



TUESDAY, 14 DECEMBER 2021

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OMANI FINDS SECURITY GLITCH IN APPLE IOS
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NEWS BRIEFS

RNO PERSONNEL DIES IN JOINT NAVAL EXERCISE WITH PAKISTAN

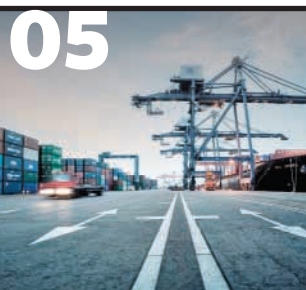
Muscat - The Moral Guidance Department of the Ministry of Defence has announced that a member of Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) died while performing duty during a joint naval exercise with Pakistan Navy.

In a statement, RNO said that Petty Officer First Class Ali bin Abdul Rahman al Balushi died while performing his patriotic duty on board an RNO ship, which is currently participating with Pakistan Navy in a joint naval exercise.

It added that another member, Deputy Marine Corporal Sultan bin Salem al Sulaitni, was injured during the exercise and was subsequently transferred to a military hospital in Karachi to receive medical care and the necessary specialised treatment.



Oman will invest RO2.9bn in projects in 2022



Sohar Port reports strong growth in cargo volumes

Expat recruitment fee hike hurting private sector

Shaddad al Musalmi
Muscat

With Oman's economy recovering with the initial indicators of economic performance being very reassuring, the private sector is expected to be at the forefront of the recovery. However, the expat recruitment fee hike is hurting some sectors.

According to Said al Rashdi, CEO of Oman Manufactures Association, the fee hike was "supposed to change how we look at Omanisation".

"Such a move was to replace the earlier system with a smarter way to deal with the matter where companies have the right to hire an expat or an Omani. With the cost for expat hiring, the balance is slightly tipped towards hiring a local," he said.

"But the new fees came with no change in other regulations. So it became just another fee that businesses have to deal with. What we need is flexibility. If the government charges such a large fee, they need to allow businesses to hire whomever they feel adequate," Rashdi added in



The way the authorities have implemented it now will have a negative impact on the economy and the common people

TAWFIQ ALLAWATI

reference to the Omanisation targets set for professions.

The new fee of up to RO2,001 per work permit, from RO300 previously, applies to trades featured in a 'Professions List' included in a Ministerial Decree.

The work visa for expatriates

earning a monthly salary of RO4,000 and more, regardless of the profession, is RO2,001.

The revised fee for mid-level positions (monthly salary ranging from RO2,500 to RO3,999, regardless of the profession) is RO 1,001 per work permit.

For other categories, the revised fees are as follows: Specialised and technical professions - RO601; artisanal fisherman - RO361; other professions - RO301; domestic workers - RO141 for 1-3 workers and RO241 for 4 and more; farm workers and camel breeders - RO201 for 1-3 and RO301 for 4 and more.

Recently, H E Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Ba'owain, Minister of Labour, indicated that while raising fees is one of the ways of liberalising the market, employers have the option of hiring Omanis or expatriates. The number of

workers affected by raising recruitment fees is about 200,000 out of 1.4mn in the labour market.

He stressed that the raised fees are not for all expatriates workers but specific professions with high salaries, and whoever can pay high salaries can also pay the high fees that are used to train and employ Omanis.

Tawfiq al Lawati, a former Majlis A'Shura member and businessman, said, "When I was in the Shura, I pushed for raising expatriate fees but not in this way. I feel the way the authorities have implemented it now will have a negative impact on the economy and the common people because prices of services and goods will go up eventually when the cost of work visas go up. The people will feel the pinch."

Lawati believes the fee increase should have been based on the worker's salary and size of the establishment they work for. "It is wrong to have the same set of rules for big companies and SMEs. By doing so, businesses are affected in a big way," he said, adding that the move will not help Omanisation.



Sayyid Fahd to head Oman's delegation at GCC Summit

Muscat - On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, will leave on Tuesday for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to lead the Sultanate of Oman's delegation in the 42nd Summit of the GCC leaders.

The summit is scheduled to be held on Tuesday. Oman has affirmed that it will continue to support the GCC march and enhance all endeavours to serve Arab and Islamic issues. It also vowed to consolidate ties of co-operation and understanding with friendly countries.

Sayyid Fahd will be accompanied by an official delegation comprising a number of ministers and government officials. ONA

First 2 cases of Omicron reported in travellers

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) announced the registration of the first two cases of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 in two citizens who had returned from travel abroad.

The ministry stated that they are in stable condition and being subjected to further epidemiological investigations.

Meanwhile, a nationwide im-

munisation campaign for all those older than 18 years and have completed six months since the second dose commenced on Monday, according to MoH.

In a statement, MoH called on all eligible in this criterion to take the booster dose for the safety of all.

On Monday, MoH announced ten new cases of COVID-19, taking the total number to 304,724 in the sultanate. There were no new related deaths.

Consumer can choose to pay in cash or electronically

Mandatory cashless payment option to be provided by businesses from Jan 1, 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has mandated businesses to provide electronic payment services beginning 2022. Consumers will have the choice to paying in cash or electronically.

In July, the ministry called on commercial establishments, including restaurants, cafes and gold shops, to provide electronic payment options to consumers by January 1, 2022.

A statement issued by MoCIIP said, 'All commercial establishments will have to mandatorily provide electronic payment (cashless) facilities to consumers, as part of the efforts to achieve digital transformation under Oman Vision 2040.'

On Monday, the ministry confirmed that consumers will have



the option of paying in cash or electronically.

According to MoCIIP, the directive for electronic payment covers all activities in industrial areas and complexes, commercial centres, gift markets, food sales, gold and silver shops, restaurants and cafes, fruit and vegetable vendors, building materials, tobacco as well as transactions involving electronic items in the first phase of its implementation programme.

'Central Bank of Oman, in coordination with banks and service providers, will provide point-of-sale devices to merchants without installation fees or monthly or annual fees to private sector in-

stitutions. Only fees for merchant transactions specified by CBO will be applicable,' MoCIIP stated.

The fees must not exceed 1.5 per cent of the transaction amount or a maximum of RO10 for any payment via debit cards or exceed 0.75 per cent for mobile payments via QR code. Consumer Protection Authority, in coordination with banks, will receive complaints related to electronic payments through the authority's communication channels.

MoCIIP urged all businesses and companies to commit to providing electronic payment options in their shops and outlets before the end of 2021 for application starting January 1, 2022.

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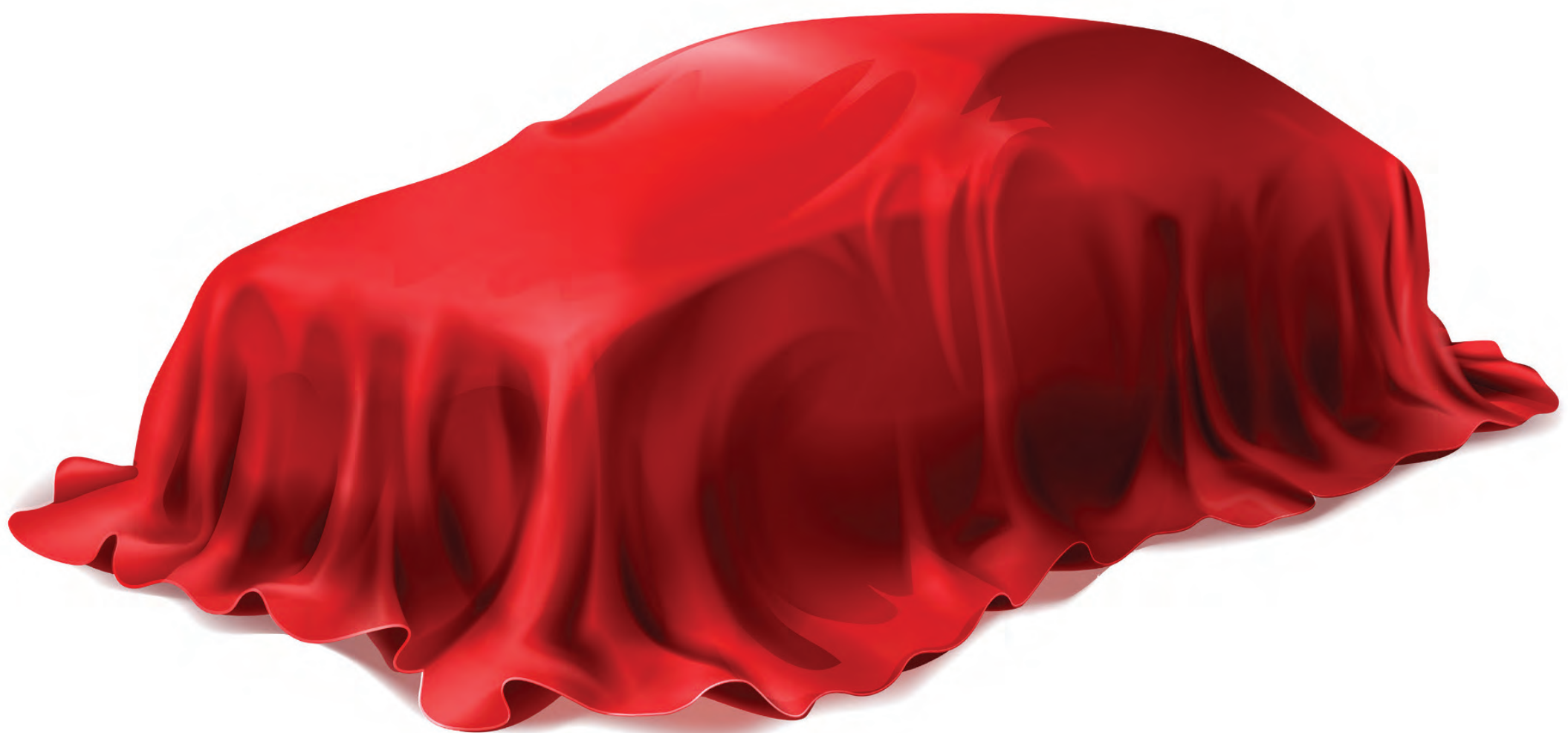
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Oman will invest RO2.9bn in projects in 2022: OIA chairman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Abdussalam Mohammed al Murshidi, chairman of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), said on Sunday that more than 110 investment projects are being implemented in 2021 and 2022 and the volume of actual investments in 2021 stood at RO2.6bn.

In 2022, the volume of spending will be RO2.9bn through the expansion of current projects and setting up new ones. "In 2022, the volume of investments in the tourism sector is expected to be RO193mn, RO57mn in the mining sector, RO116mn in the logistics sector, and RO156mn in communications and information technology," H E Murshidi said.

"This is in addition to RO99mn in the food sector,



(Supplied photo)

RO54mn in fisheries, RO1.41bn in the energy sector, RO803mn in the general services sector and RO52mn in other sectors," he added.

He informed that state-owned companies will operate themselves to cover their expenses without the help of the Ministry of Finance.

In 2022, investments in the tourism sector is expected to be RO193mn, RO57mn in the mining sector, RO116mn in the logistics sector, and RO156mn in communications and information technology

H E ABDUSSALAM
AL MURSHIDI

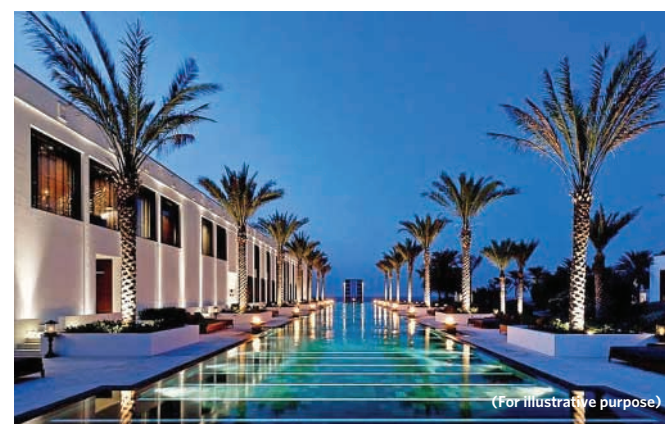
"Companies owned by OIA are working on several sustainable projects and will cover their own expenses," he said.

Meanwhile, H E Dr Said Mo-

ammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, said that his ministry is working in cooperation with other government departments to provide initiatives to boost the economy. "The Economic Stimulus Programme is still valid and we are working to upgrade it," he said.

H E Dr Nassir al Maawali, Undersecretary in the Ministry of Economy, has informed that the target average growth of the national economy from 2021 to 2040 is five per cent, while affirming that the national economy will recover at the right pace.

Citing the International Monetary Fund, H E Maawali said the expected rate of growth of Oman's economy this year is 2.5 per cent, the second best in the GCC region.



(For illustrative purpose)

Hotel guests increased 37.9% till October: NCSI

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The total number of hotel guests in three, four and five-star hotels increased by 37.9 per cent to 941,418 till the end of October 2021 compared to 682,728 in the same period in 2020, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The centre's statistics show that occupancy rate rose by 36.3 per cent compared to 26.7 per cent for the same period in 2020.

The total revenue of hotels fell by 3.5 per cent to RO69,529,000 till the end of October 2021, compared to RO72,066,000 in the same period in 2020.

Among nationalities, Omani citizens accounted for the highest number of guests surging by 93.5 per cent to 680,238, fol-

lowed by Asians (109,764), Europeans (44,628), Arabs (excluding GCC countries - 37,259) and GCC guests (20,751).

The number of Americans totalled 15,246, followed by guests from Oceania (5,548), Africa (3,376) and 24,609 guests of other nationalities.

NCSI statistics also show that domestic guests - citizens and residents - helped the sultanate's hotels stay afloat despite restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the first quarter of 2021, the number of Omani guests in three, four and five-star hotels jumped by 85 per cent to 208,404 guests compared to 112,609 in the first quarter of last year.

When restrictions were eased in September 2020, many hotels announced promotional packages and staycation offers.

Oman, Iran military committee meets

Tehran, Iran - Deliberations of the annual meeting of the Omani-Iranian Military Friendship Committee began in Tehran on Monday.

The five-day meeting is being chaired by Brigadier Abdulaziz Abdullah al Manthari, Assistant Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces for Operations and Planning, and Second Brigadier Mohammad Ahadi, Iranian Deputy Defence Minister for International Affairs.

The Royal Navy of Oman and the Naval Forces of Iran will conduct an annual joint naval drill at the end of the meet.

RAFO MARKS ARMED FORCES DAY



The Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) celebrated Armed Forces Day under the patronage of H E Dr Said Mohammed Ahmad al Saqri, Minister of Economy, at Seeb Air Base, on Monday (Supplied photo)

Archaeological excavation begins at Qamira

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Excavation works at archaeological sites in Oman have recommenced after a break that resulted from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT), several international archaeological teams are currently surveying and excavating at various sites in the sultanate.

Mohammed al Kalbani, head of the survey department in MHT, said the ministry, in cooperation with an archaeological team from University of Warsaw, Poland, has started the sixth season of survey at the dig



(Supplied photo)

site of Qamira in Dhank, which dates back to the 3rd and 1st millennium BC.

Kalbani reviewed the progress of work at the site and discussed

aspects of developing and preserving archaeological sites in the sultanate with the head of University of Warsaw's team.

Qamira is one of the most im-

portant Bronze Age sites associated with copper trade in the Majan Civilisation. The site includes tall towers, a settlement and workshops for smelting cop-

per ore from the 3rd millennium BC, in addition to a fortress and a temple dating back to the 1st millennium BC.

In 2018, three settlements from the Neolithic Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age were unearthed at the site.

One area at the site - marked Qamira 1 - is a cemetery dating back to the 3rd millennium BC. Qamira 2 is a settlement dating back to the Neolithic period, while Qamira 3 is a settlement dating back from between the Bronze Age to the Iron Age.

Surveys and tests of samples collected from other areas at the site - Qamira 20 and 21 - indicate they date back to the Second Iron Age.

Three arrested for cutting wild trees

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Cutting wild trees is a violation of the Environmental Protection and Pollution Control Law for which perpetrators can be fined and imprisoned, according to the Environment Authority (EA).

In the wake of reports of such violations in recent times, the authority has called for preservation of indigenous species of trees.

EA specialists have arrested three people in two separate incidents, according

to an official of the authority.

"In the first incident, on December 9, the Environment Department in South Sharqiyah arrested a citizen who violated the environmental protection law by cutting down wild trees without obtaining permission. A violation report was issued against him and the chopped wood confiscated," the EA official informed.

The second incident, on Sunday, involved two offenders cutting down wild trees without obtaining permission who were arrested in Dhofar.



(Supplied photo)

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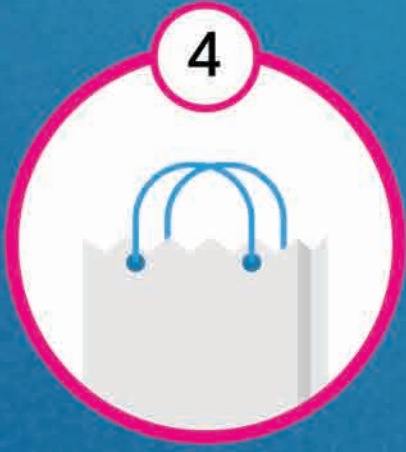
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Private firm to operate Muttrah Fort

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) has signed an agreement with Qalat Muttrah Company to operate Muttrah Fort and the Grand House in the wilayat of Muttrah.

The agreement was signed by H E Ibrahim bin Saeed bin Khalaf al Kharousi, Undersecretary for Heritage in the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, and Hilal bin Hamad al Busaidi from Qalat Muttrah Company.

The agreement comes in line with the ministry's plan to revitalise the tourism sector and increase national income as it is within its remit to find suitable investors for the various architectural and cultural heritage buildings in Oman.



In November, the ministry announced that it was planning to offer Rustaq Fort in South Batinah to investors after its ongoing restoration work is

complete.

The ministry announced that almost 40 per cent of the work is complete. This initiative is part of the ministry's efforts to preserve

historical monuments and attract tourists, a statement said.

Amjad bin Ahmed al Mukhaldi, director of Department of Restoration and

The ministry will offer Rustaq Fort for investment after the completion of its restoration. Such historical assets of great cultural and heritage value will attract local and foreign investors

AMJAD AL MUKHALDI

Maintenance in MHT, said, "The restoration of the fort will continue for two-and-a-half years due to its large area. The work includes restoration of structural

parts which were damaged by natural elements.

"The ministry will offer Rustaq Fort for investment after the completion of its restoration. Such historical assets of great cultural and heritage value will attract local and foreign investors and help make tourism a vital sector."

He informed that the ministry is exerting great efforts to restore archaeological and historical monuments - such as castles, forts and old houses - spread across all governorates.

The ministry is also implementing a comprehensive restoration project for Nakhl Fort in South Batinah.

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



Omani finds security glitch in Apple iOS

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Researcher Saif bin Hamad bin Hamdan al Hinai, a senior specialist in Oman National CERT, found a security vulnerability in Apple's iOS system, according to the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

In a statement, the ministry said, 'Researcher Saif bin Hamad al Hinai managed to discover a security vulnerability in the Apple iOS system.'

'The ministry informed the company about the details of this vulnerability, and as a result, the company took several measures, including fixing the problem in the latest version of the iOS 15 operating system.'

Apple documented this discovery on its website on October 25, it stated.

The first version of iOS was released in June 2007, when the iPhone debuted on the market. iOS, an acronym for iPhone Operating System, is a unix-derived operating system powering all of Apple's mobile devices.

Applications open for Block Funding Programme

Muscat - The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation has announced the opening of applications for research proposals for Block Funding Programme 2022 through the electronic system (RIMS) in the Oman Research Portal.

The Block Funding Programme consists of three sub-programmes: Research Grants (RG), which is concerned with supporting research of PhD holders or its equivalent (senior specialist or higher for medical doctors), Graduate Research Grants (GRG), which is concerned with supporting research of Master's or Bachelor's degree holders with at least three years of experience, or postgraduate students or OMSB residents (only applicable

if the principal investigator is an Omani nationality for this particular programme) and Undergraduate Research Grants (URG), which is concerned with supporting research of full-time or part-time undergraduate students

The Block Funding Programme consists of three sub-programmes: Research Grants, Graduate Research Grants, Undergrad Research Grants

with the GPA of all team members not be less than 2.30 or its equivalent.

The budget and duration for each programme differs from one another. For RG, the budget is RO20,000 per project and the duration is 1-2 years. For GRG,

the budget is RO3,000 per project and the duration is 1-2 years. For URG, the budget is RO1,500 per project and the duration is one year. Proposals can be submitted through the electronic system (RIMS) in the

Oman Research Portal at <https://rims.trc.gov.om>

For further information, interested applicants can contact bfp@trc.gov.om. The deadline for submissions is April end.

The Block Funding Programme has also opened regis-

tration for research proposals for Master's and doctoral students studying abroad at their own expense for 2022.

The applicant should be an Omani nationality and registered as a Master's or PhD student studying abroad at their own expense at a university from the Shanghai University Ranking approved by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation. The time remaining for the student's graduation must not be less than six months and not more than two years for PhD students, starting from September 1, while the time remaining for the student's graduation should not exceed two years for Master's students, starting from September 1.

Oman bans import of poultry from 17 countries

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources on Monday banned the import of live birds and poultry products from 17 countries.

The import of poultry has been prohibited from the Republic of Togo, Lubowski in the Republic of Poland, Zealand island in Denmark, Flevoland county in Netherlands, the Veneto region in Italy, the districts of Bács-Kiskun, Kungrad, Veques and Hajdú-Bihar in the Republic of

Hungary, Chungcheong-do in South Korea, Akita prefecture in Japan, Rogaland county in Norway, Biolaevsky district in northern Kazakhstan, Monaghan in the Republic of Ireland, Kirov and Bashkortostan provinces in Russia, Strvinsky district in the Slovak Republic, the district of Nordrhein-Westfalen in Germany, Hotsdu province in France, Sisak-Moslavina County in Croatia, and Semnan, Ardabil, Mazandaran in Iran.

'It is forbidden to import live birds and their products until the cause of the ban is removed,' the ministry said.

TBY launches its latest publication



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Business Year (TBY) launched its annual publication, *The Business Year: Oman 2021/22, Special Vision 2040 Edition* at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre on Sunday. It was launched in partnership with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit under the patronage of H E Qais al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

TBY is a global media group that has been providing investors, businesses and governments with insights into the world's most dynamic markets

for over a decade.

At the launch event, some of the top public and private-sector leaders came together to discuss the socioeconomic reinvention of the sultanate following the challenges of COVID-19 in several industries including airlines, investment and banking.

H E Yousef kicked off the event by discussing work to build a pro-business enterprise environment and attract foreign investment. On behalf of the government and public entities, he stated that all incentives are most welcomed.

"We want Oman to be a place where, more than anything, business can grow, succeed, and thrive," he said.

"The purpose of the plan created is to increase private-sector

resilience, attract investment, and assist post-COVID-19 recovery while protecting Omani workers. Historic steps are being taken to place Oman alongside the developed nations of the world."

Abdullah al Hakmani, head of Programmes Management Office at the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation and Follow-up Unit, made a presentation on the pillars and national priorities that the vision features, focusing on a society of creative individuals, a competitive economy, an environment with sustainable components and responsible state agencies. He noted the main challenges that the country will face in its current and upcoming stages, showcasing confidence in national enablers and implementation programmes to attract di-

rect added-value investment.

The event featured a panel discussion on the main incentives for investing in Oman, how firms are diversifying abroad, and which sectors will play a key role in the diversification of the local economy. Speakers included Anwar al Jabri, group president-Investment Banking at Ominvest and CEO of Jabreen Capital; Aimen al Hosni, CEO of Oman Airports; Mohammed al Harthy, executive vice president of Oman Environmental Service Holding Company (be'ah); Saleh al Rumhi, CEO of Oman Electricity and Transmission Company; and Khaled al Kayed, CEO of Bank Nizwa.

The publication features interviews with 150 leaders from the business community.

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BRIEFS

Elon Musk named Time magazine person of the year

Time magazine on Monday named Tesla founder and space entrepreneur Elon Musk as its person of the year, capping a roller-coaster 2021 for the technology magnate.

The brash South African-born 50-year-old with grand ambition overtook space race rival and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos to become the world's richest person this year.

In October his electric car company's valuation soared above a trillion dollars, and throughout the year his company SpaceX has teamed up with US space agency NASA to launch various missions including smashing a rocket into an asteroid in a test run for redirecting any future Earth-bound space rock.

'Person of the Year is a marker of influence, and few individuals have had more influence than @elonmusk on life on Earth, and potentially life off Earth too,' tweeted Time editor-in-chief Edward Felsenthal in announcing the winner.

"Our intent with Tesla was always that we would serve as an example to the car industry," Musk told Time.

Sohar Port reports strong growth in cargo volumes

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Despite a slowdown in global trade and supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic, Sohar Port and Freezone recorded solid growth during the first nine months of 2021 and is on course to finish the year strong.

Total volumes of goods and commodities handled at Sohar Port grew by overall 6.1 per cent during the January-September period of 2021 against the same period of 2020, while ship-to-ship cargo volumes surged by 59 per cent during the same period.

Volumes of liquid bulk handled at Sohar Port rose by 7 per cent, while handling of dry bulk cargo increased by 4.3 per cent. Break bulk cargo volumes remained almost same as in the previous year.

However, Sohar Port's container volumes decreased by 3.9 per cent in the first nine months of this year on a year-on-year basis.

In a press statement, Mark Geilenkirchen, chief executive officer of Sohar Port and Freezone said, "Given the prevailing global circumstances outside of our influence, the results of the last nine months have been extremely gratifying and further reaffirm the progress we are making to position ourselves as a major global logistics hub."

He noted that Sohar Port and Freezone has remained open at full capacity throughout the pandemic, operating safely and efficiently to serve the industrial and economic sectors. "We are confident that by the end of 2021, we will have achieved one of our most successful years yet."



Freezone land occupancy up 16%

Sohar Freezone also reported a strong performance for the first nine months of this year as land occupancy increased by 16 per cent and throughput grew by 14 per cent compared to the same period a year ago. The freezone recorded an 8 per cent growth in export volumes.

Omar Mahmood al Mahrizi,

deputy CEO of Sohar Port and CEO of Sohar Freezone, said, "Sohar Port and Freezone is integral to the supply and exchange of goods to serve clients within the Freezone, across the country and further afield, as well as a gateway to the region for a growing roster of overseas companies and local SMEs."

Mahrizi noted that more than 70 per cent of all goods entering Oman pass through Sohar Port and Freezone, while the port accounts for over 40 per cent of exported goods.

"We are grateful to the entire Sohar Port and Freezone team for their hard work and commitment throughout the year to date. We anticipate a strong end to the year as the manufacturing of consumer goods, food and industrial supplies ramps up for a busy 2022," he added.

Sohar Port and Freezone so far has attracted close to US\$30bn in total investments as part of a long-term commitment to developing the national economy in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.



Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud

Saudi projects budget surplus

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Saudi Arabia approved its 2022 budget on Sunday, projecting a surplus for the first time since oil prices collapsed in 2014.

Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud said the improved fiscal situation for the world's biggest oil exporter comes 'after the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has overcome the economic repercussions and the exceptional stages of the coronavirus pandemic'.

Cited by the Saudi Press Agency, he said total expenditures were budgeted at SAR955bn (US\$255bn) and revenues estimated at SAR1.045tn, giving a surplus of SAR90bn.

Riyadh's projections come with higher global crude prices, despite worries about the Omicron coronavirus variant which is spreading worldwide.

Economic experts have said Saudi Arabia needs a crude price of about US\$80 a barrel to balance its budget.

At a press conference, Finance Minister Mohammed al-Jadaan did not answer AFP's question about the price per barrel on which the budget projections were based.

The kingdom produced about 9.8mn barrels per day in October, according to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries.

If the projections are realised, it will be the first time that the Arab world's largest economy will see a surplus since 2013, when it reached SAR206bn.

"We aim to place further attention to the security and health of citizens and residents, human development, the continuation of economic growth and diversity, and financial sustainability," King Salman said.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said, "The financial and economic results and indicators confirm that we are progressing positively".

Since 2016, the kingdom has embarked on a wide-ranging programme to diversify its economy away from oil, which still generates more than two-thirds of Saudi public revenues.

After prices collapsed in 2014 from more than US\$100 a barrel, the kingdom borrowed heavily and drew from its reserves to plug the shortfall.

AFP

Iran to cut oil output, prioritise defence spending in budget

Tehran, Iran - Iran plans to cut oil output and prioritise defence spending in its 2022-2023 draft budget because of sanctions and US-Israeli threats linked to its nuclear programme.

Iranian news agencies reported that the draft, presented on Sunday, projects GDP growth of 8 per cent.

President Ebrahim Raisi submitted the draft to parliament for a vote expected by the end of 2021. In Iran, the New Year starts on March 21.

Iran plans to produce 1.2mn barrels per day (bpd) at a projected price of US\$60 a barrel. That is down from 2.3mn bpd at a price of US\$40 a barrel, leaving revenues of US\$26.3bn against US\$33.5bn in the last budget.

Industry experts say the estimate is too high, given that Iran currently sells around 600,000 barrels a day.

Oil sales account for a quarter of revenues in the budget, with another 25 per cent from a sharp

increase in taxes.

The 2022-2023 budget allocates about US\$5bn to boost 'defence capacities and strategic research', Tasnim news agency said, up from US\$4bn the previous year.

Washington, which has imposed stringent sanctions on Tehran, warned in October of 'other options' if diplomacy fails on Iran's nuclear programme, while Israel has reserved the right to use force.

A 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers has been disintegrating since then US President Donald Trump pulled out three years later.

The accord ensured sanctions relief for Iran in return for tight curbs on its nuclear programme.

Trump also re-introduced sanctions, including on its oil exports, prompting Tehran to start disregarding the deal's limits on its nuclear activities in 2019.

AFP

HSBC and NESR sign deal for first sustainability-linked loan

Muscat - National Energy Services Reunited Corp (NESR), an international, industry-leading provider of integrated energy services in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, has announced that it has secured a sustainability-linked loan (SLL) with HSBC Bank Middle East - the first SLL of its kind within the MENA oilfield services sector.

The SLL includes a tranche in Oman that is a first-of-its-kind in the sultanate and supports NESR's growth aspirations through their subsidiary Gulf Energy.

"At HSBC Oman we are committed to supporting our clients on their transition journeys with sustainable financing and investment to help their businesses develop sustainably," said Ian Johnson, Head of International Subsidiary Banking at HSBC Oman.

The loan terms are linked to three key performance indicators (KPIs) that are tied to the environmental, social and govern-



ance (ESG) indicators, and will be tracked within the agreement span.

In addition to the quantitative KPIs, NESR has also pledged to establish a formal company carbon reduction strategy. As part of its inaugural ESG report and broader decarbonisation strategy, NESR is currently evaluating a Science-Based Target initiative (SBTi) and expects to finalise targets in the coming year.

"As the national champion of MENA, we are proud to be the first of our MENA-centric oilfield services peers to enter into an ambitious, sustainability-linked loan of this type with our valued partner lenders," said Sherif Foda, chairman and chief execu-

tive officer of NESR.

Dan Howlett, regional head of commercial banking at HSBC Middle East, North Africa and Turkey, said, "HSBC is delighted to work with NESR on this sustainability linked loan, the first-of-its-kind in MENA. HSBC is prioritising financing and investment that supports the transition to a net zero global economy, and NESR's ESG ambitions - as this transaction shows - dovetail with our financing commitments and expertise."

HSBC globally has committed to align its financed emissions - the carbon emissions of its portfolio of customers - to the Paris Agreement goal to achieve net zero by 2050 or sooner.

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C.R. No.: 1365452

Al Bustan Palace hotel captures festive season

No one captures the festive season quite like Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Bringing the magic to life, the resort is inviting guests for a host of experiences with delectable menus and lively entertainment, Ritz Kids fun and New Year's glitter. Its lush, tranquil gardens and venues will be transformed with twinkling lights, seasonal decorations along with its majestic Christmas tree accompanied by unparalleled luxury and warm hospitality, making sure every family member is no less than enchanted.

Nabil bin Abdul Wahab al Zadjali, general manager at Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel, said, "It's one of our favorite times of year again and our ladies and gentleman have been busy combining all of the ingredients for a spectacular festive season. As one of the world's most luxurious destinations, our resort is made for grand celebrations and we look forward to welcoming our guests with more experiences than ever and helping them make incredible memories that will last a lifetime."

Served with a touch of glamour and luxury under the majestic dome of the Atrium Tea Lounge, Festive High Tea re-



mains one of the finest Ritz-Carlton traditions. This seasonal treat features an array of delectable and assorted savories paired with freshly brewed tea, served every day throughout December.

Also happening daily throughout the month is Christmas Jazz at Al Maha Jazz Lounge, where

yuletide cheer meets a quaint and intimate setting, and guests can unwind to the smooth sounds of live musicians until late.

On December 17 and 18, the resort's spacious grounds will be transformed into The Palace Wonderland; a winter market, where visitors can pick out spe-

cial gifts for loved ones while enjoying an open-air cinema, live entertainment, meet-and-greet Santa, Gingerbread decorating and so much more.

A magical occasion deserves a magical location and nothing beats The Pavilion. Indulge in Christmas Eve Dinner with a di-

vine seafood menu and all of the elegance of the beachfront milieu. Alternatively, a sumptuous buffet at Al Khiran Kitchen is not to be missed, complete with live cooking stations and entertainment along with games to keep the kids entertained all evening.

On December 25, indulge a

Grand Christmas Brunch, featuring a buffet with live stations and all the traditional trimmings, as well as decadent desserts and of course, a "surprise" visit from Santa.

Those in need of pampering can melt away the tension at Al Bustan Palace Spa by the Ritz-

Carlton. From Festive Cheer, with a chocolate scrub, relaxing massage and 24-carat gold age-defying facial, to Absolute Rejuvenation, with Arabian Signature Hammam, Stress Relief Massage and Immune Booster fresh juice, the spa packages make an ideal token of self-care or make a heartwarming gesture like no other. For that extra special gift, exclusive spa vouchers are also available.

The countdown is on for the most awaited night of the year, and where better to celebrate than on the shores of Oman with New Year's Eve dinner at The Pavilion, featuring the most exquisite dishes and scenic views to end the year on a high. Or, gather under the stars for a night of magic with the New Year's Eve Gala dinner.

A lavish buffet will be served on the gardens and beachfront complete with an unlimited selection of beverages and live entertainment, as guests release flying lanterns to ring in the new year.

Whether for an intimate gathering or a family celebration, guests will re-discover the wonder and merriment of the season at this timeless inspiring destination.

New features make Muzn's banking app seamless

Striving to meet the needs of an ever-evolving market, Muzn, National Bank of Oman's (NBO) Islamic banking window, has enhanced its mobile app, making it even easier and more convenient to use. The new features include a four-digit One-Time Password (OTP) instead of the previous six digits, as well as an auto-fill function.

The bank has also added biometric login so that customers can choose to use their face, fingerprint, or a four-digit passcode instead of the previous username and password. Enjoyed by a growing number of customers, Muzn's mobile app continues to make the banking experience even more seamless.

Salima al Marzouqi, chief Islamic Banking officer (CIBO), said, "Especially given the events of the last year, use of digital banking services has accelerated and rightly so, have customer ex-



pectations. These new features are designed to make both the login and payments process quicker and simpler, in line with the latest technologies. Backed up by our exceptional customer service, our mobile app is one of an expanding list of modern

Sharia'a-compatible solutions that provide our customers with a distinguished banking experience while meeting their diverse financial requirements."

With Muzn's leading digital services, customers have a host of convenient functions at their fingertips, enabling them to manage their finances round the clock, wherever they are. Available in English and Arabic, the easy and secure mobile app helps users stay connected with the bank, get required information on products, to find the closest Muzn ATMs and branches, check their account information, or perform financial transactions like bill payments and local and international transfers.

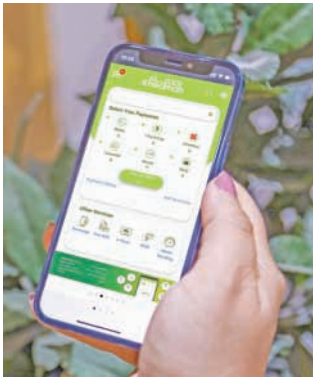
The bank also recently introduced a new Wallet Transfer feature, which enables users to send and receive money locally and instantly using a mobile number, and Scan & Pay using QR codes.

Khedmah app sets new benchmark surpassing 600,000 downloads

With its top-notch solutions that make daily life easy for customers, Oman Investment and Finance Company's (OIFC) Khedmah mobile app has accomplished a new milestone by surpassing 600,000 downloads since its launch. Taking a quantum leap in digital banking, Khedmah app is known for its ease of use and high level of security. It is considered an ideal alternative to cash payments, as well as to visiting branches to pay electricity, water and communication bills.

This new benchmark underscores the trust bestowed upon the company by the beneficiaries due to the variety of its seamless and high-quality services that can be utilised by all segments of the society. The app provides a plethora of features under one platform that customers can benefit from with a push of a button.

Through the app, customers



can easily pay their electricity, water and telephone bills, recharge their phone, and also pay their electricity prepaid meter bills.

In addition, customers can make payments to the Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI), recharge entertainment subscriptions and subscribe to Awaser Internet.

Khedmah recently added a new service in the field of collecting vehicle insurance premiums. Through the direct integration

between Khedmah and the systems of Dhofar Insurance Company, customers of Dhofar insurance can now pay the insurance premiums for renewal of their vehicle insurance through the app and website.

Speaking on this achievement, Said Ahmed Safrar, CEO of OIFC said, "We are proud of this benchmark. The team's efforts to provide the best and modern services have contributed to Khedmah's success story. This accomplishment motivates us to innovate further and expand our digital solutions to keep abreast with the latest advancement in the sector as well as meeting customers' aspirations.

"Our vision comes in line with Oman Vision 2040 that aims to harness digital transformation within the community, the public and private sector. It is considered as an essential requirement of the modern era to facilitate operations and procedures for

consumers in various fields."

A wide array of Khedmah's services can be obtained from the branches as well. The company boasts a robust network of branches and payment machines. Through the branches, clients can subscribe to Awaser and Omantel home internet products as well as Omantel postpaid packages.

Customers can now benefit from a gamut of Oman Post and Asyad Express services outside their working hours through a selected number of Khedmah branches. The services include post box subscriptions, subscription fee payments, subscription renewals and sending parcels locally and internationally.

Established in 1979, OIFC is one of the leading Investment and services companies and specialises in billing, collection and debt factoring for electricity, water and telecom services in the sultanate.

Oman Air signs service agreement with Paul Maxence Lounge at Paris (CDG)

Oman Air, the national airline of the sultanate, has signed a service agreement with Paul Maxence Lounge at Paris Charles de Gaulle airport, offering complimentary access for its business class passengers.

The agreement coincides with Oman Air's route resumption between Muscat (MCT) and Paris (CDG), which took effect on October 31.

Business class passengers and Sindbad Gold tier members can access the lounge for free, while economy class passengers can purchase access to the lounge for US\$70.

Stylishly appointed and equipped with a full range of amenities, Paul Maxence Lounge offers welcome respite from busy airport crowds and provides passengers a quiet, private space to dine, work or freshen up before their flight.

"In signing this service agreement with Paul Maxence Lounge, Oman Air business class passengers and Sindbad Gold members flying from Paris can



now enjoy an enhanced travel experience that combines comfort, elegance and convenience in an exceptionally relaxing space," said Rocio Jolivet, Oman Air country manager for France.

"Oman Air economy class

passengers can also access the lounge for a fee and elevate their travel journey with the sophistication of French hospitality."

Complimentary WI-FI, à la carte menu prepared to halal-certified standards offering hot

and cold food and beverages, shower facilities, outdoor smoking terrace, and prayer room are just some of the amenities available to lounge visitors between 6am and 1pm daily in Terminal 2A.

Anantara Jabal Akhdar Resort hosts Pizza Acrobatic champion

Pizza lovers rejoice! Anantara Jabal Akhdar Resort - the luxurious elevated resort, located 2,000m above sea level, has partnered with Pizza Acrobatic World Champion, Pasqualino Barbasso, for an exclusive week of delicious pizza making, hosted by the world-famous master himself.

Taking place daily at 7pm from December 13-19 at the resort's authentic Italian restaurant Bella Vista, Barbasso, the two-time Pizza Acrobatic World Champion, will step into the kitchen to showcase his culinary flair in the most entertaining way.

Foodies will get a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to watch Barbasso's world-renowned stunning performances, enhancing the quality and taste of Italian pizza, made according to true Italian traditions.

Indulge in authentic dishes made from the freshest Italian ingredients, with a three-course set menu including a special pizza by the chef, whilst taking in breath-taking views of the



Green Mountain.

Sign up for a pizza-making masterclass with the chef and dazzle your own guests at home, for RO30 per couple.

Born in 1973 in Palermo the capital of Sicily in the south of Italy, Chef Pasqualino Barbasso has started his career in his family restaurant, called 'Falco Az-

zurro', where he learned the secret of the real Italian pizza.

Over the past years, he has travelled around the world offering his stunning performances for the high-quality Italian pizza-making. In 2001 and 2002, Barbasso won the acrobatic pizza world championship, the most important pizza competition.

New Jeep Grand Cherokee L amazes sultanate's customers



Dhofar Automotive recently organised a driving experience for its customers to showcase its all-new Jeep Grand Cherokee L in Hawana Salalah alongside carnival activities.

During this test drive, the latest updates and features of the Jeep brand were displayed as well as its various models, renowned for its superior capabilities and outstanding performance, no matter the terrain. Attendees were also given the opportunity to view the all-new Jeep Grand Cherokee L first-hand, one of the latest models of Jeep, through test drives that were a part of the event.

In addition, representatives of the Dhofar Automotive sales

team were present to answer the attendees' enquiries. The event and driving experiences of the new Jeep model received widespread acclaim.

The interior and exterior of the newest model are designed and engineered to deliver an unmatched combination of even more legendary 4x4 capabilities, superior on-road enhancements, premium styling and impressive craftsmanship. It also hosts a myriad of advanced safety and technology features.

Commenting on the organisation of the driving experiences for the new Jeep Grand Cherokee L, Hatem El-Naggar, general manager at Dhofar Automotive, said, "Jeep models have won the con-

fidence of everyone across all the governorates of the sultanate.

"We, at Dhofar Automotive, are proud of our growing base of our customers. Through this event at the Hawana Salalah, we can reinforce our relationship with our customers, introduce them to new models and features while simultaneously keeping pace with their dynamic demands so that we can continue to serve them better. This is a positive reflection in enhancing our successes at Dhofar Automotive, with a focus on achieving the company's goals and always keeping a high level of customer service at the forefront.

"The new Jeep Grand Chero-

kee L saw huge interest from everyone who attended, since its boasts of unmated off-road capability with a refined driving experience on paved roads. Even more so, for the first time in the history of the brand, this model includes a third row of seats and spaciousness for seven passengers."

"Since its first launch, thirty years ago, the Jeep Grand Cherokee has been one of the most preferred vehicles in Oman and continues to be the best-selling SUV in the range of models we offer. The design of the new model is based on a survey conducted for Jeep customers around the world, thus meeting the requirements of our most

loyal customers. The launch of the Grand Cherokee L will undoubtedly contribute to enhancing the presence of the Jeep brand in the local market. It will also play an integral role in placing us in a sector-leading position, with a model that perfectly combines practicality and luxury," he added.

The average price for the all-new Jeep Grand Cherokee L ranges between RO21,588 and RO29,100 Inclusive of VAT, with a wide lineup that includes V6/V8 engines and 4 trims including premium and luxury versions. It is available in five different variants, namely Laredo, Limited, Overland, Summit and Summit Reserve.



Second Gulf German Film Festival begins tomorrow in Muscat

The German Embassy in Muscat, the Swiss Embassy in Muscat, and the Goethe-Institut Gulf Region announced the second edition of the Gulf German Film Festival which will take place at the Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Muscat. The festival will start on December 15 and will run until 16. Four films will be presented at the Bustan lawn, Khiran side of the Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel.

The opening night will begin with the screening of *When Hitler stole pink rabbit* by Caroline Link. This Swiss-German production is based on Judith Kerr's autobiographic novel of the same title, and relates to the story of a young girl and her family who flee Nazi Germany to find refuge in Switzerland, then Paris and finally in London.

the municipality, is left by her lover Johannes. According to the old myth, if a man whom Undine loves betrays her, she has to kill him and return to the water she once came from. Undine tries to resist this curse, although she thinks she has no choice. She meets the industrial diver Christoph and falls for him.

The second evening, Thursday 16, opens with the film *Too far away* by Sarah Winkensette. It tells the touching story of a 12-year-old country boy who has to start over again, after his family had to move to the city. In his new school, he befriends Tariq, a boy from Syria, over a joint love for football.

The festival concludes on the same evening with the German production *Gundermann* (2018).

German Ambassador H E Thomas Schneider said, "We are very proud to propose this wonderful event in the sultanate. Despite the pandemic, a number of wonderful new movies have been produced and released. It is a great pleasure to welcome a distinguished audience to enjoy contemporary German cinema."

OIH receives Femtosecond laser for eye surgeries

Oman International Hospital (OIH), Oman's newest multi-specialty hospital and a world-class medical institution, announced the installation of Femtosecond Ziemer Z8 Neo laser, the newest technology in the field of Ophthalmology and eye surgery- a first of its kind in the Middle East.

OIH, which is already home to several state-of-the-art equipment and facilities including hybrid operation theaters, will now be able to offer high-precision, exceptional ophthalmic treatments for cataracts, LASIK and eye surgeries at the highest degree of safety and comfort of the patient.

Dr Ahmed al Maskari, cataract, cornea & refractive surgeon and head of Oman Vision Centre, one of the five Centres of Excellence in OIH stated, "The addition of this laser confirms Oman Inter-



national Hospital's commitment to providing the best available technologies for its patients and compete at providing the best medical care at an international level.

"The Femtosecond Ziemer Z8

Neo laser is a truly unique and highly advanced technology. The latest technology enables very precise treatment with ultrafast laser source for patients, even for the most challenging cases. The Ziemer Z8 Neo laser enables

easy, safe and comfortable eye surgeries performed within a short time span."

The equipment will enable surgeons to perform cataract and corneal transplantation at an unparalleled femtosecond laser

precision and will open the door to providing cutting edge refractive surgery at Oman Vision Centre. Furthermore, the equipment with its new design will make it easier and faster to apply laser treatments. Oman International Hospital lately announced the soft opening of Oman Vision Centre within their premium facilities and are expecting to start their eye surgical operations in January 2022.

Marcelo Pereira, CEO of Oman International Hospital said, "As the newest and most modern healthcare destination in Oman, we want all our patients to receive world class treatments and services. The introduction of Ziemer Z8 Neo laser not only offers the latest technology in its specialization but also raises the bar of our Oman Vision Centre's world-class quality standards."



Ooredoo takes CX Live Award for Best Customer Experience

Ooredoo has won the award for Best Customer Experience in the Telecoms Category at the CX Live Awards 2021.

Beating its competitors across the region, the telecommunications company was recognised for its customer-focused digital transformation strategy, business growth, customer satisfaction, and its utilisation of technology, especially to help its customers overcome some of the challenges of the pandemic.

The award was announced during the Customer Experience Live Show Middle East held at

The Meydan Hotel in Dubai last month.

Delivering on its brand promise to 'Enjoy the Internet', Ooredoo's strategy is about far more than creating innovative products and services, but fostering lifelong relationships with its customers that ensure their individual communications needs are continually met.

Continuing its drive towards digital transformation and the introduction of the latest technologies like AI, chatbots, analytics, and cloud capabilities, it is pioneering an awesome digital experience.

'Color Sensations' exhibition opens at Bait Al Zubair gallery

The exhibition 'Color Sensations' by the artist Saif al Amri was opened in Bait Al Zubair, under the patronage of H E Professor Abdullah bin Khamis Ambasaidi, Undersecretary for Education in the Ministry of Education.

The Color Sensations exhibition is the third solo exhibition of

the artist Amiri, where the philosophy of the presented works revolves around the connection with the earth and the intimate and emotional relationship of man to this universe.

It expresses a state experienced by humans such as joy, sadness, and fear, and these are present feelings with the pres-

ence of color harmony scattered here and there.

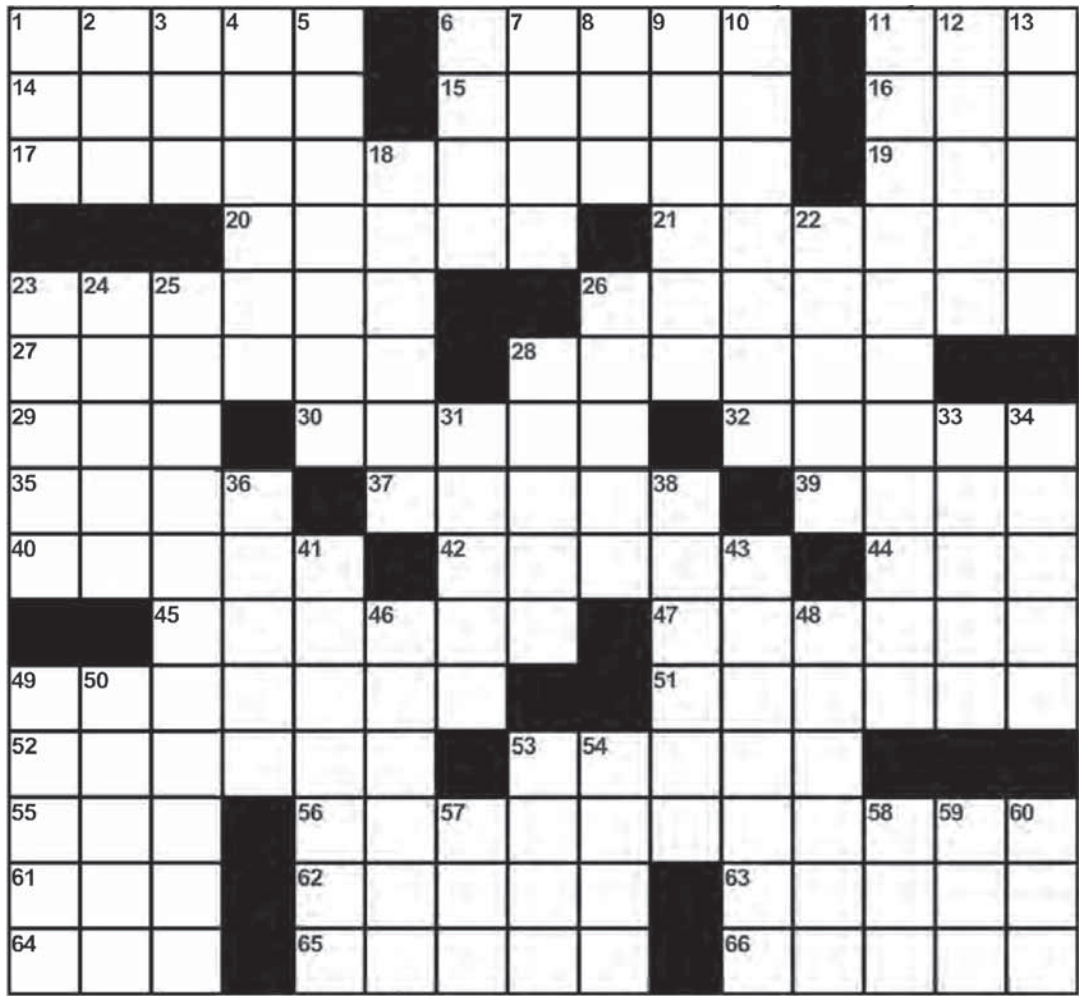
In displaying his paintings, artist Amiri uses monoprint techniques, a method of chromatic hand-flat printing, and is represented by the use of remnants of printing inks scattered on glass, plastic, or printing table surfaces.

It is worth mentioning that the artist Amiri is one of the artists of the eighties generation, and he is one of the few Omani engravers, and he has a long practice in this field.

The "Color Sensations" exhibition will continue until Thursday, January 6 at the Bait Al Dalaleel Hall, in Bait Al Zubair.



DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Butcher's discards
- 6) Vegetables in gumbo soup
- 11) Four winter wks.
- 14) Flared dress style
- 15) Type of bench in front of keys
- 16) No way to be conceived?
- 17) Basic
- 19) Regret bitterly
- 20)_ out a living (barely making do)
- 21) They walk on two feet
- 23) Cause of many a split
- 26) Moves back, as a hairline
- 27) Back somersault dive
- 28) Dehumidifying gel
- 29) Illumination unit
- 30) Lopsided wins
- 32) Some burial sites
- 35) Small things in wallets
- 37) Abnormal breath sounds
- 39) "Nobody doesn't like_

Lee"

- 40) Angler's boot
 - 42) Bob Marley was one
 - 44) Tom, Dick or Harry, e.g.
 - 45) Word with "free" or "travel"
 - 4 7) Painter of zaftig women
 - Peter Paul
 - 49) Indian appetizers
 - 51) Familiar with
 - 52) Relative of "Skoal!"
 - 53) They bring tears to one's eyes
 - 55) Large flightless bird
 - 56) Certain fragrant pink flowers
 - 61) Day's end, in poems
 - 62) Related on the mother's side
 - 63) Word with spitting
 - 64) EPA-banned bug killer
 - 65) Grown dogie
 - 66) Tie for a dandy
- DOWN
- 1) Clumsy goof
 - 2) Cold and_ season
 - 3) Shark sighting, often
 - 4) From the mountains of Peru

- 5) Less likely to stay inflated
- 6) Accepting customers
- 7) Juan Carlos, for one
- 8) "You dirty_!" (famous film line)
- 9) Cornell's_ Taylor Hall
- 10) Formally request
- 11) Like some cheap sale goods
- 12) Outwit, as a posse
- 13) What God can do
- 18) Medicine chest door, often
- 22) River to the Rio Grande
- 23) Beaming
- 24) Flora's partner
- 25) It cannot be negotiated
- 26) Ascends
- 28) Spread apart, as fingers
- 31) Chagall and Anthony
- 33) Main impact
- 34) Ultimate authority
- 36) Bell-shaped flowers
- 38) Went on the offensive?
- 41) Has a dwelling
- 43) Vienna's country
- 46) Floating on water
- 48) Brooms of twigs

- 49) Risk a ticket
- 50) Holding one's piece?
- 53) Item on a social schedule
- 54) Friendly intro?

- 57) "Diamond Lil" star West
- 58) Yolk_ (egg part)
- 59) Bighead's problem
- 60) Tennis match division



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

The moon moves into Taurus, bringing you to a grounded and sensual headspace. While staying on task within your professional matters will be a priority, thanks to a connection between the moon and Mercury, you should feel calm and as though you're able to handle your responsibilities at a leisurely pace. It'll be important that you take some time out for self-care, even if your friends try to tempt you with a night out.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

While work isn't typically your favourite way to pass the hours, you'll find a strange sense of satisfaction within your professional life as the Taurus moon illuminates your tenth house. Your warm influence will act as an anchor for your colleagues, giving you an elevated sense of purpose as people turn to you for advice, clarity, and, perhaps, some comic relief. Don't feel rushed or pressured to handle everything at once.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

With Mars fresh in your sign, you'll be feeling hyper-motivated to take on your goals full speed ahead. However, an opposition to the north node could make it difficult for you to see the path moving forward. Today's Taurus moon wants you to take a step back in favour of planning and organisation. Taking time to map out your plans for the future can help you manage your stress levels while increasing personal productivity.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

The moon enters your sign today, bringing a boost to your intuition, energy levels, and popularity! If ever there were a time to put yourself first, it would be right now. Give yourself permission to indulge in the finer things in life, and don't feel guilty about spending a little bit of money on yourself. Tonight, the moon cozies up to wildcard Uranus, which is sure to shake things up for you on an emotional or personal level.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Watch out for synchronicities and coincidences today, dear Virgo, as you could be on the receiving end of some divine messages. The Taurus moon will trigger the portion of your chart that rules spirituality, boosting your intuition and strengthening your connection to the universe. If there are any areas of your life that you need clarity on, now would be the time to get in a meditation session or pull a tarot spread.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Make the extra effort to connect with your friends as the Taurus moon activates the sector of your chart that rules self-expression. You can be a creature of habit sometimes, but these vibes will push you to mix up your routine in favour of entertainment and leisure. Your artistic side will receive a nice boost, prompting you to get creative with your personal style while bringing an added element of inspiration to any hobbies.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You'll be in a quiet mood today, dear Gemini, as the Taurus moon shines a light on the sector of your chart that rules the subconscious. While you're generally a chatty one, you won't be in the mood for small talk or shallow connections right now. Be sure to lean into your close friendships if you're feeling lonely, but don't feel guilty if you need to take time out for some peace and quiet.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You'll be in a transactional headspace today, dear Libra, as the Taurus moon activates the sector of your chart that rules business exchanges. You can sometimes be a bit passive, choosing to go with the flow before making waves. But today that won't be the case. Deep down, you know what your worth is. Right now, the universe will remind you not to settle for less. Don't feel bad about saying "no" or setting boundaries.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

The Taurus moon will put you in a nurturing mood, inspiring you to take things easy so you can focus on grounding and self-care. Do your best to stay connected with your body throughout the day, so you can be mindful about releasing physical symptoms of stress with deep breathing and perhaps a bit of stretching. Nature will also be particularly therapeutic, helping you connect with your surroundings in a calm and stress-free way.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

With the moon setting up camp in Taurus today, you'll be in the mood to take on a little bit of holiday shopping. This lunar placement will also activate the sector of your chart that rules community, asking you to reinvest in your local economy instead of spending at large corporate establishments. Go out of your way to check out some small businesses in your area while you prepare for some seasonal gift-giving.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

It's a romantic day for you, dear Scorpio, as the Taurus moon illuminates the sector of your chart that rules matters of the heart. A sensual and warm vibe will be with you throughout the day, which is perfect for exchanging sweet sentiments with that special someone. However, if you're single or in a solitary mood, it's totally okay to channel this energy into some serious self-care. So go ahead, and send that flirty text to your sweetheart.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

The Taurus moon will activate the sector of your chart that rules communication, asking you to express yourself through the material realms. A small gift to someone special will speak volumes and let its recipient know that you care. If you're not in a position to spend, you can also facilitate these sentiments through physical touch. Hugs, holding hands, and a kiss to your sweetheart will let the people know where they stand.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The headquarter of the International Court of Justice are at

- a. Geneva
- b. The Hague
- c. Rome
- d. Vienna

2. The highest rank in Army is that of

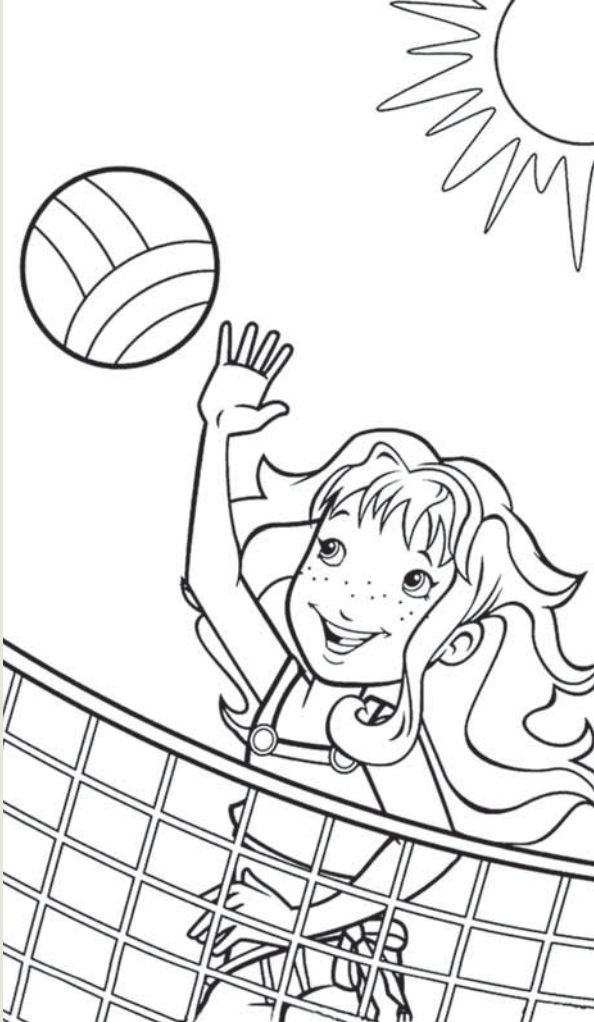
- a. Brigadier
- b. General
- c. Lieutenant General
- d. Major General

3. The headquarter of Asian Development Bank is located in which of the following cities

- a. Jakarta
- b. Singapore
- c. Bangkok
- d. Manila

Answers: 1. b 2. b 3. d

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

D	O	N	K
D	E	U	I
S	D	E	C
C	E	L	A

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Israel's PM meets Abu Dhabi Crown Prince on UAE visit

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett met Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince on Monday during the first visit by a leader of the Jewish state to the United Arab Emirates, just over a year after the two countries established ties.

Bennett's visit comes as Israel pursues a diplomatic push against international nuclear talks in Vienna that could ease sanctions on its arch-foe, Iran.

He was received by Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan at his private palace, where they exchanged greetings before heading inside for more than four hours of talks, Israeli officials said.

'New reality'

The Crown Prince hoped Bennett's visit 'would contribute to further cooperation for the benefit of the peoples of the two countries and the peoples of the region', the UAE's official WAM news agency said.

The visit comes 15 months after the wealthy UAE broke with decades of Arab consensus and forged diplomatic ties under a series of US-brokered deals known as the Abraham Accords.

Bennett, who arrived late on Sunday, said his trip reflected a 'new reality' for the Middle East.

Upon arrival, he was received in Abu Dhabi by UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan and an honour guard, according to his office.

The Prime Minister said he appreciated the 'very warm hospitality'.



Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan (right) meets with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett on Monday (AFP)

"I'm very excited to be here... as the first official visit of an Israeli leader here. We are looking forward to strengthening the relationship."

"In my opinion, this is... the new reality this region is witnessing, and we are working together to ensure a better future for our children," he told WAM.

Israel is also stepping up its diplomatic efforts against the renewed talks in Vienna with Iran, over the Islamic republic's nuclear programme.

Bennett has called for the

talks to be halted, accusing Tehran of 'nuclear blackmail' and charging that it will use any revenue from sanctions relief to bolster a military arsenal that can harm Israel.

On Thursday, global powers began meetings with Iran in Vienna aimed at reviving a deal to curb the nuclear programme after former US president Donald Trump pulled out in 2015.

Ahead of those talks, the UAE's national security advisor met Iran's ultraconservative President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran, a rare trip by a senior

Emirati official.

In Abu Dhabi, Bennett and Sheikh Mohammed discussed cooperation in 'various investment, economic, trade and development areas', WAM said.

Bennett also spoke of 'limitless future opportunities' to develop trade with the UAE.

"Israel, like the UAE, is a regional hub for trade. Our cooperation provides unprecedented economic opportunities not only for us, but for more countries," he was quoted as saying.

The UAE last year became the third Arab nation to establish

full diplomatic relations with Israel after Egypt and Jordan, and was swiftly followed by Bahrain and Morocco.

Sudan also agreed to normalise ties with Israel under the Abraham Accords, but full relations have not yet materialised.

The agreements were negotiated by Bennett's predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu, who said they would offer Israel new regional allies against Iran and bolster its diplomatic efforts to stop Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

AFP



Mourners take part in a funeral procession for Hamas member Hamza Ibrahim Shahin, in a refugee camp near Lebanon's Tyre on Sunday (AFP)

Hamas says three members shot dead at Palestinian camp in Lebanon

Beirut, Lebanon - Three members of Hamas died on Sunday when shooting erupted at the funeral procession for a member of the movement in a south Lebanon Palestinian refugee camp, the group said.

Hamas official Raafat al Murra said fighters from the rival Fatah movement 'shot at the funeral procession' of a Palestinian killed in a blast on Friday at the Burj al-Shemali camp, outside the port city of Tyre.

Six people were wounded, he added.

Hamas and Fatah, the secular party led by Mahmud Abbas, have been at odds since 2007 when the Islamists seized Gaza after a week of deadly clashes.

Talal al Abed Kassem, an official from security forces affiliated with Fatah in the camp, said that "the shooter is neither a member of the Fatah movement nor the security forces", Lebanon's National News Agency reported.

The Lebanese army said later that Palestinian security officials had handed over a Palestinian man accused in the shooting and that an investigation had been opened.

forces held 'direct responsibility' for what it said was 'murder and assassination', and that PA security forces in Lebanon and leadership in Ramallah were 'fully responsible for this crime'.

Earlier explosion

An electrical short circuit in a store containing oxygen supplies for COVID-19 patients caused Friday's blast, Hamas said earlier, denying reports that an arms depot blew up.

A Lebanese military source had said that the explosion went off in an ammunition dump kept by Hamas fighters alongside food and other stores.

The explosion blackened the walls and shattered windows of a nearby mosque.

"The fire caused damage to property but the impact was limited," Hamas said.

According to a Palestinian official, one man died of his injuries from the explosion, which also left several people wounded.

Hamas said on Saturday that one of its members, whom it identified as Hamza Shahin, had been killed. It said Shahin was 'martyred on a mission', but did not elaborate.

On Sunday, mourners had been out on the streets of the Burj al-Shemali camp, shouting pro-Hamas slogans.

Armed elements of both Fatah and Hamas had been deployed before the funeral.

Officially, Lebanon hosts about 192,000 Palestinian refugees, most of whom live in the country's 12 camps, according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

By longstanding agreement, the Lebanese army does not enter the camps, leaving security inside to Palestinian factions.

AFP

Iran negotiator sees progress at Vienna nuclear talks

Tehran, Iran - Iran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani on Sunday reported progress on an agenda for talks with global powers over its nuclear programme, as Britain said the Vienna negotiations were Tehran's 'last chance'.

Talks restarted on Thursday to try to revive the 2015 deal between Iran and other nations, which the United States withdrew from under Donald Trump in 2018.

US President Joe Biden has said he is ready to return to the agreement but US officials have accused Iran of backsliding on progress made at talks earlier this year and playing for time.

Iranian officials maintain they



Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani (AFP)

are serious about committing to the talks.

"The two parties are at the point of agreeing on the matters which should be on the agenda," Tehran's chief negotiator Kani told the official IRNA news agency.

"It's a positive and important evolution since, at the start, they weren't even in agreement on the issues to negotiate."

His comments came as the G7 said on Sunday that time was running out for Iran to agree on a deal.

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, from G7 host Britain, said the Vienna talks were the Islamic republic's 'last chance to come to

the negotiating table with a serious resolution'.

Her comments were the first time a signatory to the original deal has given an ultimatum for the talks.

The 2015 agreement aimed to prevent Iran from developing an atomic bomb, a goal Tehran has always denied. The deal ensured sanctions relief in return for tight curbs on Iran's nuclear programme, which was put under extensive UN monitoring.

According to Kani, the new administration in power in Iran since June, led by ultraconservative President Ebrahim Raisi, has raised additional points to those negotiated by its reformist pre-

decessors.

Iran wants a lifting of all US sanctions imposed after Trump's withdrawal but Biden's administration has said it will only negotiate measures taken by Trump over the nuclear programme, not steps imposed over other concerns such as human rights.

Tehran has presented two texts at the talks, one on the sanctions and the other on its nuclear activity.

"With the other parties we jointly recap [the points to discuss] in order that the differences can be resolved and the agenda established in a definitive framework," Kani said.

AFP

Palestinian killed by Israeli forces during West Bank clash

Nablus, Palestinian Territories - A Palestinian man was killed during a clash with Israeli forces in the northern occupied West Bank early on Monday, security and medical sources said.

The Palestinian sources identified the man as Jamil al Kayyal (31) saying he died as a result of bullet shots to his head following a clash in the Ras al-Ain area in the city of Nablus.

According to Israeli police, special forces officers backed up by soldiers had arrested a suspect in Nablus and seized a semi-automatic weapon.

'When the special forces finished their operation and exited the site, rioters hurled explosive devices at them from a short range, risking their lives,' police said in a statement.

'The forces responded with fire toward the attackers, and ap-

peared to have hit one of them, who was evacuated from the scene by Red Crescent' medics, the statement said.

While Israel does not have a permanent presence in Palestinian cities in the West Bank, forces will carry out raids and arrests there according to security needs, with clashes ensuing from time to time.

Excluding annexed east Jerusalem, about 475,000 Israeli settlers live in fortified communities in the West Bank, which is home to more than 2.8mn Palestinians.

Palestinians eye the West Bank, which Israel captured in the Six-Day War of 1967, as part of their future state, while hard-line Israelis, including Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, say it is a heartland of Jewish history.

AFP

Papandreou loses in Greek socialists' leadership race

Athens, Greece - Former Greek prime minister George Papandreou on Sunday lost the race to become the new leader of the nation's socialists to MEP Nikos Androulakis as the party tries to rebuild popularity.

With ballots counted at more than 95 per cent of the polling stations, Androulakis was leading Papandreou (69) in the second and final round of the race by 68 per cent to 32 per cent.

Androulakis (42), deputy of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament, vowed to capture the legacy of the once-powerful PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) movement established by three-time premier Andreas Papandreou, father of his rival.

"We are opening a new page in the history of PASOK with optimism and confidence," he said on Sunday adding that the heavy turnout in the party elections was a reminder of "how deep is the



Former Greek prime minister George Papandreou casts his ballot during the KINAL party elections

root of PASOK in Greek society".

"The race ended tonight. There are no winners and losers. Only one winner: PASOK," he said, pledging to safeguard the unity of the party.

PASOK was founded on September 3, 1974 after the collapse of the Greek military dictatorship, and at its height ruled for

nearly 20 years, dominating the 300-seat parliament.

It was renamed Movement for Change (KINAL) in 2018 in a rebranding effort to escape an image tarnished by its association with the country's bankruptcy in 2010, as well as a series of scandals. The party now ranks third, and has just 22 lawmakers.

George Papandreou's own brand suffers from having signed in May 2010 the first of three bailouts with the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF that would total €350bn.

His televised address from the tiny island of Kastellorizo has become inextricably associated

with one of the most traumatic events in modern Greek society.

In the years that followed, a quarter of Greek national output would be wiped out in wage and pension cuts and tax hikes demanded by the so-called troika of creditors. Papandreou on Sunday after congratulating Androulakis pledged to 'continue the fight for our progressive ideas, for our party to become a movement of power'.

KINAL's elections were marked by the death of its leader, Fofi Gennimata.

One of the first women in Greece to hold senior political posts, the 56-year-old mother-of-three who was confirmed as leader in 2018 and had survived a previous battle with cancer was hospitalised on October 11.

A day later, Gennimata said she was abandoning her campaign for re-election to the party leadership in December. She died on October 25.

AFP

Russian teen ‘blows himself up’ at school

The 18-year-old perpetrator was not killed in the blast which wounded another student

Moscow, Russia - A Russian teenager tried to blow himself up at an Orthodox school near a 14th century convent outside Moscow on Monday, wounding at least another student, the Interior Ministry said.

Russia has seen a rise in similar attacks on schools in recent years but incidents at religious premises are rare.

‘An 18-year-old graduate of this educational institution entered the premises of the Orthodox gymnasium of the Vvedenskiy Vladychniy convent and blew himself up,’ it said in a statement.

A 15-year-old was injured in the attack in the city of Serpukhov, 100km south of Moscow, the statement said.

According to preliminary information, the perpetrator was not killed in the blast, it said.

The ministry said the staff had been evacuated and that ‘information about other victims’ was being clarified.

Several Russian news agencies said that up to seven people were injured. The school teaches children from the ages of 7 until 16.

The governor of the Moscow region, Andrei Vorobyev, did not specify how many students were injured but said none were in a life-threatening condition.

“All the services reacted on



A traffic police officer controls the traffic in front of the Vvedenskiy Vladychniy convent after an 18-year-old graduate of its Orthodox gymnasium entered the school and blew himself up, in the city of Serpukhov, south of Moscow on Monday (AFP)

time, doctors helped injured children and there is no threat to their lives,” he said on Telegram.

Moscow prosecutors posted a video from the scene with police and ambulances outside the

convent in snowfall.

It also posted a video of a local prosecutor from inside the school with Orthodox icons in the background.

The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said

it had opened a criminal case into attempted murder and the illegal handling of explosives.

The Committee also said it had sent detectives to the scene.

The monastery was established in 1360.

Rise in teenage attacks

Since President Vladimir Putin first came to power in 2000, the Russian church has enjoyed vastly increased influence.

It has increased its influence

All the services reacted on time, doctors helped injured children and there is no threat to their lives

ANDREI VOROBYEV

on traditionally secular institutions such as schools, with lessons on religion and clerics lobbying for conservative textbooks.

In September, a student killed six people and wounded dozens on a university campus in the Urals city of Perm.

In May, a 19-year-old opened fire in his old school in the central city of Kazan, killing nine people.

In October 2018, another teenage gunman killed 20 people at a Kerch technical college in Crimea, the peninsula Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

He was shown in camera footage wearing a similar T-shirt to Eric Harris, one of the killers in the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in the US, which left 13 people dead.

The attacks have led some in Russia to call for stricter gun control in the country and for reinforced security in schools.

AFP

Top military official killed in fight for Marib

Dubai, UAE - A senior Yemeni military commander was among 28 troops killed in fighting between government forces and Houthi rebels for the strategic city of Marib, Defence Ministry sources said on Monday.

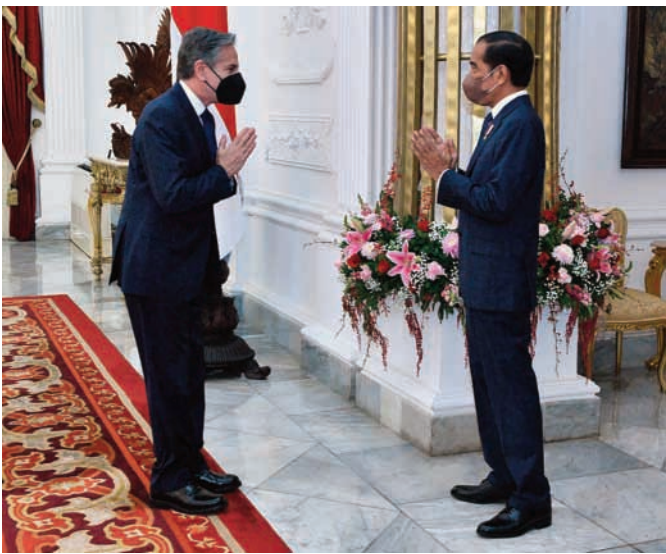
“Nasser al Zubiani, head of the government forces’ military operations, was killed along with 27 other soldiers during clashes with the Houthis in the past 24 hours south of Marib,” one source said on condition of anonymity. A second source confirmed Zubiani’s killing and the death toll.

Government forces and the Iran-backed Houthi rebels have been locked for months in a fierce battle for Marib, the government’s last stronghold and capital of the northern oil-rich province of the same name.

Fighting has escalated in recent weeks with thousands killed from both sides as a Saudi-led military coalition backing the government ramps air strikes on the rebels.

The rebels began a major push to seize Marib in February and, after a lull, they renewed their offensive in September. The Saudi-led coalition has been reporting high death tolls in almost daily strikes against the Houthis since October.

AFP



Indonesian President Joko Widodo (right) greets US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the Merdeka palace in Jakarta on Monday (AFP)

Antony Blinken begins Southeast Asia tour with China in focus

Jakarta, Indonesia - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Monday began a Southeast Asia tour in the Indonesian capital Jakarta, where he will outline Washington’s policy on the Indo-Pacific, a key US-China battleground.

Arriving from Britain after a G7 foreign ministers’ meeting dominated by tensions with Russia, Blinken will highlight what his administration says is the importance of Southeast Asia in US foreign policy.

In talks with Indonesian President Joko Widodo, Blinken ‘expressed support for Indonesia’s leadership in the Indo-Pacific, as the world’s third-largest democracy and a strong proponent of the rules-based international order’, said the US state department.

Today, Blinken will deliver an address on the ‘US approach to the Indo-Pacific’.

US President Joe Biden’s strategy does not differ fundamentally from that of former president Donald Trump’s government - insisting that the region should remain free and open in the face of rising Chinese aggression.

But Biden’s team has put a heavier emphasis on building al-

iances to counter Beijing, after the turbulence and unpredictability of the Trump era.

After Indonesia, Blinken heads to Malaysia and Thailand.

In his meetings, he will ‘focus on strengthening the regional security infrastructure in response to PRC bullying in the South China Sea’, Daniel Kritenbrink, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, told reporters ahead of the trip, using the abbreviation for the People’s Republic of China.

“We oppose any actions by the People’s Republic of China or any other actor designed to destabilise the region,” Kritenbrink said.

Tensions have been stoked by Beijing’s claims to almost all of the South China Sea, which overlap with those of several Southeast Asian states.

Blinken also plans to address the worsening crisis in Myanmar, which has been in chaos since a military coup in February.

He has said China poses ‘the biggest geopolitical test’ of the century but is seeking to walk a fine line between competition and confrontation.

AFP

Two missing after ships collide south of Sweden

Stockholm, Sweden - Two sailors were missing on Monday after a Danish cargo ship capsized when it collided with a British vessel off Sweden’s southern coast, officials said.

Nine boats and a rescue helicopter scoured the frigid waters following the early morning crash involving the two cargo ships between the Swedish city of Ystad and the Danish island of Bornholm, the media spokesman at the Swedish Maritime Administration said.

“One of the ships has capsized and is upside down,” Carl-Johan Linde said, adding that two people from that vessel were missing.

Around 10:30am the maritime authority cancelled the search ‘at sea’ for the missing



The capsized Danish cargo ship Karin Hoej in the Baltic Sea, between the Swedish city of Ystad and the Danish island of Bornholm, after colliding with a British cargo ship on Monday early morning (AFP)

sailors. The coastguard was towing the capsized Danish ship closer to shore to enable divers to scour the ship.

“We will be diving as if this is a lifesaving operation”, Angelica Anbring with the Swedish Rescue Service said, adding that they were hoping to find an air pocket

or something similar.

The British flagged Scot Carrier was headed for the Swedish island of Gotland, while the Danish flagged Karin Hoej was sailing to Denmark, according to Linde.

“The Scot Carrier released a smaller boat and looked for people and they heard screams from

the water, but couldn’t find anyone,” Jonas Franzen, communications director at the Swedish Maritime Administration, said.

‘Critical situation’

Emma Valhem, spokeswoman for the Swedish Sea Rescue Society, said she did not want to

speculate on the chances of finding the sailors alive.

She said with water temperatures around 4°C this time of year, the ‘situation is critical, already from the start’.

Soren Hoj, manager for the Danish shipping company operating the vessel, said there were two people in the crew and they were believed to be the ones missing.

Operations to prevent oil or other hazardous materials from being released into the water were also under way.

‘There is currently no ongoing oil spill’, Sweden’s coastguard said in a statement.

Prosecutors have opened an investigation into ‘gross negligence in sea traffic’, it said.

AFP

HK media mogul Lai defiant at Tiananmen sentencing

Hong Kong, China - Jailed Hong Kong mogul Jimmy Lai said he was proud to be punished as a court handed out fresh jail sentences on Monday to eight prominent democracy activists for attending a banned Tiananmen vigil.

Lai, the 74-year-old owner of the now-shuttered pro-democracy Apple Daily newspaper, was found guilty of unlawful assembly charges alongside former journalist Gwyneth Ho and prominent rights lawyer Chow Hang-tung last week.

He was among a group of eight - most of them already behind bars for protest-related offences - who were given terms ranging from four to 14 months on Monday afternoon.

Their case wraps up a lengthy prosecution of some two dozen campaigners over a banned vigil last year as Hong Kong authorities stamp out commemorations for democracy protesters killed by Chinese troops in the 1989 crackdown.

The activists were among thousands who defied a police ban to gather in Hong Kong’s Victoria Park on June 4, 2020.



Activist Alexandra Wong waves a flag outside the Wanchai district court in Hong Kong on Monday, where jailed Jimmy Lai (inset) was among eight democracy campaigners sentenced for taking part in a banned vigil (AFP)

Some gave speeches and interviews with reporters calling on Hong Kongers to light candles wherever they happened to be.

Others such as Lai only turned up at the event and lit a candle - an action judge Amanda Woodcock ruled nonetheless counted as ‘inciting’ people to join an unlawful assembly because of his fame and notoriety.

During mitigation on Monday,

Lai’s lawyer Robert Pang read out a hand-written letter his client had penned from prison which his team later released to reporters.

“If commemorating those who died because of injustice is a crime, then inflict on me that crime and let me suffer the punishment of this crime, so I may share the burden and glory of those young men and women

who shed their blood on June 4,” Lai wrote. “Remember those who shed the blood but do not remember the cruelty... may the power of love prevail over the power of destruction.”

‘The candlelight will live on’

Chow, a lawyer who represented herself at the trial, used her mitigation to describe the convic-

tions as ‘one step in the systemic erasure of history, both of the Tiananmen massacre and Hong Kong’s own history of civic resistance’.

She said Hong Kong’s courts were ‘in effect affirming the unequal power wielded by the government’ against critics by convicting people like her for taking part in protests. “People moved by conscience cannot be deterred by jail,” Chow added.

“Rest assured that the candlelight will live on, despite bans and ever more restrictive laws”.

Five other defendants in the case had previously pleaded guilty.

Judge Woodcock previously rejected the argument that authorities were curbing free speech, ruling last week that those who turned up in Victoria Park were taking part in ‘an act of defiance and protest against the police’.

On Monday, she said the defendants deserved a ‘deterrent, punitive’ sentence.

Lai received 13 months while Chow received a year behind bars.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

UK booster drive to fight 'tidal wave' of Omicron

London, UK - UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Sunday warned of a looming 'tidal wave' of Omicron, and brought forward a target to give over-18s a booster jab by one month to the end of December.

"No-one should be in any doubt: There is a tidal wave of Omicron coming," he said in a televised address, after the country's medical advisors raised the COVID-19 Alert Level due to a 'rapid increase' in infection from the variant.

Johnson, under pressure because of claims he and staff flouted COVID-19 restrictions last Christmas, called the spread of the mutation 'an emergency', as Omicron was doubling every two to three days.

"We know from bitter experience how these exponential curves develop," he added.

The increase in the five-stage COVID-19 Alert Level from three to four comes after a further 1,239 confirmed cases of the variant were recorded on Sunday.

That brings the total number of UK cases of Omicron to 3,137 - a 65 per cent increase from Saturday's total of 1,898.

Britain began easing coronavirus restrictions in June and the alert level was at stage three, which means the epidemic is in general circulation.

Alert level four means 'transmission is high and pressure on healthcare services is widespread and substantial



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (standing) visits the Health at the Stowe vaccination centre in central London on Monday (AFP)

or rising'.

The four chief medical officers for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland said the move was prompted by advice from the UK Health Security Agency, a public health body.

'Transmission of COVID-19 is already high in the community, mainly still driven by Delta, but the emergence of Omicron adds additional and rapidly increasing risk to the public and healthcare services,' they said.

'Early evidence shows that Omicron is spreading much

faster than Delta and that vaccine protection against symptomatic disease from Omicron is reduced.'

'Data on severity will become clearer over the coming weeks but hospitalisations from Omicron are already occurring and these are likely to increase rapidly.'

The officers said boosters were vital given that vaccine protection was reduced with Omicron, and both third jabs used - Pfizer and Moderna - increased immune response and showed 'good effectiveness'.

The move is designed to reduce pressure on the state-run National Health Service (NHS) which is dealing with seasonal respiratory infections such as flu.

Controversial measures

The government had set itself a target of giving everyone aged 18 and over in England a booster jab by the end of January.

But Johnson said that date would be brought forward by a month because not having high

levels of boosters could overwhelm the NHS 'and lead, sadly, to very many deaths'.

Some 42 military planning teams would be deployed across the country. Additional vaccination sites and mobile units will be opened and operate seven days a week, he added.

More than 530,000 booster jabs were given on Saturday, the Department of Health and Social Care said.

The devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which set

South African President tests positive for virus

Johannesburg, South Africa - South African President Cyril Ramaphosa tested positive for COVID-19 on Sunday and was receiving treatment for mild symptoms, the presidency said in a statement.

Ramaphosa, who is fully vaccinated, began feeling unwell after leaving a state memorial service for former president FW de Klerk earlier in the day but was in good spirits and being monitored by doctors, it said.

Ramaphosa would remain in self-isolation in Cape Town for the time being and had delegated all responsibilities to Deputy President David Mabuza for the next week.

On a recent visit to four West African states, the president and the entire South African delegation were tested for COVID-19 in all countries, the statement said.

'The president also tested negative on his return to Johannesburg on 8 December.'

The statement quoted Ramaphosa as saying his infection served as a warning of the importance of getting vaccinated and remaining vigilant against exposure.

"Vaccination remains the best protection against severe illness and hospitalisation," the statement said.

AFP

Sajid Javid said.

Vaccine passports will be introduced in certain settings from tomorrow.

MPs vote to make the proposals law today, with Johnson facing a potentially sizeable rebellion from his own Conservative colleagues.

The vote, though, is likely to pass with Labour support.

Britain --one of the worst-hit countries by COVID-19 with more than 146,000 deaths - began its mass vaccination campaign last December.

AFP

Four face trial in UK over toppling of slave trader Edward Colston's statue

London, UK - Four people were due to go on trial in Britain on Monday in connection with the toppling of a statue of a 17th century slave trader during anti-racism protests.

Demonstrators pulled down the bronze memorial to Edward Colston in Bristol, western England, on June 7 last year, then dragged it to the city's harbour and threw it in the River Avon.

The actions came as part of global Black Lives Matter protests prompted by the killing by a white police officer of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, in the United States the previous month.

Four people were arrested following the toppling of the statue of Colston, a leading figure in the Royal Africa Company which forcibly moved large numbers of West Africans.

Their trial on charges of criminal damage to the listed monument is due to start at 1000 GMT at Bristol Crown Court on Monday, according to court documents.

The defendants - Rhian Graham (29), Milo Ponsford (25), Jake Skuse (36), and Sage Willoughby (21) - have pleaded not guilty.

To support them, the artist Banksy, who comes from Bristol, announced he would be selling T-shirts to mark the occasion for £25. 'All proceeds to the defendants so they can go for a pint,' the elusive graffiti artist wrote on his Instagram page.

The limited edition grey souvenir tops have a picture of Colston's empty plinth with a rope hanging off, debris and a discarded sign, as well as the word 'BRISTOL' written above.

The Black Lives Matter protests have forced Britain into a reckoning with its colonial past,



This file photo shows the statue of Edward Colston being removed from the harbour in Bristol, southwest England on June 11, 2020 (AFP)

prompting a reassessment of statues, road names and buildings linked to historical figures associated with slavery.

Several Bristol institutions bearing Colston's name have since changed their name to avoid negative associations with him and the slave trade.

The statue, which had stood in the city since 1895, was recovered from the Avon and put on display with placards from the event, along with explanations of

what happened and why.

The empty plinth was temporarily replaced by a statue of a female protester from the day, but it was taken down within 24 hours as it did not have local authority permission.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government is pressing ahead with contentious legislation to toughen jail terms for vandalism of historical artefacts.

AFP

Indian man commits murder to fake death

New Delhi, India - An Indian man who tried to fake his death by murdering a builder and passing the body off as his own has been arrested, police said on Monday.

He did it to avoid being tried for another alleged murder, they added - Sudesh Kumar was charged with but not convicted of the 2018 killing of his daughter who had eloped.

Kumar was released last year as authorities tried to prevent coronavirus outbreaks by decongesting overcrowded prisons.

Police last month found a body in Ghaziabad, on the outskirts of the capital New Delhi, wearing Kumar's clothes and carrying his ID card.

"The body was partially burnt and its face was beyond recognition," police superintendent Iraj Raja said.

"We traced it back to [Kumar's] home and got his wife to identify the body. She promptly identified it as his husband's body. However, we were not convinced."

Police got a tip-off that Kumar was still alive and caught him outside his home on Friday. "Upon being interrogated, he spilled the beans," Raja said.

Kumar had befriended a mason and invited him to his house on the pretext of doing some repair work, giving him a set of clothes to wear and plying him with alcohol before beating him to death.

AFP



Independents demonstrate as they hold Kanak flags a day after the self determination referendum in Noumea, in the French South Pacific territory of New Caledonia on Monday (AFP)

N Caledonia pro-independence groups reject referendum result

Noumea, France - Pro-independence parties in New Caledonia said on Monday that they rejected the result of a weekend referendum which they boycotted and which overwhelmingly approved the Pacific territory remaining part of France.

A statement from a coalition of pro-independence groups said that they 'do not recognise the legitimacy or the validity of this vote which was confiscated. This referendum did not respect the spirit or the letter of the Noumea accords'.

A total of 96.49 per cent of ballots cast in Sunday's referendum were against independence, while only 3.51 per cent were in favour.

But turnout was a mere 43.90 per cent, with most of the archipelago's indigenous Kanak population heeding the call for a boycott.

Speaking earlier on the France Inter radio, France's Minister in charge of Overseas Territories, Sebastien Lecornu defended the result, saying it had full legal force.

"Whatever the turnout level, legally speaking it's a vote that has the same weight as the two

previous ones that returned a 'No' vote," Lecornu said, referring to two previous referendums in 2018 and 2020.

He admitted that, "Politically it means something: We need to look at this division."

French authorities pushed ahead with the referendum despite calls from pro-independence groups to delay the vote because of fears that COVID-19 would make a fair campaign impossible.

Kanaks, who tend to favour independence, were also called by their traditional community leaders to observe a day's mourning on Sunday for those killed by the coronavirus.

Police reinforcements have been sent to the islands in case of unrest and about 2,000 officers were deployed for the vote, which passed off without incident.

'The path of dialogue has been broken off by the stubbornness of a French government that is incapable of reconciling its geopolitical interests in the Pacific with its obligation to decolonise our country,' the statement from the main independence groups such as FLNKS said.

Transition

French President Emmanuel Macron noted 'the high abstention rates' in a recorded message on Sunday, but he said that France could be 'proud' of a more than 30-year process designed to settle the islands' status.

Residents were asked in three separate referendums if they wished to break away.

Having rejected independence in 2018 and then again last year, islanders were called on Sunday to answer one last time whether they wanted New Caledonia 'to accede to full sovereignty and become independent'.

The islands are a key part of France's claim of being a Pacific power, with New Caledonia granting Paris rights to the surrounding ocean, as well as serving as a military staging post.

President Macron said that 'a period of transition' would now start which is expected to result in Paris granting more political autonomy to the islands, which are split along ethnic grounds between white Europeans and the indigenous population.

AFP

January 6 probe: New books lift lid on Donald Trump's final days in office

Washington, US - The Congressional investigation into the January 6 assault on the US Capitol by a mob loyal to Donald Trump is increasingly focusing on the former president and his top aides - and what they did before the riot.

Last week, an appeals court ruled that Trump cannot block the release to investigators of his White House records relating to the attack, and his former chief of staff Mark Meadows faces being ruled in contempt for refusing to testify.

The committee has so far interviewed nearly 300 people.

It is piecing together a picture of the moves made by Trump after he lost the November 2020 election to Joe Biden, and the possibility that he was attempting to engineer a coup in an unprecedented threat to US democracy.

Here is a look at what happened in the crucial weeks leading up to January 6, 2021:

Trump serious about reversing election

Trump's pushback against Biden's election victory was not just an extended fit of pique, but rather a serious effort to retain power, which the Republican mounted for weeks.

After failing to reverse vote counts in the states he needed to change the result, Trump focused intensely on preventing Congress from certifying Biden's victory on January 6.

In mid-December, attorney John Eastman laid out for Trump a precise plan to have then vice president Mike Pence, who was to preside over the certification, exploit legal loopholes to keep Biden from moving into the Oval Office.

Meadows was one of several people close to Trump who, according to various reports, disseminated that plan, along with



Supporters of then US President Donald Trump protest outside the US Capitol in Washington, DC on January 06 (AFP)



Then president Donald Trump speaks at the 'Stop The Steal' Rally on January 6 this year (AFP)

bizarre conspiracy theories alleging the election was fraudulent.

Others in Trump's camp also mapped out legal justifications

for Pence to reject Biden's certification.

Pence, increasingly under pressure, sought advice in late December from former vice president Dan Quayle, who said he was required to certify Biden's win.

But according to new accounts and books about Trump's last months in office, Pence simply would not say no to his boss.

"You don't know the position I'm in," he said, according to *Peril*, the book by journalists Bob Woodward and Robert Costa.

"There are other guys saying I've got this power."

Meanwhile, on January 5 and 6, Trump, Meadows and other White House aides liaised regularly with a 'war room' in a

nearby hotel staffed by Eastman, advisor Steve Bannon and numerous others, who also were in contact with Trump supporters in the streets.

CIA, Pentagon feared Trump 'coup'

In the weeks after Trump refused to concede defeat, top officials feared he could try to mobilise the military to hold onto power.

They also feared that Trump, out of frustration, could start a war.

After the election, when Trump fired defence secretary Mark Esper, CIA Director Gina Haspel called the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, saying, "We are on the way to a right-wing coup.

The whole thing is insanity," according to *Peril*.

As January 6 neared, Milley warned staff of a 'Reichstag moment' - referring to when Nazis seized power after the 1933 torching of the German parliament.

On January 2, ten former defence secretaries issued an extraordinary statement warning it was dangerous to challenge the election results or use the military to resolve political issues.

War with Iran and China feared

Nine days after the November election, Trump asked advisors about launching airstrikes to take out Iran's entire nuclear programme. They persuaded him to

stand down, but they were unnerved.

"This is a highly dangerous situation. We are going to lash out for his ego?" Haspel asked Milley, according to *Peril*.

When the issue was again raised after a barrage of missiles was launched at the US embassy in Baghdad on December 21, officials struggled to contain Trump, according to *Betrayal*, a new book by ABC journalist Jonathan Karl.

But a much more serious situation was smoldering: China was worried an unhinged Trump could attack. And the Pentagon worried that Beijing could launch a first strike.

Just before the election, Milley took the unusual step of calling

his Chinese counterpart to offer reassurances.

"I want to assure you the American government is stable," Milley told General Li Zuoqiang. "We are not going to attack or conduct any kinetic operations against you."

Beijing's worries resurfaced after the January 6 riot, and Milley called Li again.

"Things may look unsteady.... But that's the nature of democracy, General Li. We are 100 per cent steady," he said.

'Got it?'

Before the January 6 attack, the people who might have been able to deter Trump - the top Republicans in Congress, Senator Mitch McConnell and Congressman Kevin McCarthy - are depicted in the books as frozen by their own political ambitions, and thus unwilling to challenge Trump.

In the hours after the attack, both Republican and Democratic political figures, including some in Trump's own Cabinet, felt he was unstable and should be removed from office by constitutional means.

But there was no clear path, especially as Pence refused to consider it and his support would have been necessary.

Ultimately, Pence certified the election result, and calm was restored - more or less.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called Milley to ask how an 'unhinged president' could be prevented from ordering a nuclear strike. "The nuclear triggers are secure," Milley told her, according to *Peril*. "I can assure you that that will not happen."

Milley then called in some senior officers and told them any order coming from Trump had to be checked with him.

He looked at each one and said, "Got it?"
AFP

Tornado-stricken Kentucky town organises to help their own

Mayfield, US - In Mayfield, a US town razed by the weekend's tornadoes, locals say they are driven by their Christian faith to clear the rubble, collect supplies and turn their churches into shelters for those left homeless by one of the most devastating storm outbreaks in American history.

The small town in southern Kentucky is part of the 'Bible Belt', a swathe of the southern United States where life centres on the church.

On Sunday, residents mentioned their faith as a driving force to move forward and help each other pick up the pieces.

Vanessa Cooper (40) was trying to salvage what she could from her mother's apartment, of which only two walls remained.



Volunteers from a local church help to clear a house in Mayfield, Kentucky, on Sunday after the tornado (AFP)

Nearby, three friends cleared away twisted debris while Cooper rummaged through

damaged furniture. "Some people from my church came to help ... It means

a lot to me," she said, adding that she couldn't have done it alone. Solidarity comes naturally in

small communities, Cooper said, as a neighbour asked if she needed anything.

Mayfield, a town of 10,000, 'has always been close', said Cooper, who works at the local technical high school. "We show a lot of love to each other."

'I have nothing'

Sitting on a chair in front of what was left of his house, Marty Janes stared blankly as volunteers worked around him.

A short distance from downtown Mayfield, his neighbourhood was devastated by the twister. A tree fell on his front porch, his roof collapsed, and the exterior front walls were torn off.

"I'm devastated, it's unbelievable," Janes said. He was trapped in the back of

his house, while his wife, Theresa, was in the bedroom as their ceiling collapsed.

After their rescue by firefighters, the couple were separated for two days while Theresa was hospitalised, Janes said with tears in his eyes. He didn't want his wife to see the damage to their house, now uninhabitable.

"I have nothing," said the 59-year-old, who managed to recover only an old photo of his college graduation and two American flags, which he put up in front of the ruined house.

Friends came to help him clean, but the task is immense. Young volunteers from the church also came to the rescue, cutting out the interior walls and partitions with saws, and clearing the rooms of unusable furniture

and equipment.

Others cut up and removed the tree lying on the house.

Faced with a number of now-homeless people, several places of worship are now acting as shelters.

In Paducah, about 40km north of Mayfield, Pastor Hank Garner opened his Lone Oak Baptist Church to house those in need and serve as a donations collection point.

"Folks just started pulling together everything they thought that we would need," the pastor said, as water and power remained cut off in Mayfield.

Among the donations were warm clothes, blankets, baby supplies, bottles of water and food.

AFP

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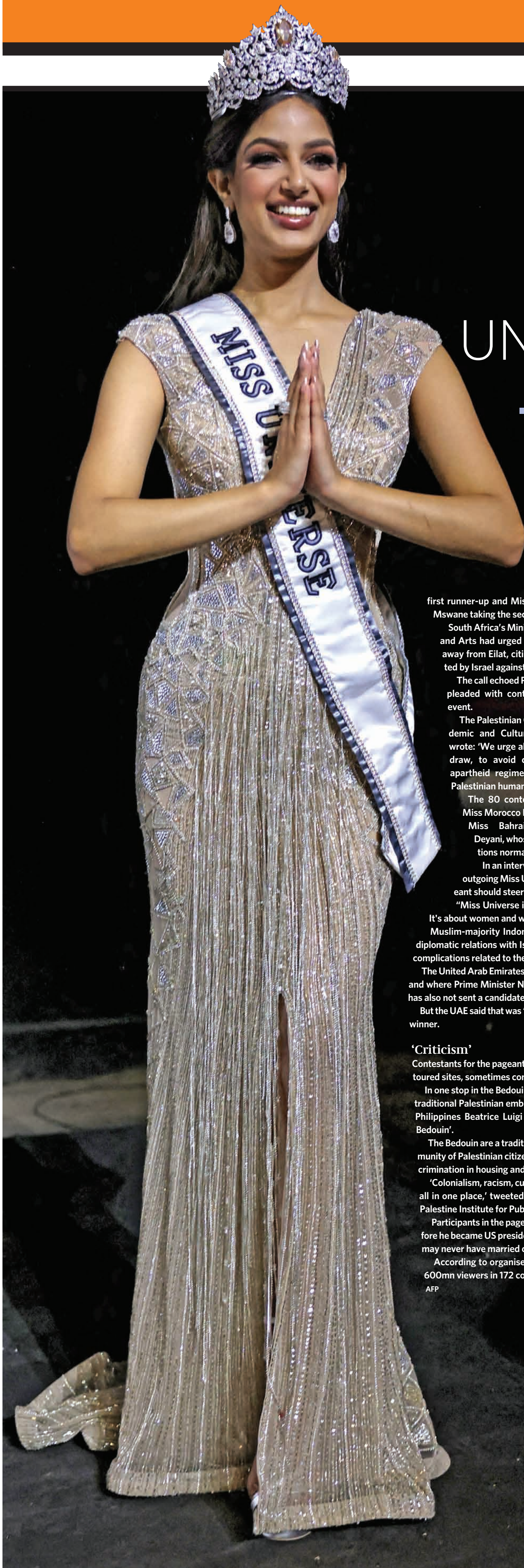
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THE NEW MISS UNIVERSE ...from India

Eilat, Israel - Miss India Harnaaz Sandhu was crowned Miss Universe in the Israeli city of Eilat early on Monday, with several contestants defying pressure to boycott in support of the Palestinians.

The 70th edition of the annual pageant, held in Israel for the first time, has also faced complications from the coronavirus pandemic.

Sandhu took the top prize in the Red Sea resort with Paraguay's Nadia Ferreira

first runner-up and Miss South Africa Lalela Mswane taking the second runner-up spot.

South Africa's Ministry of Sports, Culture and Arts had urged its contestant to stay away from Eilat, citing 'atrocities committed by Israel against Palestinians'.

The call echoed Palestinian groups who pleaded with contestants to avoid the event.

The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel wrote: 'We urge all participants to withdraw, to avoid complicity in Israel's apartheid regime and its violation of Palestinian human rights.'

The 80 contestants also included Miss Morocco Kawtar Benhalima and Miss Bahrain Manar Nadeem Deyani, whose majority Muslim nations normalised ties with Israel last year.

In an interview with AFP in Jerusalem late last month, the outgoing Miss Universe Andrea Meza, of Mexico, said the pageant should steer clear of politics.

"Miss Universe isn't a political movement, nor a religious one. It's about women and what they can offer."

Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia, nations that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, have not sent contestants but both cited complications related to the pandemic, not Israel's rights record.

The United Arab Emirates, which also normalised ties with Israel last year and where Prime Minister Naftali Bennett made a historic visit on Sunday, has also not sent a candidate.

But the UAE said that was 'due to time constraints', in selecting its national winner.

'Criticism'

Contestants for the pageant landed in Israel late last month and have since toured sites, sometimes coming under criticism for cultural insensitivity.

In one stop in the Bedouin city of Rahat, the candidates wore robes with traditional Palestinian embroidery while rolling grape leaves - which Miss Philippines Beatrice Luigi Gomez tweeted was a 'Day in the life of a Bedouin'.

The Bedouin are a traditionally nomadic people who belong to the community of Palestinian citizens of Israel. They have long complained of discrimination in housing and education.

'Colonialism, racism, cultural appropriation, patriarchy, whitewashing, all in one place,' tweeted Ines Abdel Razek of the advocacy group the Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy.

Participants in the pageant, which was co-owned by Donald Trump before he became US president, must be between the ages of 18 and 28 and may never have married or had a child.

According to organisers, the coronation ceremony was watched by 600mn viewers in 172 countries.

AFP



Miss Universe contestants congratulate Miss India, Harnaaz Sandhu (C), as she is crowned Miss Universe during the 70th Miss Universe beauty pageant in Israel's southern Red Sea coastal city of Eilat on December 13, 2021. (AFP)



A FEMINIST AT HEART

New Miss France insists she's a feminist after criticism

Caen, France - The newly crowned Miss France 2022 insisted that she was a feminist after winning this year's competition which has drawn criticism from the government's gender equality minister.

"As a woman I wanted to show that you can be Miss France and a feminist," Diane Leyre, a 24-year-old real estate professional from the Paris region, told a press conference on Saturday night.

"For me, being a feminist is deciding what I want."

The Miss France competition and other beauty pageants around the world have long been criticised by women's rights groups as objectifying women and promoting unhealthy body images.

Opposition was led this year by France's Gender Equality Minister, Elisabeth Moreno, who denounced the competition's 'outdated rules... which can be discriminatory'.

Contestants have to be single, more than 1m 70cm tall and be less than 25 years old, although organisers announced on Saturday that the requirement to be unmarried will change 'to bring us into step with the era'.

Including participants from the other section 'is part of our discussions', the head of the Miss France company, Alexia Laroche-Joubert, told Europe 1 radio on Saturday.

Over 7mn people - around one in seven French adults - tuned in to watch this year's competition on the TF1 channel on Saturday night which was filmed in a stadium in the north-east of the capital. "We all need a bit of light-heartedness," Culture Minister Roselyne Bachelot told the BFM channel on Friday, defending the contestants whom she described as 'far from being empty trophies'.

AFP



FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Ronaldo, Messi meet again as Man Utd draw PSG in last 16

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Paris, France - Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi will renew their old rivalry in the Champions League after Manchester United and Paris Saint-Germain were paired together again in Monday's draw for the last 16.

It is the standout tie to come out of the draw, with six-time former winners Bayern Munich to play Spanish champions Atletico Madrid in the most notable other match-up, while leading English contenders Manchester City, Liverpool and holders Chelsea were all handed opponents that they will expect to beat.

United and PSG will meet for the third time in four seasons with the French club at home in the first leg in February after coming second behind City in Group A.

That is despite signing the 34-year-old Ballon d'Or winner Messi from Barcelona in August, just before Ronaldo returned to Old Trafford for a second spell from Juventus.

Five of Messi's six goals for PSG so far have come in the Champions League, while Ronaldo has 13 goals this season for United, with six in Europe.

Ronaldo will turn 37 in early February. He scored twice when Juventus beat Messi's Barcelona 3-0 away in the group stage last season.

United famously beat PSG in the last 16 in 2018/19 at the start of Ole Gunnar Sol-skjaer's reign as manager, recovering from a 2-0 loss at home in the first leg to win the return 3-1 and advance on away goals thanks to a late Marcus Rashford

penalty.

The clubs also met in the group stage last season, with the away side winning on each occasion.

Pep Guardiola's City will play Villarreal, who beat United on penalties in last season's Europa League final and qualified for the last 16 ahead of Atalanta. Premier League champions and current leaders City lost last season's



Cristiano Ronaldo



Lionel Messi

LAST 16 DRAW	KNOCKOUT ROUND PLAY-OFF
Benfica (POR) v Real Madrid (ESP)	Sevilla (ESP) v Dinamo Zagreb (CRO)
Villarreal (ESP) v Manchester City (ENG)	Atalanta (ITA) v Olympiakos (GRE)
Atletico Madrid (ESP) v Bayern Munich (GER)	RB Leipzig (GER) v Real Sociedad (ESP)
RB Salzburg (AUT) v Liverpool (ENG)	Barcelona (ESP) v Napoli (ITA)
Inter Milan (ITA) v Ajax (NED)	Zenit Saint Petersburg (RUS) v Real Betis (ESP)
Sporting Lisbon (POR) v Juventus (ITA)	Borussia Dortmund (GER) v Rangers (SCO)
Chelsea (ENG) v Lille (FRA)	Sheriff Tiraspol (MDA) v Braga (POR)
Paris Saint-Germain (FRA) v Manchester United (ENG)	Porto (POR) v Lazio (ITA)
1st legs: February 15-16 and February 22-23	1st legs: February 17, 2nd legs: February 24
2nd legs: March 8-9 and March 15-16	Winners advance to round of 16

final in Porto to Chelsea, who were the only English team not to win their group.

That meant Thomas Tuchel's team could have been drawn against Bayern or Real Madrid, so they will be relieved to be facing French champions Lille, who topped their own section but are currently in mid-table in Ligue 1 and are in the knockout phase of the Champions League for the first time since 2006/07.

Meanwhile Liverpool, who have lifted the trophy six times, will play Austrian champions Red Bull Salzburg, a team through to the knockout phase for the first time.

Jurgen Klopp's side beat Salzburg twice in the group stage in 2019/20, winning 4-3 at Anfield and then 2-0 away.

Chelsea also won home and away against Lille in that season's group phase.

Record 13-time European champions Real Madrid were drawn against two-time former European Cup winners Benfica, with the first leg in Lisbon.

Inter Milan play Ajax and Portuguese champions Sporting will take on Juventus. They will hope to emulate their compatriots Porto, who knocked out the Italian giants at the same stage last season.

The first legs will be played in the second half of February with second legs in early March.

This season's Champions League final will be played in the Russian city of Saint Petersburg on May 28.

AFP



Brentford's Frank expects game to go ahead after Man Utd COVID-19 scare

London, UK - Brentford manager Thomas Frank expects Tuesday's Premier League game against Manchester United to go ahead despite the coronavirus scare at Old Trafford.

United have reported a small number of positive lateral flow tests within their squad after their win at Norwich on Saturday.

The United players and staff involved were sent home before training on Sunday.

Tottenham had both their Europa League match against Rennes on Thursday and Sunday's Premier League game at Brighton postponed after eight players and five staff members tested positive.

But Frank is hopeful United's visit to west London will still be played as scheduled.

"We are planning to play the game," Frank said on Monday. "That's what we are focusing on. We can't control anything else.

"I think it needs to be a significant amount of COVID-19 cases before the game can be cancelled but to be fair I'm a little bit in doubt when it is enough."



Brentford defender Pontus Jansson (left) celebrates with teammate Charlie Goode after scoring their first goal in a match against Watford at Brentford Community Stadium, in London on Friday (AFP)

The British government has brought in stricter COVID-19

protocols in response to the spread of the Omicron variant. But football has still been hit by the virus, with QPR unable to

play Monday's Championship game against Sheffield United due to an outbreak in their camp. Echoing Arsenal manager

Mikel Arteta's recent plea, Frank called for clearer guidelines on how many positive tests will trigger a postponement.

"It's a very tricky situation," Frank said. "I think it's very important the Premier League and all of us are following

normal society rules and restrictions. That's very important.

"And then if we can make it very clear what the rules are to cancel a game that would be good. But I think all that is just speculation and taking the focus away from what we all want and that is what's happening on the pitch."

Brentford have been hit by COVID-19 themselves, with Ivan Toney and Ethan Pinnock both missing games after testing positive recently.

AFP



Thomas Frank



FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Real Madrid move 13 points clear of Atletico after derby



Mehdi Taremi kicks the ball during a match between Real Madrid and Club Atletico de Madrid at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium, in Madrid on Sunday (AFP)

Madrid, Spain - Real Madrid strengthened their already-commanding position in the title race on Sunday by defeating Atletico Madrid 2-0 to move 13 points clear of the defending champions in La Liga.

Atletico have a game in hand over their rivals but the advantage is considerable and perhaps even insurmountable, even in December.

Barcelona are now 18 points adrift and arguably an irrelevance at the top after they were earlier held to a 2-2 draw away at Osasuna.

Sevilla, who last won the Spanish title in 1946, are the closest challengers, eight points back, and having played a game fewer.

"We are favourites today, of course, you can say that," said Carlo Ancelotti. "But if you relax it can cost you dearly. We have to keep going, to get closer to winning it as soon as possible."

Madrid, though, were ominously superior in a derby that had its occasional bad-tempered moments but was largely neutralised by the home side's dominance at the Santiago Bernabeu.

"The title race is still alive," insisted Diego Simeone. "There are a load of matches left. Madrid have a lot of points, it's true, but La Liga is complicated."

Karim Benzema was passed fit enough to start and then, worryingly for Madrid went off again at half-time, but not before volleying them into the lead. Marco Asensio doubled the advantage in the second half.

Atletico's defence were dashing back with such intent they forgot about Benzema behind them, the Frenchman holding his position just inside the area for the cut-back. Vinicius found him with a floated pass and Benzema had time to send a perfect volley past Jan Oblak.

Felix went close soon after the

restart but the changes made little difference to the balance of the game and just before the hour Madrid made it two.

Barca struggle again
Barcelona's nightmare week, meanwhile, ended in more disappointment as they conceded in the 86th minute to draw away at struggling Osasuna.

After losing at home to Real Betis last weekend and being dumped into the Europa League by Bayern Munich on Wednesday, Barca could only muster a point against Osasuna, who sit 10th and are now winless in eight league matches.

The deflation for Xavi Hernandez's team will be heightened by the manner of Osasuna's equaliser, coming so late in the game after two 19-year-olds, Nico Gonzalez and Abde Ezzalzouli, had set them on course for victory. "Our young players are the positive but in general it's negative," said Xavi afterwards. "The players who make the difference in the club right now are 17, 18 and 19 years old."

AFP



Barcelona's Luuk de Jong reacts at the end of the Spanish league match against Osasuna (AFP)



Paris Saint-Germain's forward Kylian Mbappe celebrates after scoring a goal (AFP)

Mbappe reaches landmark with double

Paris, France - Kylian Mbappe reached a century of Ligue 1 goals for Paris Saint-Germain with a brace in Sunday's 2-0 win over his old club Monaco at the Parc des Princes.

Mbappe opened the scoring with an early penalty and then grabbed a second just before half-time after being set up by Lionel Messi to get his 100th goal in France's top flight since moving to PSG in 2017.

The France striker, who also scored 16 league goals for Monaco at the beginning of his career, does not turn 23 until later this month.

The victory allowed PSG to extend their lead at the top of Ligue 1 to 13 points from Marseille, who won 2-0 at Strasbourg earlier on Sunday and have a game in hand. Mauricio Pochettino's side ultimately eased to victory in a subdued atmosphere at the Parc des Princes, with one end of the stadium closed as a punishment after the club's ultras let off flares en masse during a recent game. "It was a professional performance and we deserved to win," Pochettino said.

AFP

Inter Milan hammer Cagliari to take charge in Serie A

Milan, Italy - Inter Milan took advantage of their title rivals slipping up with a thumping 4-0 win over Cagliari on Sunday which ensured they moved top of Serie A.

Reigning champions Inter moved a point ahead of local rivals AC Milan with a statement performance at the San Siro against the Sardinians who had goalkeeper Alessio Cragno to thank the hosts didn't run up double figures.

Lautaro Martinez's brace and two more superb goals from Hakan Calhanoglu and Alexis Sanchez extended Inter's domestic unbeaten run to nine matches and allowed Simone Inzaghi's team to take charge in Italy following Milan's draw at Udinese on Saturday.

Inter, who racked up 15 shots on target, hit the bar and missed a penalty, are also four points ahead of former leaders Napoli who slipped back to fourth following a shock 1-0 home defeat at the hands of surprise team Empoli.

"We saw a lot of good teams struggle after their European matches so we knew we needed to be focused. The boys were brilliant right from the start," said Inzaghi to DAZN. "We're top of the league and in the Champions League last 16 after 11 years, it's hard to do much better."

Cagliari are second-from-bot-



Cagliari's goalkeeper Alessio Cragno stops a shot during a match against Inter Milan, in Milan on Sunday (AFP)

tom and their supine performance, even with a number of absences, so angered manager Walter Mazzarri that he left his post-match interview with DAZN after answering just one question.

Martinez opened the scoring with a bullet header from Calhanoglu's corner just before the half hour, and Inter were poised to open a two-goal half-time lead after Cragno brought down the marauding Denzel Dumfries.

Cragno saved Martinez's penalty but four minutes after the break Sanchez doubled Inter's lead with a stunning volley

after Nicolo Barella hooked over a flashy cross with his back to the penalty area.

Inter put the match to bed with two brilliant goals in two minutes, with Calhanoglu drifting in from the left flank and lashing home a powerful strike before Martinez made it 10 for the season in the 68th minute, collecting Barella's floated pass and dinking home a delicate finish.

Empoli stun Napoli

Patrick Cutrone's bizarre winner with 20 minutes remaining in Naples fired promoted Empoli seventh, above Roma and Lazio

who lost 2-1 at Sassuolo, and hit Napoli's bid for a first title since the days of Diego Maradona.

Cutrone rose highest for a corner and his flick flew at Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa, who minutes after his return from injury headed his clearance into the back of Cutrone's head and then watched the ball fly back into his own goal. It was an unfortunate way to lose for Napoli who had 30 shots, struck the bar through Eljif Elmas in the first half and had a Juan Jesus goal ruled out for offside nine minutes before Cutrone's winner.

AFP

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Salalah Club win prestigious HM the Sultan's Youth Cup

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Salalah Club has been declared the winner of His Majesty the Sultan's Youth Cup 2020, while Seeb Club has been adjudged second followed by Al Bashaer in the third place.

Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Sayyid Saud Hilal al Busaidi, Minister of State and Governor of Muscat, on Monday, presided over the awards ceremony of His Majesty the Sultan's Cup for Youth 2020.

The ceremony, which was held at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC), was attended by heads of sport federations and committees and representatives of sport clubs.

Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, said in his speech that the competition was one of the most important indicators of the continuous interest of His Majesty the Sultan in youth so as to instill a spirit of work and perseverance in them, besides motivating clubs to achieve their desired goals in various sectors and upgrading the level of their activities.

"The committee - supervising the competition - monitors and evaluates the cultural, sports and youth activities undertaken by the clubs during the past year



Clockwise from left: Salalah Club members receive the winner's trophy of His Majesty the Sultan's Youth Cup 2020; Seeb Club members with the second prize and Al Bashaer members take the trophy for the third place



through internal and external participations," Rawas added.

The ministry, he said, would work to develop and amend var-

ious aspects of the competition, such as restructuring the competition, evaluation criteria, and the quality of activities and competi-

tions to align it with Oman's Vision 2040 and its strategic objectives.

This edition of the competi-

tion saw the participation of 42 clubs, namely: Ahli Sidab, A'Seeb, Oman Club, Muscat, Bowsher, Quriyat, Salalah, Al

Nasr, Dhofar, Al Ittihad, Mirbat, Khasab, Madha, Diba, Bukha, Ibri, Yanqul, Nizwa, Bahla, Samail, Al Bashaer, Fanja, Al

Hamra, Sohar, Saham, A'Suwaik, Al Khaboura, Al Salam, Majees, A'Rustaq, Al-Musna'a, Al-Mudhaibi and Bidiyah, beside others.



Hazlewood out of 2nd Ashes Test due to injury

Adelaide, Australia - Injured Australian paceman Josh Hazlewood was on Monday ruled out of the second Ashes Test against England in Adelaide this week, with Jhye Richardson or Michael Neser in line to replace him.

The 30-year-old suffered a side strain during Australia's nine-wicket thumping of the visitors in the opening Test at Brisbane and has returned home to rest.

"Hazlewood returned to Sydney for further assessment and rehabilitation with a decision on his fitness for the Boxing Day Test (in Melbourne) to be made in due course," Cricket Australia said.

His absence is a big blow ahead of the Adelaide day-night Test starting on Thursday, with Hazlewood boasting a pink-ball record of 32 wickets at just 19.90. He didn't bowl on the third afternoon in Brisbane, although after an overnight scan he did get through six overs on day four.

Australian captain Pat Cummins said at the time Hazlewood was 'a bit sore'.

"(It's) nothing too serious but didn't want it to turn into a huge injury," Cummins said then.

Richardson is widely seen as favourite to replace him and join Cummins and Mitchell Starc as Australia's three-pronged pace attack in what would be only his third Test.

AFF

Mercedes set to appeal over safety car call

ABU DHABI GRAND PRIX

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Lewis Hamilton's Mercedes team are expected to appeal after two protests they made against Max Verstappen's title-winning victory in the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix were rejected by stewards.

The man in their sights is race director Michael Masi and his controversial decision to withdraw the safety car for the final lap.

The appeal must be lodged within 96 hours from the moment they indicated their intention to appeal, which in this case would be 0700AEDT Friday (2000GMT Thursday).

It is likely to relate to the way in which the safety car rules were applied by Masi at the end of the race following a crash by Williams' driver Nicholas Latifi.

The involvement of the safety car set up a final lap in which Verstappen overtook long-time race leader Hamilton to win the race and the title, dashing the Briton's hopes of a record eighth world crown. Mercedes argued that Masi did not apply the rules correctly by resuming the race for the last lap.

Stewards on Sunday countered by saying 'although Article 48.12 may not have been applied fully' the following article 'overrides' it and 'once the message 'safety car in this lap' has been displayed, it is mandatory to withdraw the safety car at the end of that lap'.

With a bit of hindsight, could the race stewards have done a better job? Yes. Did something controversial take place? Yes.

DAVID COULTHARD

Masi made his opinion clear to a seething Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff.

"That is what we call a race," said the 42-year-old Australian, who took on the role when Charlie Whiting died at the beginning of the 2019 season.

Unlike Wolff, Hamilton - who had won the previous three races to draw level on points with his



Dutch rival - accepted defeat with grace.

"Congratulations to Max and his team," he said.

"We gave it everything this last part of the season and never gave up, that's the most important thing."

Opinion varied amongst former Formula One stars with some sympathising with Mer-

cedes and others with Masi.

"With a bit of hindsight, could the race stewards have done a better job? Yes," said David Coulthard, runner-up in the 2001 title race. "Did something controversial take place? Yes."

'Unbelievable climax'

Four-time champion Alain Prost said he understood Mercedes'

gripe.

"The protest over the managing of the safety car is an extra controversy which one does not need because the mistake was committed by the authorities," the Frenchman told Canal Plus.

Britain's 1996 world champion Damon Hill said Masi appeared to make up the rules as he went along.

'This is a new way of running the sport where the Race Director can make these ad hoc decisions,' he tweeted after the race.

'Its been a bit too 'guess what I'm going to do now' I think.'

The 61-year-old softened his tone in a tweet on Monday, conceding Masi's job was not one for the faint-hearted.

'Does anyone fancy changing jobs? F1 Race Director? I'd think about it at least twice. And then a couple more times,' tweeted Hill. 'Masi has a massively difficult task. Not made easier by communications now being broadcast live globally. Maybe this needs a re-think?'

Hamilton's former Mercedes team-mate and 2016 champion Nico Rosberg pleaded for Masi to be shown 'some compassion'.

"The world is watching and he has to take a decision in 15 seconds," said Rosberg.

"It is the last lap of the final race of the championship, the most pressurised of situations.

"His decision provided us with a magnificent racing moment and an unbelievable climax," Rosberg added.

AFF

Rohit hopes to end India's cricket world title drought

New Delhi, India - India's new limited-overs captain Rohit Sharma said he hopes to win a world title for the cricket-crazy nation, an achievement that eluded his sacked predecessor Virat Kohli.

During Kohli's five-year tenure India rose in the one-day, Twenty20 and Test rankings but missed out on securing a single international tournament.

India, who last won a world crown - the Champions Trophy



- in 2013, failed to make the semi-finals in this year's T20 World Cup and got knocked out in the last four of the 2019 50-over showpiece event.

The team also lost the inaugural World Test Championship final to New Zealand in June.

"The last ICC trophy we won was in 2013, since then we haven't won but I don't think we did anything wrong after that," Rohit (34) said in a video on the Board of Control for Cricket in

India's official website on Sunday. "We played as a team, we performed as a team, it's just that we couldn't get that extra inch that we look forward to," he said.

"There is a lot of World Cup coming up. India will definitely be eyeing to do well in all those World Cups."

Kohli was fired as captain of India's ODI side last week, a month after he stepped down as the T20 leader following the

T20 World Cup.

But the 33-year-old remains Test captain and will lead India in three Tests in South Africa starting on December 26.

Rohit praised Kohli for his leadership since he took over the limited-overs job from M.S. Dhoni in 2017. "He has put the team in a position where there is no looking back. Those five years that he has led the team, he led from the front," Rohit said.

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