet-Borgomano of the Institut Montaigne.

'Merkelism' is out

As the guard changed in Berlin,

Macron recently signed a new bilateral cooperation treaty with Draghi and this month launched a joint appeal to reform EU fiscal rules to allow greater investment spending. The ambitious 43-year-old president has said he is not seeking to replace the Franco-German bond, but the move comes as the EU is realigning itself after Brexit.

Macron however faces an election in 2022, with the far-right posing a challenge.

No matter the outcome, France could be tied up with do-

mestic politics for a while, limiting its capacity to develop a grand vision for Europe.

Scholz (63), a former finance minister who has served in two of Merkel's cabinets, could seize the chance as Merkel's heir, particularly as he assumes the 2022 G7 presidency.

But analysts warn that times have changed, and more 'Merkelism' might not do for the new era.

'The policy of remaining neutral and avoiding tough solutions to Europe's predicaments does

None may be right away capable of assuming the task given the EU's unresolved challenges - internal dispute over the rule of law, marginalisation in global geopolitics and aftershocks of Brexit

ANALYSTS

left by Angela Merkel as a consensus builder in the European Council', Nicoletta Pirozzi of think-tank Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome told AFP.

"Also, compared to Merkel's cautious approach, he could inject a new dynamism in key sectors of European integration, from the reform of economic governance to foreign policy and defence, in cooperation with France and the new German government." But Pirozzi noted that much will hinge on whether the Italian leader (74) does manage to successfully implement the EU's economic recovery plan.

Italy's presidential election in January 'could radically change the picture' as Draghi is also touted as 'one of the most credible potential candidates' in that race. Until a new leader emerges, some analysts see a sombre future for the bloc.

"Europe might be heading towards a period of uncertainty and potential weakness," warned Reiche.

Likewise, Thompson was pessimistic.

'Hamstrung by the rivalry between America and China, and deeply divided internally, the European Union inhabits a world different from that of the years of Ms Merkel's ascendancy,' she wrote.

'The reality, starkly stated, is that neither the (new) German chancellor nor the French government can lead Europe.

'And in the absence of leadership, Europe is headed for one thing - stasis.'

AFP

Barcelona's 'bicibus' lets kids ride to class, triggers global interest

Barcelona, Spain - In a chic Barcelona neighbourhood, a convoy of kid cyclists glides down a car-free street as part of the city's 'bicibus' scheme to encourage green transport and physical exercise.

The children take to the streets every Friday in the city's Eixample neighbourhood, picking up other kids along the circuit and dropping them off at their schools, as a traditional bus route would work.

The roads are closed to traffic to make sure the young riders are safe, and parents often join in, sometimes carrying younger children in bike seats.

The programme, which was rolled out in September, has been so popular that other neighbourhoods are hoping to replicate it - and interest has been piqued internationally as well.

"In several months, there will be other routes in other neighbourhoods," said Genis Dominguez (40), whose children go to school in Eixample, home to wide avenues and stylish shops.

Barcelona already boasts a



The children take to the streets every Friday in Barcelona's Eixample neighbourhood

network of bicycle lanes, but they are not necessarily safe for kids, Dominguez said.

"They are very close to the streets where cars go too fast and motorcycles get too close," he told AFP.

Municipal police are available to escort the children, with officers on bicycles or motorcycles travelling in the front, back or next to the group.

Barcelona's city hall said the

goal of the scheme is to 'promote a change toward a more sustainable and active mobility'.

Around 140 children use the two 'bicibus' routes that currently operate in Eixample, but parents from 35 schools across Barcelona took part in a recent meeting to learn how to set them up in their neighbourhoods, said Dominguez.

Similar projects already exist in other cities such as Dublin, but

a viral video of Barcelona's 'bicibus' has sparked interest in the scheme around the world, including from Buenos Aires and San Francisco.

So far, the scheme is proven popular among the pint-sized participants.

"Parents tell us that Friday is the day when they have the least difficulty to wake up their children," said Dominguez.

AFP

Street photography pioneer Sabine Weiss dies aged 97

Paris, France - Swiss-French photographer Sabine Weiss, who chronicled social change with a unique gaze for nearly eight decades, has died aged 97 in her Paris home, her family said Wednesday.

Weiss was the last of the French humanist photography school of post-World War II that reimagined the evocative powers of images, which included Robert Doisneau, Willy Ronis and Brassai.

A pioneer of what later became known as street photography, Weiss captured the condition of ordinary people in the French capital, often outdoors, in a body of work that has been shown in major retrospectives around the world.

She was also in high demand as a portrait photographer of artists, including composers Benjamin Britten and Igor Stravinsky, cellist Pablo Casals and French painter Fernand Leger.

"From the start I had to make a living from photography, it wasn't something artistic," Weiss told AFP in an interview in 2014, adding that she started taking pictures in 1942. "It was a



This file photo shows Swiss-French photographer Sabine Weiss in front of her photographs, in Vannes on July 16 last year (AFP)

craft, I was a craftswoman of the photography," she said.

Weiss was born in Switzerland and moved to Paris in 1946, and she later became a French citizen.

'A good picture must move you'

Her work has featured in 160 exhibits and is shown in permanent collections of several leading museums, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Weiss said that she had

wanted to immortalise 'the snotty-nosed kids', 'the beggars' and 'the little piss-takers' in her photos.

"A good pictures must move you, have a good composition and be sober," she told French daily La Croix. "People's sensitivity must jump out at you."

She told the France Inter broadcaster: "The people who know me are the ones who like my view of things. I have empathy." In the 1950s, Weiss, explored the streets of Paris, often at night, looking to capture furtive moments on film.

AFP

Fairytales MUSEUM

Denmark revamps museum that honours famous writer **Hans Christian Andersen**, whose works have inspired countless Disney films, ballets, songs and books



Born in 1805 and losing his father aged 11, Andersen left Odense three years later and headed for the capital, Copenhagen, where he dreamt of becoming an actor.

By the time of his death in 1875, Andersen had produced 158 fairytales and 800 poems, enjoying success in later life thanks to the popularity of tales including *The Emperor's New Clothes* and *Thumbelina*.

Artefacts still have their place in the new exhibition, including the writer's inkwell and a champagne glass given to him by Jenny Lind, a Swedish singer who turned down his marriage proposal.

"The rooms, together with the architecture, the sound and music - it's a whole experience," said Danish teacher Jonna Vind, who was there with a group of her students.

"It binds together all the senses."

'A larger universe'

The new museum designed by Japanese architect Kengo Kuma - the man behind Tokyo's new Olympic stadium - opened in the summer but work was only completed in early December.

From above, its circular structures and winding outdoor gardens resemble four green buttons supported on wooden stilts.

With two-thirds of the exhibition space below ground, the architect was inspired by *The Tinderbox*, Andersen's story in which a hollow tree is a gateway to an underground world.

"The idea behind the architectural design is similar to Andersen's method, where a small world suddenly transforms into a larger universe," Kuma said.

The museum's metamorphosis began in the early 2010s after Odense authorities drew up a plan to keep cars out of the centre of the city of 205,000 inhabitants.

Work began in 2014 after the closure of a major road that left the space available for the new complex.

The old museum, which stood since 1930 in the house where Andersen was born, closed at the end of 2017.

Since the reopening, 40,000 people have passed through its doors. But the new COVID-19 safety measures introduced in December meant it had to close once again, and the numbers had in any case been hit badly by the drop-off in foreign tourists.

The previous Hans Christian Andersen museum pulled in 100,000 visitors a year, the vast majority of them from abroad including 20,000 from China, where Andersen is very popular.

AFF



The museum takes you to a complete other world. How fantastic it is to be taken away from your daily struggles

Ara Halici

Denmark is honouring its most famous writer, Hans Christian Andersen, with a revamped museum that aims to immerse visitors in the fantasy worlds he created.

Visitors have expressed delight with the new museum, which reopened in the summer and saw renovation work completed this month before it was shut as part of Denmark's efforts to fight a COVID-19 resurgence.

From *The Little Mermaid* to *The Snow Queen*, Andersen's works - which the author called his 'children' - have inspired countless Disney films, ballets, songs and books.

The old Hans Christian Andersen museum in the writer's hometown of Odense in central Denmark was a 'traditional biographical museum' filled with 'a lot of artefacts and text', said Lone Weidemann, marketing coordinator for Odense museums.

But visitors 'were looking for his fairytales, because that's what they know'.

In a magical transformation that any fairy godmother would be proud of, city authorities have overseen a seven-year renovation of the museum into a sprawling complex above and below the cobbled streets of Odense's old town.

After entering the redesigned museum, visitors move through the modest cottage where Andersen spent his childhood in the early 1800s, before being swept into a vast underground space devoted to his stories - filled with animations, interactive exhibits and music.

The museum 'takes you to a complete other world', said Ara Halici, a tourist from the Netherlands who made the trip to Odense especially for the museum.

"How fantastic it is to be taken away from your daily struggles in life," he said.

Having arrived just days before Denmark shut down cultural venues to fight a resurgent coronavirus pandemic, his story at least had a happy ending.

'Binds the senses'

Andersen's life story is woven through the exhibits, which chart his humble beginnings as the child of an illiterate washerwoman and an impoverished shoemaker.



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Dean Elgar reacts after being hit against the body by a ball during the fourth day of the first Test against India at SuperSport Park, in Centurion on Wednesday (AFP)

Despite Elgar's resistance match tilts India's way

South Africa are under the pump on a pitch offering plenty of help

Centurion, South Africa - India's irresistible seam attack worked their way around a stubborn Dean Elgar and left the visitors six wickets away from victory at SuperSport Park. In pursuit of 305, South Africa were 94 for 4 at close on a track that was still offering sideways movement.

More than that, it was the uneven bounce that proved an ever-present threat to the batsmen. Jasprit Bumrah got balls to kick up from a length, Mohammed Shami from a short of a length and Mohammed Siraj from various lengths. Late in the

day, a length ball from Shardul Thakur rolled through at shin-height, but Elgar stooped low enough to keep it out.

Rassie van der Dussen was fairly organised in defence until the final exchanges when he shouldered arms to an inducker from Bumrah that clanked the top of off. Bumrah then yorked Keshav Maharaj, the night-watchman, off what turned out to be the last ball of the day. Elgar, meanwhile, was unbeaten on 52 at stumps.

When the seamers erred too full or too straight, a switched-on Elgar put them away confidently with checked drives and flicks. One such flick, off Siraj, got him past fifty.

Shami, who excelled with a five-wicket bag on day three, got the new ball along with Bumrah, ahead of Siraj. He made it count immediately with a delightful set-up. His first ball to Aiden

SCOREBOARD	
India 1 st Innings 327	South Africa 1 st Innings 197
INDIA 2nd INNINGS	
KL Rahul	c Elgar b Ngidi 23
M Agarwal	c de Kock b Jansen 4
S Thakur	c Mulder b Rabada 10
C Pujara	c de Kock b Ngidi 16
V Kohli	c de Kock b Jansen 18
A Rahane	c van der Dussen b Jansen 34
R Pant	c Ngidi b Rabada 14
R Ashwin	c Petersen b Rabada 1
M Shami	c Mulder b Rabada 1
J Bumrah	not out 7
M Siraj	b Jansen 0
Extras:	(b 17, lb 4, nb 6) 27
TOTAL:	174 all out in 50.3 overs
Fall of wickets: 1-12, 2-34, 3-54, 4-79, 5-109, 6-111, 7-146, 8-166, 9-169, 10-174	
Bowling: J Bumrah 11.5-2-22-2, M Shami 9-2-29-1, M Siraj 11-4-25-1, S Thakur 5-0-11-0, R Ashwin 4-1-6-0	
SOUTH AFRICA 2nd INNINGS	
A Markram	b M Shami 1
D Elgar	not out 52
K Petersen	c Pant b M Siraj 17
R van der Dussen	b Bumrah 11
K Maharaj	b Bumrah 8
Extras:	(lb 1, nb 4) 5
TOTAL:	94 for four in 40.5 overs
Fall of wickets: 1-1, 2-34, 3-74, 4-94	
Bowling: J Bumrah 11.5-2-22-2, M Shami 9-2-29-1, M Siraj 11-4-25-1, S Thakur 5-0-11-0, R Ashwin 4-1-6-0	

Markram was full enough for the drive and snagged the outside edge, but it didn't carry to Rishabh Pant. The second was shorter and seamed away to graze the outside edge once again, but this didn't carry either, falling short of gully.

Having scrambled Markram's judgement with the first two balls, he made the incision with the third that veered in and had the opener chopping on for 1.

Keegan Petersen clipped Shami through midwicket and caressed him down the ground for fours, but Siraj came on and bested him with a set-up of his own. After pinning Petersen just above the knee-roll with an inswinger - it was bouncing over the stumps - Siraj found the outside edge with an outswinger.

Elgar then got together with van der Dussen and briefly repelled India's attack with a 40-run partnership for the third

wicket. Bumrah, however, seized the day with his terrific double-strike.

Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen had thrived earlier in the day, sharing eight wickets between them to bowl India out for 174 from an overnight 16 for 1. It was Pant, who top-scored for India, with a run-a-ball 34, swelling the lead beyond 300.

In a rollicking passage of play, Pant played some great shots to reach 34. But when he walked at Rabada and aimed another pull, the quick benefited from a bit of extra bounce and had him flapping a catch to mid-on.

India's lower order and then South Africa's top order spiralled out of control during extended sessions.

There's forecast for some rain on the final day, but, despite that threat, India will fancy their chances of going 1-0 up.
Cricinfo



Warner eyes one more crack at England in 2023

Melbourne, Australia - David Warner has hinted he is keen for one last Ashes tour in 2023 to make amends for his failed campaign in England two years ago, drawing inspiration from veteran seamer Jimmy Anderson.

The explosive Australian opener would be approaching 37 should he retain his place that long and in all likelihood would have joined the 100-Test club. He currently has 89 caps.

Winning in India is also on his bucket list before pulling

up stumps on a Test career that has so far yielded 7,551 runs at 48.40.

"Winning the Ashes here was obviously a big one," Warner said after Australia crushed England in the third Test in Melbourne to retain the Ashes.

"We still haven't beaten India in India, that would be nice to do. And England away - we had a drawn series (in 2019) but hopefully if I manage to get that opportunity, I might think about going back."
AFP



Boland fighting for Test future despite dream debut

Melbourne, Australia - Scott Boland wrote his name into Australian Ashes folklore with his magical 6-7 against England in Melbourne, but his fairytale debut could incredibly be his last Test.

The 32-year-old was called up as cover with Jhye Richardson, Michael Neser and Josh Hazlewood either rested or not fit for the third Test.

Boland become just the second Indigenous man - after Jason Gillespie - to play Test cricket for Australia.

Yet despite equalling the record for the fastest five-wicket haul in Test history, Boland could well be overlooked for the fourth Test in Sydney starting on January 5.

"That could conceivably be the last Test that he plays," former skipper Ricky Ponting said. "It's staggering to think. He's almost 33, he's just taken six for seven. Hoff (Hazlewood) has got to come back, Jhye's probably ahead of him in the pecking order as well."
AFP

Woakes backs Root to stay on as England captain

'He's got a great cricket brain and I think his record as England captain is actually pretty good'

Joe Root declined to answer questions about his own future as England's captain after their innings defeat at the MCG but has been backed to stay on in the role after the Ashes by Chris Woakes despite losing the series.

Root will become England's most experienced Test captain during the fourth Test in Sydney, going clear of Alastair Cook by

leading them for the 60th time, but despite his own record-breaking year with the bat, his side has lost nine of their last 12 Tests and have been thrashed in six consecutive games overseas.

His captaincy has come in for heavy criticism throughout the Ashes series, starting at the toss in Brisbane when England left out James Anderson and Stuart



England's captain Joe Root (AFP)

Broad and opted to bat first on an underprepared, green pitch. When asked about his future as captain following the defeat in Melbourne, Root said that it would be 'wrong to look past' the final two Tests of the series: "My energy has to be all about trying to win the next game," he said.

"I can't be selfish and start thinking about myself."

The Guardian and The Telegraph reported that Root had met Tom Harrison, the ECB's chief executive, in Melbourne on Wednesday and signalled his desire to stay on as captain past the

end of the series. And with a dearth of obvious candidates to replace him - Ben Stokes is his deputy but has endured a tough 18 months due to bereavement, injury and struggles with his mental health - and the support of the dressing room, Root looks likely to continue in the role.

"Absolutely," Woakes, one of the England players, told reporters in Melbourne when asked if Root retained the team's backing. "Joe is a great cricketer, he's got a great cricket brain and I think his record as England captain is actually pretty good."

"Definitely it feels like Joe will continue. Hopefully he will. It's clear that the captaincy isn't having an effect on his batting, which a lot of the time with captains can be the case. The fact that he's scoring the runs he is, is great for the team. It would be great if we could help him out with that and score a few more runs around him. Joe is a world-class player who has obviously had a fantastic year. When a guy bats as well as he has you would expect us to put in a lot stronger performances than we have."
Cricinfo

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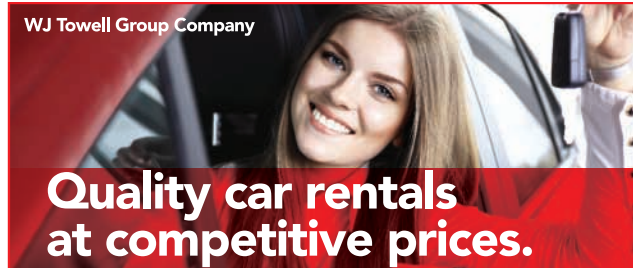
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Three more Barca players test positive for COVID-19



Forward Ousmane Dembele



Midfielder Gavi



Defender Samuel Umtiti

Barcelona, Spain - Barcelona forward Ousmane Dembele, defender Samuel Umtiti and midfielder Gavi have tested positive for COVID-19, the Spanish club said on Wednesday, bringing to six the number of infected first team players.

'The players are in good health and self-isolating at home. The Club has reported the cases to the relevant authorities,' it said in a statement.

The three players join left-back Jordi Alba, centre-back Clement Lenglet and defender Dani Alves, who also tested positive this week.

Barcelona, currently seventh in La Liga, travel to Real Mallorca (15th) on Sunday.

Several Spanish clubs have reported Covid cases, such as Real Sociedad on Monday or Real Madrid in mid-December, but no match has yet been postponed.

According to La Liga and Spanish Football Federation

rules, a match is suspended when a team does not have at least 13 players, of which five must be from the first team.

This puts Sunday's match between Atletico Madrid and Rayo Vallecano at risk because the latter team has up to 17 infected players, according to press reports, making it the hardest-hit squad in the first division.

Arsenal's Arteta tests positive for 2nd time

Reports from London also say that Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta has tested positive for COVID-19 for a second time and that he will miss the Premier League clash with leaders Manchester City on Saturday.

The 39-year-old Spaniard's first positive test was in March 2020 which prompted

English football to shut down as the pandemic took hold, AFP reported from London.

He is the latest Premier League manager to test positive in the last few weeks following Aston Villa's Steven Gerrard and Patrick Vieira of Crystal Palace. A club statement read: 'Mikel Arteta will miss our match against Manchester City on New Year's Day after testing positive for COVID-19. Mikel is isolating'.

AFP



Mikel Arteta

Djokovic withdraws from ATP Cup, deepening Australian Open doubts

Sydney, Australia - Novak Djokovic has pulled out of this week's ATP Cup in Sydney, organisers said on Wednesday, heightening doubts over whether he will defend his Australian Open title.

There has been intense speculation as to whether he will travel to Australia, having refused to confirm if he has been inoculated against the coronavirus.

'World No.1 Novak Djokovic has withdrawn from the 2022 ATP Cup,' organisers said in a statement ahead of Saturday's start to the team tournament.

'Team Serbia will now be led by world No.33 Dusan Lajovic.'

Djokovic, the nine-time Australian Open champion, could win a record 21st Grand Slam title if he plays at Melbourne Park next month, but to enter Australia he and members of his entourage have to be vaccinated.

He has previously expressed his opposition to the vaccine and his father Srđjan said in late November that Djokovic would probably not play the first Grand Slam of the year, accusing the organisers of 'blackmail'.

Djokovic has been named in the entry list for the Australian Open, which starts on January 17, but he could yet withdraw. He was also originally on the entry list for the ATP Cup.

Tennis Australia has organised charter flights to bring international stars into Melbourne and Sydney.

Defending women's Aus-



Novak Djokovic

Roger Federer pulled out as he recovers from a knee injury and Rafael Nadal's plans are unclear

tralian Open champion Naomi Osaka was among those to touch down on Tuesday, but Djokovic was not on board. Players can also opt to fly commercial.

The ATP Cup has been hit by several withdrawals - either because of COVID-19 or injury - and as a result France will replace Austria in Group B after Dominic Thiem and Dennis Novak pulled out, organisers said on Wednesday.

Team Russia's Andrey Rublev, who has COVID-19, Aslan Karatsev and Evgeny Donskovy have also withdrawn, the ATP Cup said, as has the USA's Austin Krajicek.

COVID-19 looks set to cast a dark shadow over the Australian Open and the raft of tournaments in the country beforehand.

Spanish superstar Rafael Nadal, who was due to play a warm-up event in Melbourne next week, was among several players to have contracted the virus at an Abu Dhabi exhibition tournament this month.

His Abu Dhabi opponent, Wimbledon semi-finalist Denis Shapovalov, also later tested positive.

Three female players at the same event also tested positive -

- Olympic gold medalist Belinda Bencic, US Open champion Emma Raducanu and Wimbledon quarter-finalist Ons Jabeur.

Earlier on Wednesday, Nick Kyrgios urged Nadal and Djokovic to play at the Australian Open, saying it would be a 'disaster' if the 'Big Three' were missing. Swiss ace Roger Federer has already pulled out as he recovers from a knee injury and Nadal's plans are unclear.

The dominant 'Big Three' have won 20 Grand Slam titles each and Kyrgios said tennis still needs them, starting in Melbourne next month.

"I honestly don't know Novak's current situation with anything COVID-related or what he needs to play," Kyrgios said. AFP

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Chelsea legend Terry returns to club in consultancy role

London, UK - Former Chelsea captain John Terry is returning to the club where he won 17 trophies including five Premier League titles and the Champions League in a coaching consultancy role at their Academy.

"I'm delighted to announce that I'm coming home, and have taken up a consultancy role at ChelseaFC academy," the 41-year-old former defender said on social media.

"As well as delivering on field coaching sessions I will be involved in coaching discussions and mentoring our academy players."

The former England skipper, who has been out of a job since leaving his role as assistant coach at Aston Villa in July, will focus on Chelsea's youth development programme.

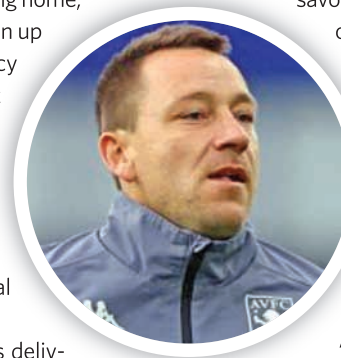
"The Blues legend will work with our young players and

coaching staff in our youth development programme, sharing the vast experience gained from his 20-year playing career and recent spell as assistant coach at Aston Villa," the club said in a statement on its website.

Despite being involved in unsavoury incidents on and off the pitch during his playing days Chelsea's head of youth development Neil Bath said Terry would be a 'great mentor' for the youngsters.

"It goes without saying that John's experience in the game, both as a world-class player and more recently as an assistant coach in the Premier League, will be invaluable for everyone in the building," said Bath.

"He will be a great mentor for our players and a fantastic asset to our coaching staff. We can't wait for him to get started." AFP



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