

FOREIGN MINISTER RECEIVES CREDENTIALS OF PAKISTAN, NORWAY ENVOYS



H E Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, received copies of credentials of Mohammed Imran Ali Chaudhry (top), Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and Thomas Lid Ball, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Norway to Oman. H E Sayyid Badr welcomed the ambassadors, wishing them success in carrying out their duties, and further progress and growth in the bilateral relations between Oman and their countries (ONA)

Amerat resident claims title at Oman's first esports event

Our Correspondent
Muscat

More than 250 gamers took part in the first esports event organised by the Oman Committee for Electronic Games and Sports of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth held in the country recently.

Fahad bin Abdul Rahman al Hassani, a 25-year-old, defeated 256 contestants to be crowned winner. "I have been gaming for long, but facing some of the most talented players in this mega competition was indeed challenging. I did well throughout the tournament. My main challenge was in the semi-finals when I faced an experienced player. He gave a tough fight," Hassani said.

A resident of Amerat, Hassani aims to represent Oman at international competitions. "Esports are now the talk of town. Oman is taking the right steps in encouraging esports among enthusiasts. I long to represent my country in the esports arena in



Esports are now the talk of town. Oman is taking the right steps in encouraging esports among enthusiasts

FAHAD AL HASSANI (LEFT)

the near future, be victorious and pave the way for an esports boom among the youth. Globally,

due to the pandemic and resultant lockdowns, we have seen a huge surge in online games and

the figures will increase further in the future."

Hassani scored a total of 42 goals in the tournament and conceded ten. While the first stage and preliminary rounds of the competition were held online, the semi-finals and finals took place at City Centre Muscat.

PDO creates 250 training opportunities for Omanis through seven contractors

Muscat - Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour, signed agreements with seven contractors on Wednesday to provide training for employment programmes to upskill and recruit more than 250 Omanis in various positions.

The Memorandums of Understanding, which are part of PDO's Emdad initiative, were signed virtually under the auspices of H E Dr Saeed bin Hamed al Rubaie, vice chancellor of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, a press release said.

Under the terms of the agreements, participants will secure work with Arabian Industries, Special Technical Services, MB Petroleum Services, Shaher United Trading and Contracting Co, Al Ghalbi International, Zawawi Powertech Engineering and Carillion Alawi upon successful completion of the training programmes which will range from ten to 18 months in duration.

In 2021, the Emdad programme managed to secure more than 3,000 jobs and training opportunities for Omanis within the oil and gas sector

STEVE PHIMISTER



pletion of the training programmes which will range from ten to 18 months in duration.

On the occasion, Steve Phimister, managing director of PDO, said, "Despite the constraints placed on parts of our business due to the pandemic, PDO remained resolute in supporting in-country value, and specifically job creation challenges.

"In 2021, the Emdad programme managed to secure more than 3,000 jobs and training opportunities for Omanis within the oil and gas sector.

"I would like to thank our partners for their continuous co-operation and effective contribution in identifying meaningful ways to upskill the local workforce and achieving the goals of this programme. Indeed, the reliability and quality of these trainings are a testament to the successful collaboration between PDO and its contractor community in this regard."

The training programmes provided as part of these agreements will offer opportunities in several new fields with positions including Protection Testing Engineers, Electrical Inspectors, HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air-conditioning) Specialists and Crane Operators. Other positions include Mud Engineers, Electrical Assistants, Quality Assurance /Quality Control Engineers, and HSE (Health, Safety and Environment) Specialists.

Additionally, as part of PDO's drive to bridge the gap between academia and industry and to support the local education system, the company donated two HVAC units to the University of Technology and Applied Sciences. This donation will support in establishing the first HVAC discipline in Oman with actual HVAC units and enable students to gain practical skills.

To increase market demand for the graduates, the university will also work on improving its current diploma programme in AC to include courses in HVAC.



Pact signed to recycle shredded banknotes

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Central Bank of Oman (CBO) and Dar al Herfya, an establishment that specialises in developing and producing traditional Omani handicrafts, signed an agreement to recycle shredded banknotes on Wednesday.

A statement issued by CBO said, "The Central Bank of Oman and the handicrafts house - Dar al Herfya - have signed an agreement to implement a project for recycling shredded banknotes, which is the first of its kind in the sultanate."

The agreement was signed by H E Tahir bin Salim al Amri, executive president of CBO, and

Zuwaina Sultan al Rashdi, CEO of Dar al Herfya.

The project aims to produce innovative and unique recycled products from shredded banknotes that reflect Omani culture and heritage. The products will be made for both local and international consumption.

The project will help preserve the environment and reduce waste and pollution, in line with the goals of sustainable development in the sultanate.

Mohammed al Riyami, an employee of CBO, is the creator of the project conceived through the 'Outside the Box' initiative launched by the bank in 2019.

ESO wins grant from British Embassy in Muscat for frankincense trees and fishing net recycling projects

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a boost to Oman's environmental wellbeing, Environment Society of Oman (ESO) has been awarded a special grant by the British Embassy in Muscat. The embassy invited bids from non-profit organisations that deliver in-country projects focused on achieving long-term environmental sustainability.

ESO is using the funds to support two conservation projects - Population Assessment of Frankincense Trees in Oman and Fishing Net Collection and Recycling on Masirah Island, which will be carried out over a period of three months.

"The UK, alongside our partner Italy, recently hosted the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) with world leaders to accelerate action towards the goals of the



Paris Agreement, to protect communities and natural habitats," said H E Bill Murray, British Ambassador to Oman. "Oman Vision 2040 has outlined the sultanate's ambition for climate protection and sustainable development. The British Embassy wants to support these aims by working with partners like Environment Society of Oman to deliver on green initiatives that will

have a long-term sustainable impact in Oman, and beyond. The two chosen projects are more than deserving of these funds and we look forward to seeing the outcome of their valuable work."

On the occasion, H H Sayyida Tania al Said, president of ESO, said, "Environmental degradation affects us all and we must all take steps to tackle it. As the

British Embassy's pledge shows, this is not merely a local issue; countries around the world are mobilising all for a mutual cause - to preserve our natural environments.

"We are overwhelmed by the support we received to secure this valuable grant and would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the British Embassy in Muscat for helping us ensure that we can continue to safeguard the future of Oman's precious environment."

The frankincense tree project, which is being conducted in collaboration with the Environment Authority and other local entities in Oman, in partnership with Wageningen University and FairSource Botanicals LLC, is part of ESO's long-running efforts to conserve frankincense trees in Dhofar. Over three months, the team will assess the initial health and distribution of

wild frankincense (*Boswellia sacra*) trees across Dhofar.

The second project is a new initiative designed to accelerate the recycling of fishing nets in Oman. It builds on years of work led by ESO to reduce the entanglement of marine and coastal wildlife in abandoned fishing nets in Masirah Island, an issue which has contributed to a 79 per cent decline in nesting turtle populations over the last 30 years.

Conducted in partnership with Future Seas Global SPC and Wakud International LLC (part of the 44.01 Group), and in collaboration with the Environment Authority, be'ah, the Wali of Masirah and local municipalities, it includes a dedicated net clean up initiative, followed by the collection, sorting, washing and palletising of fishing nets from Masirah before shipping them to recyclers abroad.

COVID-19 UPDATE

2,335 new cases: MoH

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Wednesday announced 2,335 new infections registered in a 24-hour period on Wednesday taking the total number of COVID-19 cases registered in Oman to 344,043. Five more deaths were reported in this period.

"The total number of COVID-19 related deaths reported in the country has now risen to 4,151," an MoH statement said, adding that 1,300 new cases have recovered, accounting for a total of 317,584 recoveries.

"There were 103 new hospitalisations in the past 24 hours. The total number of COVID-19 patients currently in health institutions is 339, including 50 in intensive care units," MoH stated.



Omani-Hungarian Business Forum explores opportunities to promote investments

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) and Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in cooperation with the Hungarian Embassy in the sultanate, held the Omani-Hungarian Business Forum on Wednesday.

The forum discussed opportunities to enhance investment and trade exchange between the two friendly countries and to establish partnerships between Omani and Hungarian business owners.

The forum was attended by H E Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, president of Oman Investment Authority, and H E Asila bint Salim al Samsami, Undersecretary for Investment Pro-



(Supplied photo)

motion in MoCIIP.

On the agenda were investment and economic cooperation,

enhancing trade and investment, and increasing trade exchange between the two sides. The

forum reviewed facilities and incentives provided by MoCIIP for investors and shed light on sev-

eral investment opportunities in the industrial sector, besides tourism, scientific research, min-

Oman and Hungary also signed an agreement worth US\$11.3mn to build a solar power, and Eximbank Hungary inked a financing agreement worth US\$65mn to facilitate trade exchange

Additionally, the Foreign Ministry signed an investment promotion and mutual protection agreement between the two governments on Wednesday.

The Omani side was represented by H E Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, and Peter Szijarto, Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The signing ceremony was attended by H E Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, H E Dr Tibor Szatmári, Ambassador of Hungary to Oman, and a number of officials.

The two sides also signed an agreement worth US\$11.3mn to build a solar power, and Eximbank Hungary inked a financing agreement worth US\$65mn to facilitate trade exchange between the two countries.

MoCIIP seizes products for illegal use of official emblems

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has seized products, which used the sultanate's official emblems without obtaining licence.

A statement issued by MoCIIP said, 'Some commercial establishments and accounts on social networking sites are using the national emblem of the sultanate (khanjar and two swords) and the Royal Emblem (crown, khanjar and two swords) without obtaining licence.'

The use of the national emblem, the Royal Emblem and the sultanate's map on commercial products without obtaining necessary approvals is a violation of law.

MoCIIP has called on all commercial establishments wishing to use the national emblem on their products or advertisements to submit applications to the ministry to get the necessary approval. MoCIIP confirmed that it will continue to conduct inspec-



(Supplied photo)

tion campaigns to monitor markets and initiate legal action against violators.

A ministry statement said, 'Using the national and Royal emblems without approval contravenes Royal Decree No 53/2004 on the Law of the National Flag,

Emblem and Anthem.'

According to the law, 'Use of the emblem on jewellery, products or instruments produced locally or imported is prohibited without permission from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.'

Heritage undersecretary visits Misfat al Abriyeen

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Following up on the development of tourism projects and heritage villages, H E Ibrahim bin Said al Kharousi, Undersecretary for Heritage in the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, visited Misfat al Abriyeen in the wilayat of Al Hamra, Dakhliyah, on Wednesday. At an elevation of 1,000m above sea level nestled in the foothills of Jebel Shams, Misfat al Abriyeen has become a tourist attraction in recent years due to its picturesque location and views of old mud houses built atop rocks. The village also has terrace farms, narrow alleys and a walking trail that crisscrosses plantations and mud houses still being used by local residents.

A statement issued by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism said, 'The visit aimed to review the heritage projects in the village that are carried out by the local community and Al Misfat al Ahlia Company. Ministry officials dis-



(Supplied photo)

cussed developing the heritage village with new projects.'

In May 2021, Misfat al Abriyeen was chosen by World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as

one of the Best Tourism Villages.

'The Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO initiative was launched to advance the role of tourism in safeguarding rural villages, along

with their landscapes, natural and cultural diversity, and their local values and activities, including local gastronomy,' the ministry stated.

CITIZEN JOURNALIST



Pothole-riddled Ghubra road

Residents draw the concerned authority's attention to the potholes created by recent rains in North Ghubra Way No 3818. Rains cause waterlogging and to avoid these potholes, motorists drive on the wrong side of the road posing a threat to pedestrians and oncoming traffic.

Abdulsalaam,
Ghubra

MAFWR urges farmers to sell wheat to OFMC

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resource (MAFWR) has urged wheat farmers to sell their wheat crop to Oman Flour Mills Company (OFMC).

A statement issued by MAFWR on Wednesday said the ministry has renewed a memorandum of cooperation with OFMC to purchase wheat crop from farmers in the sultanate at RO500 per tonne.

'Farmers wishing to sell their produce to the company must register with the Department of Agricultural, Fisheries and Water Resources in their wilayat within two weeks of this announcement,' it stated.

'The ministry has set some

conditions for farmers, such as the wheat crop should be of Omani variety and must be this year's production, the crop should be pure and not mixed with any other strain and the farmer must supply the harvest himself to the company's warehouses in the wilayat of Muttrah in Muscat governorate.'

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Abdul Rahman al Abri, a farmer from Nizwa, said, 'Nizwa farmers will start their wheat harvest this year in March. Wheat cultivation land increased this season due to ample supply of water.'

Abri thanked MAFWR for the agreement with OFMC.

Wheat production grew by 19 per cent in the sultanate during the 2020/2021 agricultural season to 2,649 tonnes.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	24	15
Doha	23	13
Kuwait City	19	13
Manama	20	13
Muscat	25	17
Riyadh	24	13

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.29am
Sunrise	6.47am
Duhr	12.26pm
Asr	3.37pm
Maghrib	6.00pm
Isha	7.12pm

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MARKET WATCH

MSX30	4,124.44
BSE Sensex	59,558.33

FOREX RATES
(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs	194.18
Pakistani Rs	457.67
Bangladeshi Taka	223.32
Philippine Peso	132.55
Sri Lankan Rs	526.96

*Rates as on February 02
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Sri Lanka gets urgent \$500mn Indian loan

Sri Lanka was handed temporary relief from energy shortages and rolling blackouts on Wednesday with a US\$500mn loan from India to finance urgent oil purchases for the cash-strapped nation.

The island's economic woes have left thermal power generators unable to keep the lights on and disrupted transport networks, as traders run desperately low on foreign currency to fund imports.

Frequent breakdowns at a huge coal power plant have compounded unannounced electricity cuts and households are also struggling to source cooking gas and kerosene.

Officials said a formal agreement was being signed on Wednesday after two weeks of talks, in addition to a recent US\$915mn in foreign exchange support.

Alpek offers \$620mn to buy Octal

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Alpek, a leading multinational petrochemical company incorporated in Mexico, has offered to acquire 100 per cent stake in Salalah-based Octal for a consideration of US\$620mn.

Octal, producer of thermo-forming PET sheet and a leader in the clear rigid packaging industry, announced Tuesday that its shareholders have entered into an agreement to sell their 100 per cent stake to Alpek.

The Mexican chemical giant in a statement on its website said, 'Alpek will purchase 100 per cent of Octal's shares for US\$620mn on a debt-free basis. Financing for the acquisition will be secured through cash on the company's balance sheet, free cash flow generated from existing businesses, and dedicated bank loans.'

This acquisition, Alpek said, forward-integrates Alpek into the high-value PET sheet business segment, closes the gap towards achieving its ESG goals, and enhances its ability to serve its customers' growing PET resin needs.

Oman's largest financial institution Bank Muscat on Wednesday said that it is one of the minority shareholders in Octal Holding with 4.99 per cent stake.

'Alpek has offered its interest to acquire 100 per cent stake in



Alpek will purchase 100 per cent of Octal's shares for US\$620mn on a debt-free basis. Financing for the acquisition will be secured through cash on Alpek's balance sheet, free cash flow generated from existing businesses and dedicated bank loans

Octal to shareholders of Octal for a total consideration of US\$620mn subject to customary adjustments,' Bank Muscat confirmed in its disclosure to the Muscat Stock Exchange.

The bank notified the stock market that it has signed an agreement to sell its stake in

Octal, along with all other shareholders of Octal to Alpek.

'The carrying value of this investment [in Octal] in the bank's book as of December 31, 2021 was RO4.2mn,' Bank Muscat said.

The bank's disclosure added that Bank Muscat's 4.99 per cent stake in Octal on proportionate basis amounts to approximately RO11.9mn (or US\$31mn).

'Accordingly, Bank Muscat has agreed to proceed with the transaction to sell its stake in Octal by signing the necessary agreements,' the bank added.

The completion of the acquisition of Octal by Alpek is subject to customary closing conditions agreed between Alpek and Octal, including receipt of regulatory approvals by Alpek.

'Bank Muscat will inform the market once its stake sale in Octal is completed,' Bank Muscat added.

With its proprietary direct-to-sheet manufacturing technology and early adoption of advanced PET resin manufacturing processes, Octal has become a global leader in PET packaging. Established in 2006 in Salalah, Octal has grown into a globally recognized enterprise and a world leader in PET sheet, with manufacturing facilities and offices in Oman, the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE and sales of over US\$1bn.

Octal on Tuesday said that the transaction is expected to close in the first half of 2022, subject to customary closing conditions and regulatory approvals.

JP Morgan acted as exclusive financial advisor to Octal on the transaction and Latham & Watkins LLP were legal advisors.

Alpek is a leading producer of PTA and PET worldwide, the largest rPET producer in the Americas, the third largest expandable polystyrene manufacturer worldwide, and the only producer of polypropylene in Mexico.

The company operates 32 plants in the US, Mexico, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and the UK, and employs more than 6,000 people.

Honeywell joins hands with Meras for expansion in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Multinational conglomerate Honeywell has announced an agreement with Oman's Meras - the energy, engineering, construction and project management services provider - to support Honeywell's expansion to conduct sustainability and energy projects across the sultanate.

Part of the private equity firm Oman Investment Corporation, Meras will develop a capability center to support Honeywell as it implements energy and sustainability projects in the country

including innovation, resources, design, contract, procurement and more.

Meras has a strong presence in Oman, with strategic ties with private and government entities related to infrastructure healthcare, hospitality and education.

'This collaboration with Meras will enable to strengthen the local capability around sustainability and energy domain. It will also support the requirements to implement energy efficiency actions, and carbon neutral objectives,' Honeywell said in a press statement.

Honeywell has a long-standing history in Oman, having worked on a wide range of projects including airports, oil and gas projects and refining and petrochemicals technology implementation. Honeywell also works with a number of leading healthcare, education and hospitality customers within Oman.

Honeywell Building Technologies is transforming the way every building operates to help improve the quality of life. It is a leading building controls company with operations in more than 75 countries supported by a global channel partner network.

OPEC+ backs modest output hike despite surging oil prices

London, UK - Top oil-producing countries led by Saudi Arabia and Russia announced another modest increase in output on Wednesday despite soaring crude prices and geopolitical tensions rattling the markets.

The 23-nation OPEC+ group said in a statement that it will increase production by 400,000 barrels per day in March, the same amount as in previous months.

The group, which includes the 13 members of the Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and their ten allies, including Russia, has resisted US pressure to further boost production to tame prices.

OPEC+ said in its statement following a ministerial videoconference that the decision was made "in view of current oil market fundamentals and the consensus on the outlook".

The alliance's prudent approach dates back to the spring of 2021 as demand recovered after drastic 2020 cuts in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The announcement Wednesday "was hardly surprising, as the group has rigidly followed this approach since it was first agreed upon, even in December when oil prices plunged following the emergence of Omicron," said Edward Gardner, commodities expert at Capital Economics.

"What matters going forward is whether OPEC+ can keep up with its planned production increases," he said.

Oil prices hit seven-year highs in January, with the main international crude contract, Brent, topping US\$90. Prices are now hovering under US\$90.

Victoria Scholar, an expert at Interactive Investor, said she expected "further gains" due to solid demand and "drip-feed production increases" by OPEC+.

OPEC+ is already struggling to meet its quotas with some members, such as Angola and Nigeria, unable to scale up their production and others, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, unwilling to do so, said Carsten Fritsch of Commerzbank.

In December, the total volume of OPEC+ output increased by only 90,000 barrels per day, far short of the 400,000 target, according to a survey by the Bloomberg news agency.

The market has been further boosted by soaring geopolitical tensions plaguing stalwarts of oil production - Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The United Arab Emirates on Monday intercepted another ballistic missile launched by Yemen's Houthi rebels, the latest attack on the Gulf country, which is part of a Saudi-led military coalition.

AFP

Qatar says Europe will need help if Russia cuts gas

Doha, Qatar - Qatar's Energy Minister Saad al Kaabi told the European Union on Tuesday that his country could not rescue Europe alone if Russia turned off gas supplies amid spiking tensions over Ukraine.

Kaabi, told EU Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson that Qatar was ready to help Europe "in times of need".

The United States has raised the possibility of Qatar, one of

the world's leading gas producers, supplying Western European nations in talks, officials said.

The Ukraine crisis was a key topic in a meeting on Monday between US President Joe Biden and Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani.

In a video conference, Kaabi told the EU official that Qatar hoped the tensions in Europe could be resolved through diplomacy. "Qatar stands ready to support our partners around the world in times of need," he said.

But "the volume of gas needed by the EU cannot be replaced by anyone unilaterally, without disturbing supplies to other regions around the world. Europe's energy security requires a collective effort from many parties," he added.

AFP

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Google parent firm Alphabet nearly doubles annual profit

San Francisco, US – Google's parent firm Alphabet announced quarterly profits on Tuesday that beat expectations and nearly doubled in 2021 – after a booming holiday season for the online ads giant facing anti-trust regulation scrutiny.

The tech giant had net income of US\$20.6bn on revenue that grew 32 per cent to US\$75bn in the final quarter of 2021, ending the year with a total of US\$76bn in profit.

That was nearly double the US\$40bn annual profit reported for 2020, as the pandemic had already accelerated a shift to online shopping, working and learning that also benefited fellow giants like Amazon and Facebook.

Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai cited "strong growth in our advertising business... a quarterly sales record for our Pixel phones despite supply constraints, and our cloud business continuing to grow strongly" for the success.

In all, Google earned more than US\$61bn in advertising revenue, mostly from online search and its video platform, while its cloud business grew by 45 per cent to US\$5.5bn in revenue.

Google's dominance online has powered it to new heights during the pandemic period, but has also left it in the sights of regulators around the world.

Pichai said during an earnings call that Alphabet is open to "sensible" regulation by Congress but is "genuinely concerned that they could break a



Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai

wide range of popular services we offer to our users."

Some regulatory proposals could have unintended consequences such as weakening privacy and safety, or putting US companies at a disadvantage, according to Pichai.

Alphabet's strong earnings come after Apple, another pandemic-era winner, reported record revenue last week as markets were jittery about tech's future as well as geopolitical risks like the Ukraine crisis.

However, regulators' scrutiny around the world is stacking up as one of the most significant risks for the Silicon Valley giant. "Google has the biggest uphill battle in terms of antitrust issues

among all of the Big Tech companies," Third Bridge analyst Scott Kessler wrote.

"Despite Apple's bigger size and Meta/Facebook's bad publicity, Google is seen most at risk in terms of US antitrust law," he added.

Retail ads help push growth

Just last week, a group of top US justice officials accused Google in lawsuits of tracking and profiting from users' location data, despite leading consumers to think they could protect their privacy on the tech giant's services.

These suits are the latest legal threats against Google and other US Big Tech giants, which have

long faced probes and court cases but a lack of new national laws that would regulate their businesses.

The courts and legislatures are not moving fast. Two weeks ago, for example, Google appealed a European court ruling that upheld a €2.4bn fine imposed by Brussels in 2017 for anti-competitive practices in the price comparison market.

Alphabet's expectations-beating results offered positive signals even as diminishing growth shadowed firms like lockdown lifestyle champ Netflix.

Netflix lost tens of billions of dollars in market capitalization last month – but has rebounded – after projecting growth of just 2.5mn subscribers this quarter.

Fortunes were quite different for Google, with Alphabet saying its board had approved a 20-to-1 stock split that would make shares more affordable to small investors.

The firm predicts that its growth will continue in 2022, with digital advertising expected to bring in more than US\$171bn to Google this year, or 30 per cent of the global pie, just ahead of Facebook.

"In the fourth quarter, retail was again by far the largest contributor to year-on-year growth of our ads business," Alphabet CBO Philipp Schindler told analysts.

"Finance, entertainment and travel were also strong contributors," he added.

AFP

Eurozone inflation rises to new record high

Brussels, Belgium – Inflation in the eurozone soared to a new record high in January, official data showed on Wednesday, adding pressure on the European Central Bank (ECB) ahead of a monetary policy meeting this week.

The figure hit 5.1 per cent last month, a first since the official Eurostat agency started to compile the data in 1997.

The ECB, in charge of eurozone monetary policy, has a medium-term inflation target of 2 per cent.

Its board meets on Thursday and observers expect the ECB to stick to its current rates, which are historically low in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, despite the inflationary pressure.

Any tightening could threaten economic recovery, and weigh down indebted companies and governments.

"January's inflation data support our view that the ECB will soon forecast inflation to be at its target over the medium term," the firm Capital Economics said in response to the latest data.

"Accordingly, we think that policymakers will end net asset purchases completely this year and prepare to start raising interest rates in early 2023, if not sooner," it said.

ECB chief Christine Lagarde has insisted inflationary pressure is "transitory" and should ease over the course of the year. She says the sudden bounceback of economies from COVID-19 restrictions has caused the steep energy price rises.

Inflation had already hit a record 5 per cent in December.

Energy prices soar

An analyst at ING, Charlotte de Montpellier, told AFP that the inflation increase was surprising and added ammunition to the argument for an ECB rate hike.

"We expected a little drop" in January's inflation, with consensus around 4.4 per cent, she said.

"This shows that inflationary pressures in the eurozone are



very big, and certainly bigger than what the ECB had in its last forecasts."

Energy accounted for 28.6 per cent of the inflation surge seen in the eurozone in January, Eurostat said. That weight has grown since December, when it represented 25.9 per cent of the overall price jump.

Food, alcohol and tobacco accounted for 3.6 per cent, also an increase over the previous month, while services jumped 2.4 per cent.

Inflation for non-energy industrial goods rose 2.3 per cent in January, lower than the 2.9 per cent seen in December.

Inflation is becoming a point of increasing anxiety in the eurozone, as in other economies around the world facing supply constraints and sudden demand for energy as businesses try to jump back into

pre-pandemic mode.

The EU is also confronted with other variables weighing on its energy market. In the short-term, there are climbing tensions with Russia – its main natural gas supplier – over Ukraine.

Over the longer-term, there is the bloc's transition towards a net carbon-zero future that will require shifting away from fossil fuel sources to renewable ones.

Capital Economics said its current forecast was for eurozone inflation to fall to around 2.5 per cent by the end of 2022 – "though that assumes that both oil and natural gas prices come down significantly from current levels".

It added: "The January inflation surprise suggests that the risks to our already above-consensus forecasts are to the upside."

AFP

China's property stress poses spillover risks to global markets, says IMF

Beijing, China – A funding crisis battering China's big property developers could start to shake the wider economy and global markets, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned, saying deeper reforms were needed to fully curb the threat.

The IMF's report comes as property firms in the world's second-biggest economy struggle with liquidity problems as Beijing looks to curb excessive debt and rampant consumer speculation in the sector.

Among those embroiled in the crisis is Evergrande, one of the country's largest developers, which is involved in restructuring negotiations after racking up US\$300bn in liabilities.

Multiple other Chinese developers have also defaulted on bond payments in recent



months, piling pressure on the wider economy and rattling investors.

"Property plays a large role in both China's economy and financial system, accounting for about a quarter of both total fixed investment and bank lending over the past five years before the pandemic," the IMF said in a report released on Friday.

It warned that with developers beyond Evergrande also facing funding problems, there were "concerns of negative spillovers to the broader economy and global markets".

A sharper-than-expected slowdown in real estate "could trigger a wide range of adverse effects on aggregate demand, with feedback loops to the financial sector," the IMF said.

Should there be a sudden slowdown in China's growth, this would also create spillovers via trade and commodity prices, the fund added.

The institution this week lowered its 2022 growth forecast for China to 4.8 per cent, down 0.8 points from earlier estimates.

Although China's recovery is "well advanced", it lacks balance and momentum has slowed – partly due to lagging recovery in consumption amid recurrent virus outbreaks – the IMF said.

China, where the coronavirus first emerged, remains one of the few places left in the world pursuing zero-COVID infections.

AFP

Oil prices hit 7 year high again

London, UK – Oil prices jumped on Wednesday, heading near a previous seven-year high, after OPEC+ decided to stick to its planned output increase despite pressure from top consumers to raise production more quickly.

Brent crude was up US\$1.16, or 1.3 per cent, at US\$90.32 a barrel by 1303 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate crude rose US\$1.28 to US\$89.48 a barrel, according to a Reuters report.

Tight oil supplies and geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe and the Middle East have boosted oil prices by about 15 per cent this year, Reuters reported.

On Friday crude hit their highest since October 2014, with Brent touching US\$91.70 and US crude hitting US\$88.84.

Agencies

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Oman Oasis wins Oman's Most Trusted Brand Award for the fifth consecutive year

Oman Oasis, the nation's leading water brand manufactured and distributed by Oasis Water Company, won Oman's Most Trusted Brand Award once again for the year 2021.

This marks a prestigious fifth win in a row through the survey conducted by *Muscat Daily* and voted on by the people of Oman. The survey was conducted online, and the winners of the Oman's Most Trusted Brands Awards were felicitated at a special function held under the auspices of H E Dr Mohammed bin Hamed al Rumhy, Minister of Energy and Minerals. The event was also attended by their highnesses, excellencies, chairmen, managing directors, CEOs, and senior officials from 45 winning companies.

An annual event in its fifth year, Oman's Most Trusted Brands Awards is the ultimate recognition of a brand's products and services as well as of customer satisfaction. The public is free to nominate the companies or brands they prefer without



being limited to just a few names. It is a true test of brand recall and an excellent way of establishing genuine public perception of different brands in the country.

Speaking about the award,

NSS Subramanian, chief operating officer, Beverages and FMCG at The Zubair Group said, "We are proud to win the Oman's Most Trusted Brand for the fifth time. On this occasion, I would like to thank

employees and stakeholders for their contributions and efforts, not forgetting the trust bestowed upon us by our loyal customers."

Saleh al Amri, deputy general manager, Admin and Human Re-

courses at Oasis Water Company received the honour from H E Rumhy and Saleh Zakwani, executive chairman of Apex Media. Speaking on the occasion, Amri, said, "It is truly a privilege to yet again be recognised

as a brand that people appreciate and trust. To win consistently since the inception of the awards in 2016 is a testament to our efforts. Oman Oasis will continue to work to further improve itself, as we always want to go further

than our client expectations."

Oman Oasis has always ensured the quality of its products by adhering to stringent quality control, maintaining international standards and production practices securing numerous regional and international awards and certifications. It is this unflinching commitment to the highest quality standards that has now also earned them the title of Oman's Most Trusted Brand. Winning the award for the fifth time demonstrates the level of trust consumers have in the brand, showing that the nation's favourite water brand is also the most trusted.

Subramanian added, "On behalf of Oman Oasis, I would like to thank everyone who participated in the survey, which made it possible for us to win this award. We will ensure that we continue our efforts to provide our customers with only the best products - to nurture with care. Additionally, I would like to congratulate Apex Media for yet another successful award culmination."

Oman International Hospital makes strong presence at Arab Health 2022

Oman International Hospital (OIH), along with its operator IdealMed GHS, Portugal, made its strong presence at the Arab Health 2022 held recently in Dubai, UAE.

At the custom-built pavilion, OIH showcased its state-of-the-art facilities and unique features such as the five Centres of Excellence, Hybrid Operation Theater, Medical Spa, hi-tech Cath Lab and other unique features, while IdealMed GHS demonstrated its global know-how and capabilities in the conception, development, delivery and deployment of turn-key solutions as well as day-to-day operational management and administration of hospitals and healthcare projects across the world.

Marcelo Pereira, CEO of Oman International Hospital said, "Oman International Hospital, Muscat, officially opened earlier last month, is a world class, comprehensive healthcare institution providing 3600 healthcare solutions of highest international standards to the people of Oman and the region. Our multi-specialty hospital is home to five Centers of Excellences, unique Hybrid Operation theatre, a medical Spa, and several other cutting-edge features and facilities.



ties. The expert doctors, nurses and para-medical staff of the hospital are drawn from Oman and across the globe."

Dr Jose Alexandre, chairman of Idealmed Global Healthcare Services, Portugal said, "At Idealmed GHS, we assume a unconventional vision for hospitals, leading innovative projects and maximising their sustainability and profitability, enhancing the comfort and well-being of its users and surpassing their superlative expectations. Our decades of experience in designing, exciting and managing large scale hospital projects and healthcare solutions across the world, stands testimony to our

standing."

He added, "In all our projects, we integrate local culture with science, safety with comfort, and aesthetics with functionality. Using the most innovative layouts and engineering concepts and leading-edge equipment solutions, we combine technological sophistication with the know-how of the most skilled and trained human resources."

Senior executives from Siemens Healthineers, Portugal and MENA- one of the long-term associates of IdealMed GHS and a sponsor of the newly established Med Academy at Oman International Hospital, were also present at the pavilion.

During the event, several medical manufacturers, distributors, health institutions, medical innovators, pharmaceutical manufacturers and representatives from other related business sectors met with OIH and IdealMed GHS officials and held discussions.

The Arab Health 2022 is one of the largest healthcare expos held annually and is a scientific and educational platform for healthcare professionals who wish to remain up-to-date in their area of specialisation Connecting manufacturers and service providers with clinicians, procurement professionals, dealers and distributors.

ahli islamic conducts 2021 Qitaf fourth quarter draws

Committed to helping its customers achieve financial stability and take advantage of saving opportunities within Sharia'a-compliant Qitaf account, ahli islamic celebrated the 2021 fourth quarter draws. The Bank presented one lucky winner (Salim al Sabahi) from Ghubra branch, with a grand prize of RO100,000. The event was streamed live on the Bank's official social media platforms.

The Bank has presented a weekly prize of RO250 to two winners from each branch, and awarded three winners from each of the ahli islamic branch, a prize of RO50 under its weekly children's draws. In addition to rewarding its followers on social media platforms with cash prizes during the virtual prize ceremony.

Yousuf bin Salim al Rawahi, deputy general manager and head of ahli islamic said, "We are delighted to celebrate with our customers the final draws of Qitaf prize scheme, which started at the beginning of 2021. The scheme successfully rewarded over 4,200 customers from across ahli Islamic branches in the sultanate, with total prizes of more than



RO1,250,000. The phenomenal response received by Qitaf reflects the trust it enjoys from its customers, and the belief they have in the practice of wise savings for their secure future. It has also provided customers with lucrative opportunities and offers that conform to the principles of Islamic Sharia'a."

"We congratulate all the winners, and we hope that Qitaf has changed their lives for the better, enhanced their potential to achieve their ambitions and created a more stable future for themselves and their families. We will continue to offer other innovative and attractive programs to reward our customers,

encouraging them to adopt positive financial habits to achieve their long-term goals, which in turn will cement the bank's position in the market," he further stated.

While the final draws of 2021 Qitaf may have concluded the popular prize scheme, ahli islamic stays committed to rewarding its saving customers in the future as well in numerous ways. The 2021 scheme was well-received for the various winning opportunities it offered to various segments in society through its quarterly, monthly, weekly, weekly draws for children, as well as special event draws.

London's King's College Hospital to open its doors in Jeddah

Building on the success of King's College Hospital Dubai, which in a short period of time has become one of the best hospitals in the UAE, Ashmore Group, a specialist emerging markets investment manager, in partnership with King's College Hospital London and Saudi Bugshan Group, announced the start of construction of King's College Hospital Jeddah (KCHJ). The hospital is scheduled to open its doors to patients in the second half of 2023, and this is expected to be the first of many similar projects providing Ashmore and King's the platform for further growth in Saudi.

KCHJ will be the country's

first truly integrated hospital bringing the full benefits of King's College Hospital London to Saudi Arabia, and playing its role in achieving the kingdom's 2030 vision in the healthcare sector. The London-based tertiary hospital is part of the world leading UK National Health Service, with a 180 year history of successfully caring for patients with complex conditions. King's is also one of the largest teaching hospitals in the UK. The hospital's 13,000+ staff in London treat over 1mn patients every year.

Scheduled to open in 2023, the state-of-the-art King's College Hospital Jeddah, located on King Abdulaziz Road, will

cover an area of over 32000 sqm, with a capacity of 150 beds in the first phase. The hospital will be staffed with over 1000 leading healthcare professionals, sourced from London, KSA and wider region, delivering care in line with the tested clinical pathways of King's College Hospital London.

Clinical innovation and smart technologies will be a prominent feature at the hospital, with 40 medical and surgical specialties and four Centres of Excellence in the following Institutes: Women's Health, Metabolic Diseases & Bariatric Surgery, Orthopaedics and Heart & Vascular.

Better photographs with vivo X70 series

Launched in mid-December 2021 across the Middle East, the vivo X70 series contains two major flagship models. Consisting of the X70 and X70 Pro, the series was built with the aim to center users' needs and deliver professional photography experience within the industry.

Apart from introducing new portrait photography modes in partnership with ZEISS, vivo's X70 series lineup is also fitted with next-level specs to provide users the optimal experience. vivo has brought to its worldwide customers heightening and new standards of mobile innovation and mobile photography with the X70 and X70 Pro.

Looking for a phone that captures high-end imagery and videos? Well, the X70 series has got you covered. In partnership with ZEISS, the X70 Pro and X70



incorporates top-notch imaging and video features inside and out, meaning your imaging and vlogging experience will enable you to record and snap natural-looking shots, literally. This is all thanks to the X70 series' camera redefined specs front and back. The entire X70 lineup has 32MP front cameras, while rear quad-camera arrays have been installed on the X70 Pro (50MP + 12MP+ 12MP +

8MP), while the X70 uses a tri-camera system (40MP + 12MP + 12MP).

In addition, aspiring vloggers need to look no further! The X70 series offers a seamless, easy and professional vlogging experience through its Gimbal Stabilisation 3.0 technology, making one's video smooth and enjoyable to watch. The feature allows users to transition the X/Y-axis with Z-axis rotation to achieve

well-rounded stability.

The X70 series has also introduced multi-modal photography and videography features, allowing users to get creative and hands-on when it comes to unleashing their imaging capabilities. This includes Real-Time Extreme Night Vision, Super Night Video, Pure Night View, and Pro Cinematic Mode to maximise visual aesthetics for users.

Providing users with a customised experience, the two global flagship devices run on the MediaTek Dimensity 1200-vivo chip that provides faster algorithm calculations, lower power consumption, and higher operating efficiency.

If you're looking for a phone that matches your personality, then the X70 series is definitely the one.

Message of Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Oman on the occasion of 74th Independence Day

On the occasion of 74th Independence Day of Sri Lanka, I wish to extend my warmest greetings and felicitations to all members of the Sri Lankan community living in the Sultanate of Oman and back home.

Independence Day is an important day to all Sri Lankan citizens. Our leaders of all communities in Sri Lanka fought hard to gain this independence with unity. Sri Lanka has embarked on an ambitious socio-economic development plan and strategy with drastic policy reforms aiming at regaining her past glory in the Indian Ocean. The vision of the government of Sri Lanka is to transform the country into the hub of the Indian Ocean, with a knowledge-based, highly competitive, social-market economy.

Sri Lanka and Oman are bound by long-standing historical relations underpinned by a vibrant tradition of people to people contacts and mutual respect. Both countries commemorated the 40th Anniversary of the establishment of Diplomatic Relations on 17th February 2021 by organising a special event at the Foreign Ministry of the Sultanate of Oman. A memorial logo on this significant occasion was also jointly issued by both

countries. Foreign ministers of the two countries exchanged congratulatory messages to mark this milestone in the history of bilateral relations by demonstrating their commitment to further consolidate the relations between the two friendly countries with renewed visions and vigor.

Despite COVID-19 pandemic challenges, a series of activities were organised during the said commemorative year. A number of initiatives in key areas of mutual interest including direct maritime connectivity were taken whereby laying a strong foundation for the future cooperation between the two countries with a view to achieving another milestone in the bilateral relations in the years ahead.

Bilateral agreement on the mutual visa exemption for diplomats, officials, service people and other special passport holders of both countries was signed in order to facilitate smooth exchange of bilateral visits between the two countries. This arrangement will ease and invigorate the exchange of bilateral political, diplomatic, economic, defence and other official level visits and engagements between the two countries. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) between



H E Omar Lebbe Ameer Ajwad

the two national Chambers of Commerce of Sri Lanka and the Sultanate of Oman namely National Chamber of Commerce of Sri Lanka (NCCSL) and the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) was virtually signed with a view to enhancing interactions between the private sector business communities in both countries. A vir-

tual business forum with the participation of key government ministries and Agencies of both countries as well as private sector B2B sessions were also organised with the participation of around 100 private companies from both countries. High-level bilateral visits from Sri Lanka to the Sultanate of Oman were also organised in-

cluding a visit by Ajith Nivard Cabral, then State Minister and Special Representative of the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka together with 10 member private sector delegation carrying a special message addressed to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. The Special Representative had an audience with Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan. Namal Rajapaksa, Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs of Sri Lanka visited Oman in October 2021 as a Special Guest on the invitation extended by Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham bin Tarik al Said, the Crown Prince and the Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth Affairs of Oman, to attend the inauguration of T20 Cricket World Cup Tournament hosted first time by Oman and he had bilateral meetings with the Crown Prince and other dignitaries of the government of Oman.

I take this opportunity to sincerely thank all the members of the Sri Lankan community living in the Sultanate of Oman for their unwavering cooperation extended to the Embassy during the challenging times due to the

outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic by demonstrating their great sense of social responsibility in the host country and for their generous solidarity with the home country. I cordially invite all the members of the Sri Lanka community in the Sultanate to join hands with us to further elevate the relations that happily exist between Sri Lanka and Oman for centuries into new heights encompassing all areas of mutual interest.

I also take this opportunity to extend, on behalf of the government and the people of Sri Lanka, best wishes for the good health, happiness and personal well-being of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and for the continued progress and prosperity of the people of the Sultanate of Oman.

On this special occasion of 74th Independence Day of Sri Lanka, I wish to extend my sincere appreciation and gratitude to His Majesty, the government and the people of the Sultanate of Oman for their goodwill and support extended, over the decades, to the Embassy of Sri Lanka in Muscat as well as to the Sri Lankan community living in the sultanate for their well being and peaceful stay in this blessed country.



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Supporting the community remained at the heart of SOHAR's activities in 2021

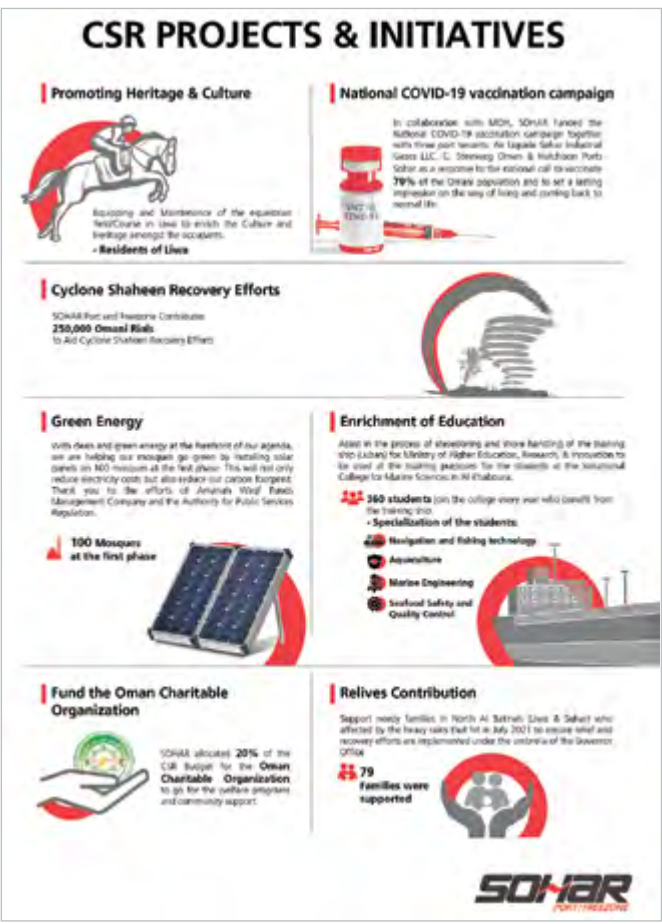
SOHAR Port and Freezone continued to make a telling contribution to the community throughout 2021, helping with local initiatives, Cyclone Shaheen recovery and COVID-19 efforts. Despite a turbulent year, SOHAR strengthened its bond with the community through a series of social efforts designed to have a long-term, sustainable benefits for all sectors, maintaining a perfect balance between expanding operations, people and the planet.

The year's main activities included a donation of RO250,000 to Cyclone Shaheen recovery efforts, where many staff volunteered to help with the clean up, as well as for those affected by the heavy rains in July.

SOHAR also offered training experiences for students of the Vocational College of Marine Sciences in Khaboura, through the contribution of the process of stevedoring and shore handling of the ship (*Luban*) that berthed at the Port.

The ship provides simulation and is part of the college curriculum for the students development and training purposes.

Furthermore, SOHAR contin-



ued to support the Ministry of Health in partnership with tenants at the port in response to the national call to action to vaccinate the Omani population by

securing vaccines and funding treatment facilities.

SOHAR also continued to support its long-term programmes to enrich the commu-

nity, including equipping the equestrian course in Liwa to promote horsemanship heritage and sport and cultural activities, funding the installation of solar panels on 100 local mosques to promote sustainability and reduce electricity costs, while also providing the Oman Charitable Organisation with funding in order to support ongoing welfare and community programmes

Mohsin al Jabri, executive manager - corporate affairs at SOHAR Port and Freezone, said, "This has continued to be an incredibly challenging year. Not just with the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic but heavy rains and Cyclone Shaheen causing damage throughout the governorate. We have always been committed to supporting the local community with a comprehensive programme of capacity-building."

He added, "In 2022, we will continue investing in green energy and sustainability through various initiatives in supporting the social development of the Batinah North Governorate while preserving our important traditions."

Weekends are made for gaming with OPPO's Reno6 Pro 5G

Weekends are made for relaxing, socialising and of course gaming! To support one of the world's most popular hobbies, global technology brand, OPPO prides itself in creating smartphones that rival PC, tablet and even gaming consoles when it comes to gaming potential.

Powered by the Qualcomm Snapdragon 870 5G processor with a Kryo 585 CPU, the Reno6 Pro 5G can operate at up to 3.2 GHz, giving you the lighting-fast mobile game experience; the Multi-Cooling system that uses a 3168mm² Ultra-large Vapor Chamber that cools down the phone, while also looking cool with its sleek and lightweight body, the Reno6 Pro 5G remains comfortable to hold for longer than ever before. On top of that, 5-minute charging will give you a whopping up to 100-minutes PUBG MOBILE gaming, thanks to 65W SuperVOOC 2.0.

With the Reno6 Pro 5G, gamers no longer need to worry about their phones lagging or slowing down because of the heavy load of games; Reno6 Pro 5G comes with large 12GB RAM + 256GB ROM and OPPO's self-developed RAM Expansion tech-



nology, allowing for enhanced data processing capability and reduced fragmentation.

In addition, the System Booster and HyperBoost 4.1 ensures a stable operating experience from the system level.

Meanwhile, the incredibly fast 90 Hz Refresh Rate and 180 Hz touch sampling rate make gaming a smooth experience without any distractions, as all status bars, buttons, floating windows and notification alerts are disabled while gaming to ensure a total immersive feel.

The Immersive Gaming feature takes gamers into a world of virtual reality with robust and vivid life-like vibrations powered by a top-of-the-line X-axis linear

motor. The X-axis Linear motor supports multiple different vibration waveforms to stimulate real physical feedback, giving a more smooth and crisp vibration that mimics-real life situations while gaming. The gaming experience is enhanced and enriched with OPPO Reno6 series' dynamic surround-sound technology powered by Dolby Atmos and Ultra-linear Stereo Speaker, taking pro-gaming sound and a life-like listening experience to a whole new level. OPPO Reno6 series takes Immersive Gaming a step further by collaborating with PUBG MOBILE games to give gamers added advantages while gaming, such as a co-customised quick-return bubble.

New bookings open for 2022 Chevrolet Groove, launch inventory sold out

True to its newly-garnered reputation as an international best-seller, Chevrolet Groove - the sporty and youthful new compact SUV from General Motors - quickly sold out as soon as it made its debut in the Omani market. The resounding success of the new brand, replicated in markets around the world where it was launched over the past year, is a testament to its burgeoning global popularity.

Following the brand's runaway success, OTE Group - the exclusive distributor of Chevrolet cars in the Sultanate of Oman - has announced the opening of bookings for the next shipment of the all-new 2022 Chevrolet Groove, which is due to arrive in March.

Since its arrival in the Middle East late last year, the Groove has charmed potential customers and motoring enthusiasts alike, particularly among the young and tech-savvy. Occupying a distinctive niche of its own in Chevrolet's expanding SUV portfolio, the 2022 edition of the Groove is targeted at customers looking for a vehicle bristling with tech innovations, offering excellent fuel efficiency and boasting stunning looks - but all wrapped up in an affordable package.

The all-new Groove is powered by a 1.5L engine, mated to a continuously variable transmission (CVT) the offers a more efficient acceleration and deceleration for a smoother and more enjoyable daily drive. With an



amazing fuel efficiency of 15.9 km/l, owners can go further on a tank of fuel than the brand's peers.

Technology and safety features come standard across all variants in the Groove line-up from the base trim upwards. For

ease of driving and maneuverability, there is a reverse camera and sensors, while a multifunctional steering wheel ensures all

controls are easily accessible from Cruise Control. Stability and Traction Control also ensures the driver remains in control, no matter the road conditions.

A spacious and delightfully designed cabin can seat up to five people.

Taking centre-stage in the cabin is an 8-inch screen packed with the latest Chevrolet infotainment capabilities, including phone projection, USB ports, and up to six speakers.

A panoramic sunroof in the Premier trim helps bring a bit of the outside world into the comfortable cabin.

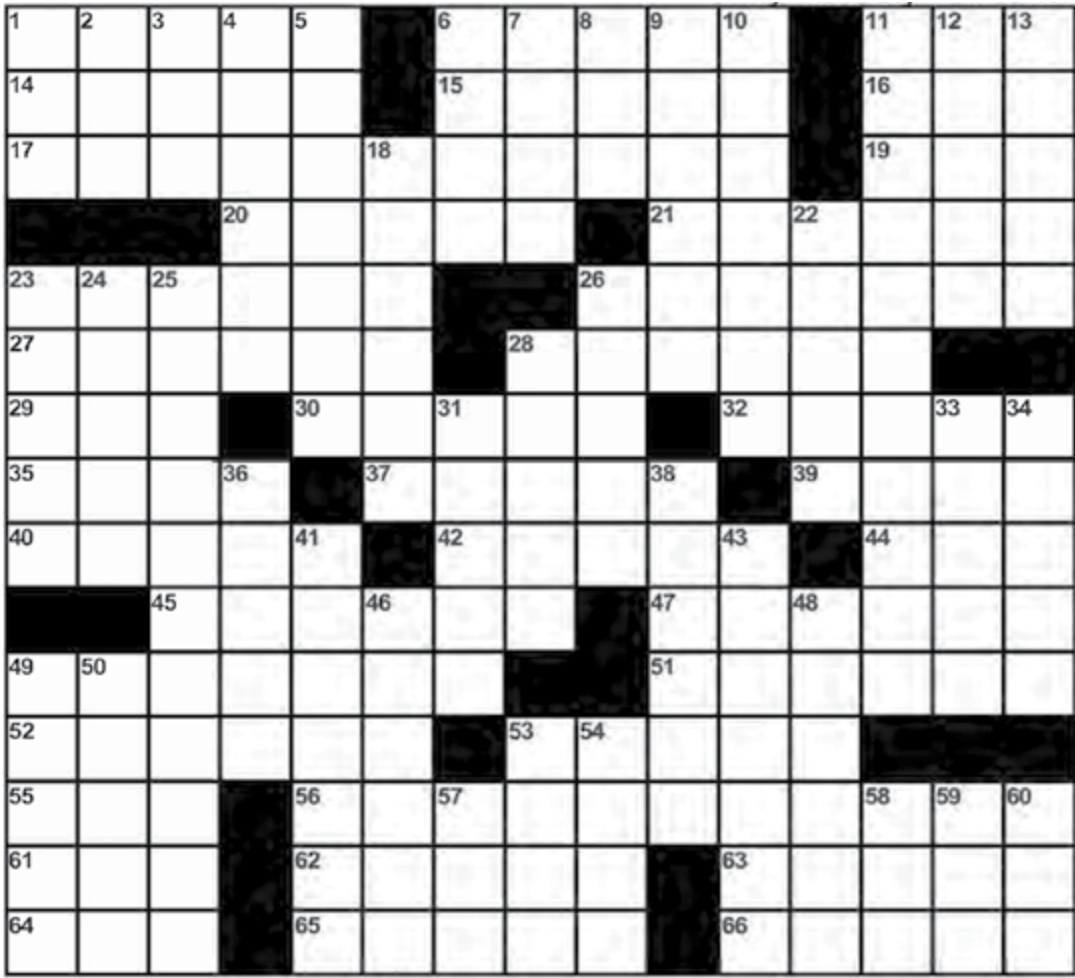
"Clearly, the all-new Chevrolet Groove made quite an impression on Chevy fans when the

first vehicles hit the local market in January this year," said Man-deep Singh, general manager - OTE Group, exclusive distributors of Chevrolet in Oman.

"With prices starting at RO6,889 (inclusive of VAT), the Groove is simply the most price-competitive SUV on the market, and a key driver of its overwhelming appeal. We are moving quickly to replenish our inventory to meet what is anticipated to be strong and consistent demand for this popular brand."

Book now to own one of Oman's bestselling, yet most affordable, SUVs, which come in four distinct colour options - Metal Red, Candy White, Aurora Silver and European Blue!

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Whitman samplers?
6) Mist
11) In good shape
14) Candlelight event
15) Magazine unit
16) Prefix with "gram"
17) Not far from, as in a race
19) Proofs of age, briefly
20) Like a wintry scene
21) Sissy role
23) Former Portuguese coin
26) Worldly, not spiritual
27) Place for linen
28) Expensive
29) Felon's flight
30) Kingly
32) Religious factions
35) Big name in car rentals
37) Hangs on a clothesline
39) Freudian error
40) Fair pavilions, essentially
42) Atlas enlargement
44) What a geisha may pull tight
45) Bing alternative
47) Determined in

advance
49) Accountant's entry
51) Group doctrines
52) Elementary school staples
53) Persona's counterpart, to Jung
55) Midori of skating
56) Battle in tight quarters
61) Family member, for short
62) Down on the pond?
63) Jeweler's magnifier
64) Ending for "benz"
65) "Bed" or "home" addition
66) Fashioned into a sphere

DOWN

1) Plumbing pipe material, informally
2) Common lubricant
3) Self-important attitude
4) Wife, informally (with "the")
5) Slim and trim
6) Penthouse feature
7) Like burned briquettes
8) Air pump letters
9) Cup divisions

10) Censors, as a document
11) Not too far away
12) Home of the Taj Mahal
13) Immobilising shooter
18) Started, as a computer
22) Makes a judicial decision
23) Extraordinary brilliance
24) Frederick Douglass was one
25) Losing by a nose, e.g.
26) Shoe undersides
28) Sir Michael, of films
31) Question harshly
33) Highest land on Earth
34) Pig turners
36) Mall tenant
38) Tank type
41) Reporter's requirements
43) Shaky singing technique
46) Illuminated like Victorian streets
48) Inflammation with love
49) Leave one's bed
50) Interrupt, as a dance
53) On the Caspian, e.g.

54) Egghead, in stereotypes
57) English I reading, sometimes
58) Fella relative
59) Gibbon, e.g.
60) Name in a cinematic "excellent adventure"

NOTE PAD

RECAP ANGST BAS
ORATE HOOHA ALL
WARMB LOODED RIO
ERASED BILK PUMAS
DEFILED BOOKISH
GIRLS BULGE ZAG
ACME KARMA UVEA
SAM GINNY TSARS
AMULET SOPHIE
ASCENTS CHASSES
BAHTS ARID
DEN IDEAS EERIE
ERE PATHS SNAPS

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Your straightforward side may be sidetracked now while your mind (or possibly your heart) indulges in some fantastical stuff. Not that there's anything wrong with fantasy, mind you. In fact, it expands your thoughts and feelings and can even leak some sweet stuff over into regular reality. It's when you get carried away that things can be a bit problematic. Ask a grounded friend for a reality check.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

For some reason, individuals of a certain type seem to be gravitating toward you. You've just about had it with listening to sad stories, pleas for redemption, and promises to do better next time. That kind of energy just seems to follow you around right now. Practice saying no and walking away. It might be tough to master at first, but you'll get the hang of it eventually.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

You've always been famous for jumping on the moment, for taking advantage of whatever the universe has tossed your way and being happy with however it ends up. Tonight, if a certain person crosses your path quite unexpectedly, you'll be only too happy to explore the possibilities. Just be sure you don't have any early morning commitments tomorrow before you really pull out all the stops.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You're fully prepared to assume the consequences of talking about that secret you've been trying to hide for far too long. But before you open up and let the world know what's on your mind, be sure you're not betraying a confidence. You know how seriously you take the issue of loyalty? Well, the folks you've become close to feel the same way. It's not surprising either. After all, you trained them.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

The heavens offer you a mixed bag of energies today, but that kind of energetic potpourri suits you just fine. You're ready for anything at this point. You've been chomping at the bit for weeks, just dying for a taste of anything and everything that's new and interesting. That goes double for new company, by the way, and that, at least, can be easily addressed. Go on out and find that intriguing new soul you seek.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You could exhibit some very peculiar characteristics today: Nostalgia, sentimentality, a desire to return to the past. No, that doesn't sound at all like you, but remember that even you get to express all your unfiltered feelings every now and then. It's just officially your turn right now. Bottling up feelings and emotions doesn't feel great. Oh, and when your dear ones look a bit troubled, tell them not to worry. This, too, shall pass.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

What is your purpose? What is life all about? Where is the world heading? Save this type of deep thought for another day. Right now, there's too much socialising to be done! Don't try to ponder these questions today. Instead, fill your day with friends and laughter. This is a great day to catch up with the people and family members you haven't seen in a while. Send a message to a long-lost friend, make a spontaneous call to a favourite aunt.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You're not quite sure what's gotten into you, and neither are your dear ones. All of a sudden you're determined to win, no matter what the cost, and you're thinking twice before you open your mouth and let your true feelings slide out. No, it's certainly not typical, but it's not exactly out of character either. After all, when was the last time (or the first) that anyone accused you of being timid?

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You could be feeling a bit rebellious, okay, a bit more rebellious, but you've certainly earned it. So when a dear one comes to you and expects you to back down just because they say so, try not to laugh out loud, and don't be rude. Just explain plainly and simply that you've never been fond of 'shoulds', and that you hear 'don't' as an invitation to break the rules. They will slowly understand and come around the rebellious you.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

There's a difference between gossip and conversation, and you're definitely in the mood for gossip. Not that you want to run anyone into the ground, of course, but exchanging a few choice tidbits, especially if the party in question happens to be sitting directly across from you, would certainly be fun. No fair only talking about others, though. Reveal something equally juicy about yourself.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Still focused on that object that's the perfect gift for a dear one? Or are you now officially ready to admit you're obsessed with it yourself? For you, there's a fine line between those two sentiments. Today, it's going to be even finer. Fortunately, you're beginning to sense the existence of an alternative. Talk to a friend, and don't you dare shop alone under any circumstances.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

It's one thing to follow your mood, but it's quite another to be fickle. Pick one task and stick to it today, even if you find out about something that sounds like a lot more fun this afternoon. You have to build up a strong reputation for reliability. If you don't, people will think you're flighty, and it is hard to recover from that label. The grass may always seem greener on the other side of the fence, but you ought to know that it seldom is.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1 Luge and skeleton racing were developed in the late 19th century in which country??

A. Switzerland
B. England
C. India
D. Australia

2. What compound in the human body acts as a neurotransmitter and helps to regulate temperature?

A. Cortisone
B. Serotonin
C. Haemoglobin
D. Insulin

3. Countries with territory in the Sahel include Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad and ...?

A. Zimbabwe
B. Morocco
C. Mauritania
D. Mozambique

Answers: 1. a 2. b 3. c

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

O	V	O	T
R	Z	C	S
R	A	I	V
M	E	N	E

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

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

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

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

WORD BUILDER

T B O
L O E
E S

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

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

US to send warship, fighter jets to help UAE

The deployment to assist UAE comes after a series of missile attacks by Houthis which left three dead

Dubai, UAE - The United States will send a warship and fighter jets to help defend the United Arab Emirates, officials said on Wednesday, after a series of missile attacks by Yemeni rebels left three dead in the wealthy Gulf state.

The deployment, to 'assist the UAE against the current threat', follows a phone call between Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the US Embassy in the UAE said.

The UAE, part of the Saudi-led coalition fighting Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels and a major financial hub, suffered its third missile attack in consecutive weeks on Monday.

As part of the new arrangements, the *USS Cole* guided missile destroyer will partner with the UAE Navy and make a port call in Abu Dhabi, while the US will also deploy fifth-generation warplanes.

Other actions include 'continuing to provide early warning intelligence (and) collaborating on air defence', the embassy said.

The *USS Cole*, currently in port in Bahrain, was hit by an Al-Qaeda bombing in the Yemeni port of Aden in October 2000 that killed 17 sailors.

Austin and the Crown Prince 'discussed the recent Houthi attacks against the UAE that



This file photo shows *USS Cole* transferring control of a stateless fishing vessel to the Yemen Coast Guard in the Sea of Oman on January 21 (AFP)

caused civilian casualties and also threatened US and Emirati armed forces stationed at Al Dhafra air base', the embassy added.

The rebel attacks on the UAE have added a new dimension to Yemen's seven-year war, which

has killed hundreds of thousands directly or indirectly and displaced millions.

Three foreign workers were killed in a drone and missile assault targeting Abu Dhabi's oil facilities and airport on January 17, triggering a salvo of deadly air

strikes in retaliation.

On January 24, US forces stationed at Abu Dhabi's Al Dhafra air base fired Patriot interceptors and scrambled to bunkers as two ballistic missiles were shot down over the city.

And on Monday, a third mis-

sile attack was thwarted during a visit to the UAE by Israeli President Isaac Herzog.

'Clear signal'

The US, a staunch Saudi and UAE ally, intends the deployment to be 'a clear signal that

As part of the new arrangements, the USS Cole guided missile destroyer - currently in port in Bahrain - will partner with the UAE Navy and make a port call in Abu Dhabi, while the US will also deploy fifth-generation warplanes

the United States stands with the UAE as a long-standing strategic partner', the embassy said.

President Joe Biden withdrew US support for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen after taking office early last year, reversing his predecessor's policy of providing logistical assistance.

However, the US State Department announced in November the approval of the sale of US\$650mn worth of air-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia to help the country protect itself from Houthi drone attacks.

A US\$23bn US arms package to the UAE, including F-35 fighter jets, has yet to be fi-

nalised, with the Emiratis threatening to scrap the deal over stringent conditions.

The rebel attacks have increased Gulf tensions at a time when international talks over Iran's nuclear programme are stumbling, and have helped push oil prices to seven-year highs.

They began after a series of defeats on the ground in Yemen, inflicted by the UAE-trained Giants Brigades militia.

In early January, the rebels seized a UAE-flagged ship in the Red Sea, saying it was carrying weapons - a claim denied by the Emirates.

Yemen's civil war began in 2014 when the Houthis seized Sanaa, prompting Saudi-led forces to intervene to prop up the government the following year.

The UAE, one of the world's biggest arms buyers, announced a redeployment from Yemen in 2019 but remains an influential player.

The country has called on Biden to redesignate the Houthis as a terrorist organisation after he delisted them in response to aid group concerns over what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The grinding conflict has left millions on the brink of famine, according to the UN.

AFP

Turkey launches deadly strikes on Kurdish targets in Iraq, Syria

Beirut, Lebanon - Turkey has launched deadly strikes against Kurdish targets in Iraq and Syria, where Kurdish forces were still reeling from the largest Islamic State (IS) group attack in nearly three years.

The raids on Tuesday night targeted shelters, tunnels, caves, ammunition depots, bases and training camps operated by the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) which Ankara views as terrorist groups, Turkey's defence ministry said on Wednesday.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the Syria strikes hit a Kurdish-run power station near the town of Al-

Malikiyah in Hasakeh province, where a brazen jailbreak attempt by IS militants last month sparked days of clashes that have left hundreds dead.

"At least four people were killed in the strike targeting a power station near Al-Malikiyah," the Britain-based war monitor said, adding that they were all security guards.

The attack came hours after hundreds of mourners gathered in Al-Malikiyah for mass funerals honouring Kurdish fighters killed in a week of battles with IS militants who had attacked the Ghwayran jail on January 20.

In Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region, Turkish strikes hit PKK positions in the

Makhmur and Sinjar regions, where bombardment caused 'human and material losses', Kurdish authorities said, without specifying a death toll.

As part of the attack, Turkish 'military aircraft bombarded six PKK positions in the Karjokh mountains', which overlook a camp for Kurdish refugees from Turkey, Kurdish counter-terrorism services said in a statement. The PKK-linked armed group that oversees management of the camp reported 'the death of two combatants and dozens of injuries among camp residents'.

It said the wounded were stable and receiving the necessary medical care.

AFP

At least 40 dead in militia attack on displaced people in DR Congo

Bunia, DR Congo - At least 40 people were killed when knife-wielding militiamen attacked a site for displaced people in strife-torn eastern DR Congo, a monitoring group and local sources said on Wednesday.

"At least 40 civilians were killed with edged weapons last night in Plaine Savo" in Djugu territory, the US-based Kivu Security Tracker (KST) said on Twitter.

Local officials and civil society sources put the toll at more than 50 dead, while the army's spokesman in Ituri province, Lieutenant Jules Ngongo, gave provisional figures of 21 dead.

The KST said the suspected attackers were from a notorious armed group called CODECO, blamed for ethnic massacres in



This file photo shows a child collecting materials in the ruins of Ituri province on December 18, last year (AFP)

the area. The Djugu area, bordering Lake Albert and Uganda which lie to the east, is the theatre for a bloody, long-running feud between the Lendu and Hema communities. Fighting between the two groups flared between 1999 and 2003, claiming tens of thousands of lives before being quelled by a EU peacekeeping force, Artemis.

Violence then resumed in 2017, blamed on the emergence of CODECO - the Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (CODECO) - which claims to defend the Lendu. Attacks on camps for displaced people over an eight-day period in November-December left 123 dead, according to the KST.

AFP

Afghan universities reopen with trickle of women attending

Mihtarlam, Afghanistan - Some public universities opened in Afghanistan on Wednesday for the first time since the Taliban seized power in August, with a trickle of women attending classes that officials said would be segregated by sex.

Most secondary schools for girls and all public universities were shuttered when the hard-line Taliban stormed back to power, sparking fears women would again be barred from education - as happened during the Taliban's first rule, from 1996-2001.

"It's a moment of joy for us that our classes have started," Zarlashtha Haqmal, who studies law and political science at Nangarhar University, told AFP.

"But we are still worried that the Taliban might stop them."

One analyst said the reopening of universities was a 'critical marker' on the Taliban's road to international recognition.

Officials said that universities in Laghman, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Nimroz, Farah and Helmand provinces were



Women wearing a burqa walk towards the gate of Laghman University as Taliban fighters stand guard in Mihtarlam, Laghman province on Wednesday (AFP)

opened on Wednesday.

More were scheduled to resume operations elsewhere in the country later this month.

An AFP correspondent saw one small group of women, wearing the all-covering burqa, enter Laghman University early on Wednesday.

The men who attended - ferried to the campus in local taxis and buses - were dressed in traditional tunics known as shalwar kameez.

Attendance was very light and Taliban fighters guarded the university entrance, a tripod-mounted machine gun

resting on a boom gate.

Most students declined to offer their thoughts on returning to class, with some saying they had been warned by authorities not to speak to the press.

Journalists were prevented from entering the Laghman campus and universities in other

provinces.

'Critical marker'

The Taliban have said they have no objection to education for women, but want classes to be segregated and the curriculum based on Islamic principles.

"We were told that the

classes will be held according to the Sharia'a law," said Malik Samadi, a 23-year-old mathematics student.

"I hope that they keep all the courses, because society needs them. Education is the foundation of a country," said civil engineering student Munsefullah at Helmand University, expressing joy at returning to his studies.

Still, while happy to be returning to lectures, one student looked beyond her studies with pessimism.

"We are also sad because being political and law students, our future is at risk as we won't be able to get jobs under this regime," said Khadija Azizi from Nangarhar University.

"It's no more pleasant for us because we have lost hope for our future."

On Tuesday, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said the reopening of universities was an 'important step' as it offered equal access to education for all.

The reopenings come a week after a Taliban delegation held

talks with Western officials in Norway, where they were pressed on improving the rights of women to unlock billions of dollars in seized assets and frozen foreign aid. The halting of aid has triggered a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, which has already been devastated by decades of war. No country has yet recognised the new Taliban regime, which has promised a softer version of the harsh rule that characterised their first stint in power.

The regime has imposed several restrictions on women, including banning them from many government jobs.

The Taliban say all girls' schools will reopen by the end of March. "The reopening of public universities... would bode well for the return of the country," United States Institute of Peace analyst Andrew Watkins told AFP.

"This is the Taliban taking a step that would be a critical marker in moving closer towards recognition."

AFP

More talks due as Putin accuses West of inciting Russia into war

Moscow, Russia - NATO leaders pursued diplomatic efforts on the Ukraine crisis on Wednesday after President Vladimir Putin accused the West of trying to draw Russia into a war but left the door open to further talks.

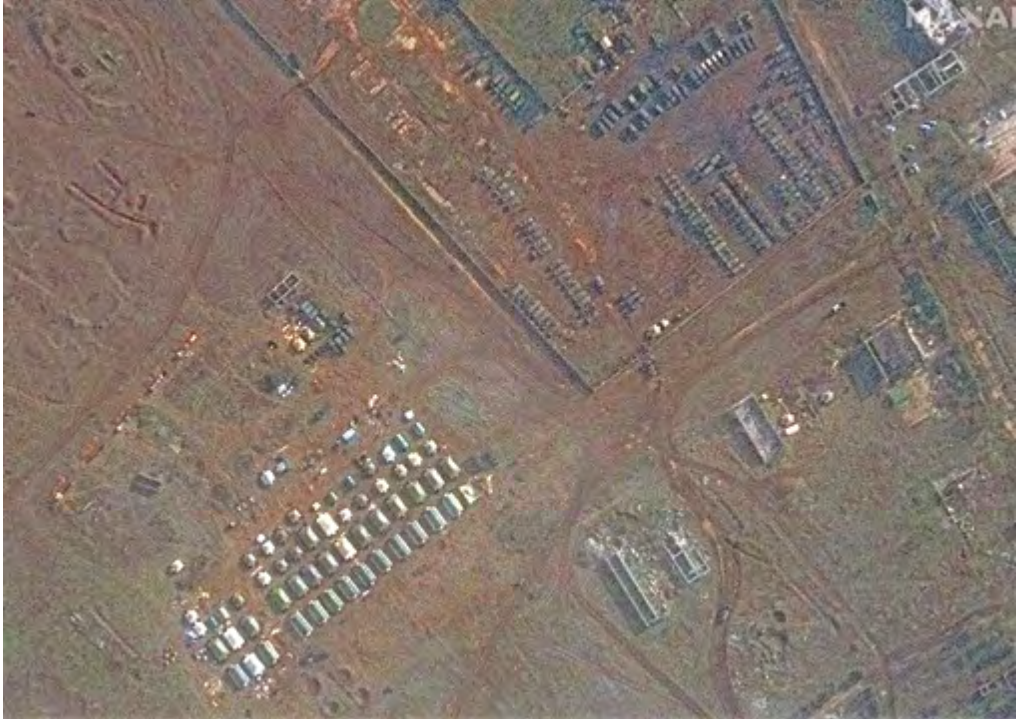
British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was to talk by phone to Putin a day after visiting Kyiv, where Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte was the latest NATO leader to visit in shows of solidarity with Ukraine.

Recent weeks have seen a flurry of diplomacy to avert a feared Russian invasion of Ukraine, after Moscow amassed tens of thousands of troops on the pro-Western country's borders. Western leaders have warned that any attack would be met with 'severe consequences' including wide-ranging economic sanctions.

Russia denies any plans to invade, instead accusing the West of failing to respect Moscow's security concerns on its borders.

Russian officials have put forward a series of demands to ease tensions, including bans on Ukraine joining NATO and the deployment of missile systems near Russia's borders, as well as a pullback of the US-led military alliance's forces in the eastern Europe.

In his first major remarks on the crisis in weeks, Putin on



A view of troop tents and armoured vehicles at Yevpatoriya in Crimea on Tuesday (AFP)

Tuesday accused the West of ignoring Russia's demands and suggested Washington was using Ukraine as an instrument to potentially draw Moscow into a conflict.

'Ukraine itself is just a tool to achieve this goal' of containing Russia, Putin said at a press conference with the Hungarian leader.

"This can be done in different ways. Drawing us into some kind of armed conflict. And to force, among other things, their allies in Europe to impose the tough

sanctions against us that the United States is talking about."

Rush of visits to Ukraine

Putin said he hoped that 'in the end we will find a solution, although it will not be simple'.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov held a phone call on Tuesday, with Lavrov saying afterwards that Washington had agreed to further discussions.

The United States and NATO

have provided written responses to Moscow's demands, which Putin said he is studying.

In the meantime Western leaders have been rushing to Ukraine to meet with President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Johnson and the Polish prime minister were in Kyiv on Tuesday ahead of Rutte, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was due in Ukraine on Thursday.

Erdogan will try to leverage his strategic position in NATO and rapport with Putin to help resolve the crisis, though Ankara's sup-

Washington is using Ukraine as an instrument to potentially draw Moscow into a conflict

VLADIMIR PUTIN



plying of combat drones to Ukraine has angered Moscow.

The French and the German foreign ministers are also expected in Ukraine next week, with plans for them to visit the frontline in the east where Kyiv's forces are battling Russian-backed separatists.

Putin has said that French President Emmanuel Macron could also be travelling to Moscow in the coming days.

Ukraine has been battling Moscow-backed insurgencies in two separatist regions since 2014, when Moscow annexed the peninsula of Crimea.

More than 13,000 people have been killed in the fighting, the last major ongoing war in Europe. Kyiv has welcomed the Western support against the Russian build-up, but officials have also urged caution, with Zelensky warning against creating 'panic' with talk of an invasion at any moment.

AFP

'US, NATO offer Russia trust-building steps'

Brussels, Belgium - Washington and its NATO allies have offered Moscow arms control and trust-building measures to defuse the threat of a new Russian offensive against Ukraine, according to documents published by *El Pais* on Wednesday.

The proposals, set out in letters by NATO and the United States last month in response to Russian demands, remain firm on insisting that Ukraine and any other sovereign country has a right to apply to join the alliance.

But the reported US response - posted to the Spanish daily's website - suggests 'reciprocal commitments by both the United States and Russia to refrain from deploying offensive ground-launched missile systems and permanent forces with a combat mission in the territory of Ukraine'.

Both the US and NATO documents urge Russia to restore diplomatic ties with the alliance and to renew and renegotiate nuclear missile control treaties with the United States. Moscow is urged to re-engage with the NATO-Russia council, a diplomatic body 'offering dialogue and partnership in place of conflict and distrust'.

A NATO official refused to confirm the text, saying: "We never comment on alleged leaks." Kremlin spokesman

Dmitry Peskov said Moscow was aware of the report but added: "We didn't publish anything, and I don't want to comment on this."

Huge Russian force

President Vladimir Putin's government has deployed a huge force - more than 100,000 strong - on its territory near the Ukraine border and in Crimea, a Ukrainian region that Russia annexed in 2014. The Kremlin has demanded that NATO guarantee that Kiev never be allowed to join NATO and that the alliance withdraw forces from eastern member states that were Soviet allies or republics during the Cold War.

The western allies have dismissed calls to slam shut NATO's door, but the leaked letters call for 'meaningful arms control discussions and dialogue with Russia on mutual transparency and confidence-building measures'.

"No other partner has been offered a comparable relationship or a similar institutional framework," the allies said of the NATO-Russia council, in the letter released by *El Pais*.

"Yet Russia has broken the trust at the core of our cooperation and challenged the fundamental principles of the global and Euro-Atlantic security architecture," it says.

AFP

Erdogan seeks payoff from Russia-US clash on Ukraine

Istanbul, Turkey - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will try to leverage his strategic position in NATO and his rapport with Russia's Vladimir Putin when he visits Kyiv on Thursday in a bid to head off war in Ukraine.

The veteran Turkish leader hopes mediation between Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky can avert a Russian offensive that Washington warns could start by mid-February.

His high-profile efforts - met with caution in Moscow - carry huge stakes and potentially rich rewards.

Analysts believe a serious conflict in Ukraine could upend Turkey's economy and imperil Erdogan's chances of extending his rule into a third decade in elections due by mid-2023.

It could also force Ankara to pick sides between Putin - a leader who holds several economic and military trump cards over Turkey - and traditional Western allies that have grown impatient with Erdogan's rule.

Kyiv's acquisition of battle-tested Turkish drones is a particular worry for Russian-backed separatist fighters in eastern Ukraine and for the Kremlin.

But analysts think success in averting a Russian invasion could highlight Turkey's importance to the Western defence alliance and warm Erdogan's chilly relations with US President Joe Biden.

"This is an opportunity for Turkey to elevate its status and come out of the doghouse, metaphorically speaking, in NATO," Asli Aydintasbas of the European Council on Foreign Relations told AFP.

"Ankara will also use this as an opportunity to improve ties with Washington," she added.

"Erdogan has developed this unique personal relationship with Putin that is simultaneously competitive and consensual - allowing them to support different



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan speaks at a press conference in Ankara on Tuesday (AFP)

sides in Libya, the Caucasus and Syria."

'Keeps his word'

Erdogan's evolving relationship with Putin has been one of the defining features of diplomacy across southeastern Europe and the Middle East.

Their relations imploded after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane near the Syrian border in 2015.

They improved markedly after Putin became the first head of state to call Erdogan on the night he survived a Turkish coup attempt in 2016.

Most Western leaders waited days before publicly supporting Erdogan - indecision that analysts say pushed Turkey closer to Russia in subsequent years.

This bond has withstood repeated tests since.

Their support for opposing sides in Syria and Libya did not keep Turkey in 2019 from acquiring a Russian missile defence system at the heart of current tensions with Washington.

Putin also appeared to take in stride Turkey's game-changing supply of drones to Azerbaijan during its 2020 war with Moscow-backed ethnic Armenians in disputed Nagorno-Karabakh. "This is a person who keeps his word - a real man," Putin said of Erdogan weeks after

the Karabakh conflict wound down.

Istanbul Medipol University scholar Abdurrahman Babacan said Erdogan and Putin share what 'most leaders do not have in their bilateral relations: timely intervention and playing their cards face up'.

'Counter the Bayraktars'

Ukraine represents one of the leaders' points of friction.

Erdogan vocally opposed Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea because of the historical presence of ethnically-Turkic Tatars on the peninsula.

He has backed Kyiv's NATO ambitions and approved Ukraine's acquisition of Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 combat drones.

Ukraine's release of grainy footage of a TB2 destroying a separatist military target prompted Putin to raise the issue during a December 2021 call with Erdogan.

Eastern separatist leader Denis Pushilin cited the drones as the main reason Russia should start openly arming Ukraine's rebel fighters. "First and foremost, we need to counter the Bayraktars," Pushilin said.

Military analysts play down the drones' importance in case of all-out war.

AFP

Paris delays new crackdown on polluting cars

Paris, France - Drivers of older cars in Paris and its suburbs will have a bit more breathing room before the vehicles are largely banned as part of anti-pollution efforts, with the latest crackdown now set to come in force only next year.

Authorities have gradually been removing the oldest and most-polluting vehicles from Paris streets over the past several years with the introduction of mandatory emission ranking stickers, called Crit'air levels.

The move was spearheaded by Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo, who is playing up her green cre-

dentials as the Socialist Party candidate to challenge Emmanuel Macron in the looming presidential election.

She has pledged to ban diesel vehicles outright in the city by the opening of the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris, and is planning a near-total traffic ban in the heart of the capital, one of the densest urban landscapes in Europe. On July 1, the ban on older cars in the greater Paris region was to be extended to Crit'air Class 3 vehicles, which include all gasoline-engine cars made before January 2006 - and all diesel-engine cars from before

2011. That would have affected more than 1.2mn vehicles, as a two-page spread in the popular Parisien tabloid reminded readers on Tuesday.

However 'the next stage for the Low-Emission Zone... has been postponed to at least 2023', the Paris Metropolitan Authority (MGP) said late on Tuesday. It attributed the delay to a need for additional financial aid for low-income households to buy more recent cars, and to the rollout of standardised radars for automated checks.

Older cars, light trucks and motorcycles will be prohibited

from 8:00am to 8:00pm on weekdays within Paris and its nearest suburbs, a zone with a population of around 7.2mn people.

The MGP says on its website that similar schemes 'already adopted in 231 European cities or regions... have proved particularly effective in cutting traffic emissions'.

But critics say the crackdown penalises in particular suburban residents and workers who do not have easy access to efficient public transportation, forcing them to rely more on their cars.

AFP

Perth suburbs threatened as Australia bushfires rage amid fierce winds

Perth, Australia - Two out-of-control bushfires threatened lives and homes in Western Australia on Wednesday, with blistering temperatures set to intensify in the coming days.

An emergency warning for the outskirts of Perth, the country's fourth-largest city, was issued after a blaze that has now burned through about 100 hectares began on Tuesday.

Authorities are concerned about the fire reaching residential areas, as fierce winds strain containment lines.

Emergency services have told residents they are 'in danger and need to act immediately to survive. There is a threat to lives and homes'.

Perth is forecast to hit 34 degrees Celsius on Wednesday before ramping up to near 40C until Saturday.

"The emergency warning remains in place due to the wind intensity that is impacting the fire ground today, which continues to put pressure on containment lines," the Department of Fire and Emergency Services said.

Meanwhile, a second bushfire in the state's southwest had



Firefighters conduct mop up operations in a smouldering forest after a bushfire that threatened homes was extinguished in the suburbs of Perth on Wednesday (AFP)

been 'contained but not controlled' on Tuesday afternoon, authorities said.

Evacuated residents near the small town of Kirup, about 220km south of Perth, were cautioned not to return to their properties as conditions could remain 'very dangerous'.

Western Australia has endured record heat this summer,

with Perth recording 10 days above 40C. Last month the coastal town of Onslow matched Australia's highest-ever temperature of 50.7C.

A year ago, a devastating bushfire destroyed 86 homes in the city's suburbs and burned through 11,000 hectares.

A 40-year-old man was charged with starting the blaze

after police alleged he used a spark-producing angle grinder during a total fire ban.

Western Australia was spared the brunt of the devastating climate change-fuelled wildfires in the summer of 2019-20, which mostly ravaged the country's two most-populous states, New South Wales and Victoria.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Australia says warship delivering aid didn't bring the virus to Tonga

Nuku'alofa, Tonga - Australian defence chiefs on Wednesday said a warship delivering aid to Tonga was not the source of an outbreak that has plunged the previously coronavirus-free Pacific kingdom into lockdown.

Residents of the remote island nation, struggling to recover from a deadly volcanic eruption that triggered huge tsunamis, were ordered to stay at home on Wednesday after two port workers tested positive in the capital Nuku'alofa. They were the first community cases recorded in the nation of 100,000 people, with officials later confirming another three family members, including two children, also had the virus and were in isolation.

Tongans have feared losing the country's virus-free status since foreign ships began delivering humanitarian aid in the wake of the January 15 eruption.

Australia, New Zealand, the United States, China, France, Fiji and Britain have all sent ships carrying relief supplies including drinking water, medical kits and engineering equipment.

Australia's HMAS Adelaide docked in Nuku'alofa to unload supplies last week, despite a



A woman carries a refilled gas container in the centre of the capital Nuku'alofa ahead of Tonga's first lockdown on Wednesday (AFP)

coronavirus outbreak among its crew.

All offshore deliveries are subject to strict 'no-contact' protocols in a bid to keep the virus at bay, including leaving goods in isolation for three days before they are handled by Tongans.

The Australian Defence Force's operations chief, Lieutenant General Greg Bilton, said

the Nuku'alofa outbreak 'doesn't appear to have evolved from the Adelaide'.

'Unprecedented disaster'

Bilton said the warship, which has recorded 51 COVID-19 cases among its 630-strong crew since leaving Brisbane last month, berthed in a different area of the harbour from where

the two local men were working.

"We unloaded in a manner that was COVID-friendly, contactless, in line with arrangements made with Tongan officials at the wharf," Bilton told Sky News Australia.

"So I don't think there's any connection, there's no evidence of that." He said the Tongan government had asked the Aus-

tralians to take samples from the infected men away for analysis to identify the strain of coronavirus and help identify its source.

Prime Minister Sioosi Sovaleni announced late on Tuesday that Tonga would enter a national lockdown at 6:00 pm (0500 GMT) on Wednesday, with the situation reviewed every 48 hours.

Omicron BA.2 in 57 countries, says WHO

Geneva, Switzerland - A sub-variant of the highly contagious Omicron coronavirus strain, which some studies indicate could be even more infectious than the original version, has been detected in 57 countries, the WHO said on Tuesday.

In its weekly epidemiological update, the World Health Organization said that the variant, which accounts for over 93 per cent of all coronavirus specimens collected in the past month, counts several sub-lineages: BA.1, BA.1.1, BA.2 and BA.3. The BA.1 and BA.1.1 still account for over 96 per cent of all the Omicron sequences uploaded to the GISAID global science initiative, it said.

But there has been a clear rise in cases involving BA.2, which counts several different mutations from the original - including on the spike protein that dots the virus's surface and is key to entering human cells. "BA.2- designated sequences have been submitted to GISAID from 57 countries to date," WHO said, adding that in some countries, the sub-variant now accounted for over half of all Omicron sequences gathered.

France lifts restrictions, including mandatory outdoor mask-wearing

Paris, France - France began lifting coronavirus restrictions including mandatory outdoor mask-wearing on Wednesday in a bid to ease citizens' daily lives, dividing opinion as the country only last month reported record COVID-19 infections.

Audience capacity limits for concert halls, sporting matches and other events were also removed, and although home-working will no longer be mandated it is still recommended.

The move begins a two-part relaxation of curbs announced at the end of January - despite the country hitting record levels of daily cases last month - and comes as England and Denmark also eased their restrictions.

France 'will be able to lift most of the restrictions taken to



People play slot machines in a 'Pasino drive' casino which limits the risks associated with COVID-19 in La Grande Motte, last week (AFP)

curb the epidemic in February' thanks to the new vaccination pass, which replaced the health pass, Prime Minister Jean Castex said in January. Since last month proof of inoculation records have been required for the new passes - needed to access everything from bars and restaurants to long-distance public transport.

Previously, the health pass could also be obtained with a recent negative COVID-19 test, a possibility the government ended in its bid to convince more people to get COVID jabs. The second stage of the curb-lifting will see nightclubs, shut since December, reopen on February 16 and standing areas will again be allowed at

concerts, sporting events and bars.

Eating and drinking will also be permitted in stadiums, cinemas and public transport. Paris has not made the easing of restrictions conditional on the progress of the health situation.

Authorities view the threat of the Omicron variant as limited and less dangerous than previous strains of the virus, even though it is more contagious.

"We have seen a weak reversal of the trend over the past few days, with fewer cases declared each day than seven days earlier," government spokesman Gabriel Attal told France Info radio on Tuesday.

An average of 322,256 cases were recorded over the previous seven days, as per latest figures.

Russia not to bring in new rules despite record number of cases

Moscow, Russia - Russia has no plans to introduce large-scale restrictions to reel in surging coronavirus cases, a senior health official said on Wednesday, despite reporting new infection records for 13 days running. Moscow has been hesitant throughout the pandemic to introduce any restrictions that could hurt the embattled economy.

"The healthcare system is coping," Anna Popova, the head of Russia's federal health regulator, told state-run news agency RIA Novosti in an interview published on Wednesday.

"The mortality rate is not higher now compared to previous periods that we went through in the last two years, and there are no grounds today for any special restrictions," Popova added.



People wait to undergo a free rapid antigen test for COVID-19 at a testing centre in a state department store in Moscow on Monday (AFP)

Officials in Moscow instituted a strict but brief lockdown at the of the pandemic in March 2020 but have since largely allowed regions to implement their own measures to avoid case surges. "Regions are carefully introducing kinds of special measures without plunging all of society and the entire economy into a state of collapse, which, today, does not

need to be done," Popova told RIA Novosti. Officials reported a record 141,883 new cases over the last 24 hours on Wednesday - a dramatic increase from two weeks ago when 33,899 new cases were reported on January 19. Russia's second city of Saint Petersburg was particularly badly hit, recording 13,000 infections.

Queen Elizabeth II to mark 70 years on the throne

London, UK - Queen Elizabeth II on Sunday becomes the first British monarch to reign for 70 years, heralding the start of her Platinum Jubilee year despite her retreat from public view.

But the landmark date this weekend will see little fanfare, as the 95-year-old monarch traditionally spends the anniversary of the death of her father in private.

The sovereign's record-breaking reign as head of state began when she was aged 25 and watching wildlife in a remote part of Kenya with her husband, Prince Philip.

She has since become the one constant in an era of rapid social and political change, a figurehead of modern Britain and a living link to its post-war and imperial past.

The Queen - who regularly tops surveys as the most popular royal - on January 23 flew by helicopter to her sprawling Sandringham estate in eastern England.



These file photos show Queen Elizabeth II posing with Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, and sitting (centre) at Westminster Abbey on her coronation day in London on June 2, 1953 (AFP)

She had been due to stay at Sandringham House with close family over Christmas and the New Year but the annual visit was postponed because of surging cases of Omicron.

No public engagements are expected on Sunday, in keeping with previous years.

But four days of festivities are planned for early June, including a military parade and a music concert, street parties, a mass attendance picnic and a 'Platinum Pudding Competition'.

Commemorative coins have been minted to mark the unprecedented milestone.



Retreat

At Sandringham, the queen is staying at Wood Farm, a five-bedroom cottage that was favoured by her late husband after he retired from public life in 2017. According to British media, Prince Philip spent his time there reading, painting and walking, in

more modest surroundings away from liveried servants and royal pomp.

The queen travelled to Sandringham by helicopter and was photographed in the back of a Range Rover, wearing a silk headscarf printed with birds.

The 20,000-acre estate, near

the north Norfolk coast, is dear to her heart.

Not only was it a retreat for Philip until he joined her in COVID isolation at Windsor Castle in 2020, but also for her father, George VI, who died there of lung cancer, aged 56.

It was also a favoured residence for her grandfather, King George V, who also died there, and her great-grandmother, Queen Alexandra.

After Philip's death in April last year, the queen returned to public and official engagements, including hosting world leaders at the G7 summit in Cornwall, southwest England.

But she has been forced to slow down on advice from doctors, after an overnight hospital stay in October sparked public concern.

Since then she has largely stayed at Windsor and made few public appearances.

The last dates back more than a month to her annual - recorded - Christmas message, where she paid a rare personal tribute to her husband of 73 years and his 'mischievous inquiring twinkle'.

Only three monarchs in global history have reigned for more than 70 years.

CYCLING



Cycling is one of the best workouts in terms of safely maintaining social distancing during the current pandemic. So, get onto your bike and breeze around for good health

If you're feeling a little restless with your exercise regime and want to try something new, try cycling. Not only will it keep you fit, but it'll also help you get the most out of your time outdoors and explore your local area.

Aside from a form of exercise, cycling is a great mode of transport. It's a good way to avoid coming into close contact with people as people do on buses, trains and Tubes. Sam Jones from Cycling UK told The Independent that cycling "remains one of the best in terms of safely maintaining social distancing."

To help make it less of a costly affair, 'Cyclescheme' is a work benefit many companies in the UK offer to employees, encouraging them to ride to work. It means you can save between 25 to 39 per cent on buying a bike and equipment too, which is taken from your pay at source, and you don't pay anything upfront.

Best bike that suits your need

Craig Myers, recreation manager for British Cycling UK explains that you don't need to spend a fortune to get the best bike for your needs.

"It's a common misconception that cycling is an expensive activity and you certainly don't need to pay a lot of money if you're just looking for something to get you from A to B. The important thing is that you choose a bike that is comfortable for you and is fully roadworthy," he says.

There's a huge range of bikes from those specifically designed to use just on the road, to mountain bikes, racing bikes and hybrid bikes which can combine certain elements of different things to make them more suitable for all of your needs. There are also folding bikes, which are great for commuting in cities, as you can get on trains easier and even take them into offices and neatly fold them at the end of a desk.

Then there are electric bikes which do more of the work for you, and also mean you

The important thing is that you choose a bike that is comfortable for you and is fully roadworthy

CRAIG MYERS

won't turn up to work looking like you've done a full workout.

When trying to choose a bike, Jones said, "The most important thing is to think what you are mostly going to use the bike for. You could buy an ultra-light carbon framed road bike which will look amazing and cost you a hefty sum, but if all you really need is something to get you three miles to work and back, then the top-range bike is not really

what you need. "If you are only undertaking short journeys, a hybrid bike, which comes with racks and mudguards, might be more suitable, and is also going to be a more affordable option."

Safety equipment you'd need

Once you've got your bike sorted, there are a handful of essentials you need to make sure your rides are safe. You should always carry a spare inner tube, tyre levers, a multi-tool and pump with you while out riding, and be familiar with how to use them.

It goes without saying that you should always wear a helmet, to keep you cool, agile and most importantly protected.

If you are going out when it's dark, make sure you have a high visibility jacket to keep you safe. It's covered with millions of tiny glass beads, making it 100 per cent reflective at nighttime, but it will still look completely normal by day.

The jacket has an inner mesh that means you don't feel it on your skin, and the tough

waterproofing and excellent breathability serves very well during winter commutes.

Plan your rides

If you're looking to build up your confidence on a bike it can be a good idea to first head to a park or quiet road, ideally with a good smooth surface. Start small and build up to larger rides. A park or your garden can be a good place to take your first steps, but if heading to the latter, try to pick a quiet area where not many people congregate or a quiet time of day."

British Cycling has set up 'Let's Ride Local', to help parents teach kids how to ride and provide inspiration and tips for novice cyclists from experts. It's a handy online resource that provides routes and advice on everything you need to know about becoming a better cyclist.

Once you're up and running and confident to go on longer rides, use a GPS device to track them, set distance goals, and record your pedalling rate, power output, or heartbeats.

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In 2022, fitness gets tailored into multiple forms to suit the convenience of different individuals

Fitness has now assumed a new identity. Over the past two years, with the pandemic holding sway the world over, people have realised that you don't need a fixed time or place for fitness activity. Many have shed the gym mentality and have happily converted their homes or work places into ideal settings for workouts and fitness activities. And fitness providers, too, have begun targeting this new trend.

Mental health and fitness are now inter-linked like never before and many gyms and health clubs have started incorporating new programmes that tackle both these aspects. Going solo at home has replaced group fitness sessions and hygiene protocols have assumed greater importance, whether indoors or outdoors. These are a few fitness trends that will continue in 2022:

Hybrid gym memberships
There has been an increase in gyms offering

hybrid memberships. Many traditional gyms are noticing that members want to have the option to work out either online or in-person. Online fitness isn't necessarily a competitor to brick-and-mortar businesses, but an ally as long as you can adapt to the needs of members. Members want the option to head to the gym a few days a week, but also get a workout at home. Hence, hybrid gym memberships are all about providing a level of convenience for consumers.

Wearable wellness technology
Wearable tech and activity trackers continue to be a big trend for 2022, but they are going beyond fitness. According to fitness website www.glofox.com, this year, many smart watches and fitness trackers are adding features that delve into metrics like body temperatures, stress levels, sleep, and heart rate. People are looking to track a variety of wellness metrics that go beyond just steps or miles run.



Exercising outdoors

People are spending more time outdoors and with the closure of gyms, many members went to their local outside space for their workouts. UK gym chain, Pure Gym, conducted a survey based on Google searches to spot the latest fitness trends or fads. They found that reverse running and stroller fitness are climbing the list of popular searches. Also, outdoor activities like hiking, running, cycling, and outdoor workouts in nature will continue to be popular ways to exercise.



Low-impact exercise

As popular as high-impact exercise is, there's a space for low-impact exercise to grow. Workouts like rowing, yoga and pilates are perfect for strengthening but are much less harsh on the body. As more people look to work on functional daily movements and just live a healthier life, low impact but effective workouts will continue to be a fitness trend.



Mini workouts

Mini workouts are for the people who don't have 45 minutes spare to dedicate to a workout. They are for the people who want to squeeze in an effective, but quick workout throughout the day. Mini workouts benefit both, time-sensitive people as well as those who simply don't have the motivation to commit to a huge workout. Whether it's strength training with free weights or a ten-minute bodyweight training programme, a mini workout is simple and quick.



Smart home gym

Smart home gym equipment was already trending before the pandemic, but multiple lockdowns really accelerated consumer adoption and growth. No doubt smart home gym equipment can be pricey, but some brands continue to raise millions in funding this year. For many people, the barrier to smart home gym equipment is price and size. However, it will be interesting to see how new brands come to the field with different offerings.



Fun group fitness

There's something about working out in a group that makes you feel good. Entire brands are built on the premise that people like to work out together and that feeling of community elevates the business. While HIIT and yoga will always be popular group workouts, classes for trapeze, roller skating, and trampoline are also growing in popularity.

South African players support coach Boucher

Johannesburg, South Africa - South African cricket captain Dean Elgar said on Wednesday that his players supported head coach Mark Boucher, who faces a disciplinary process on charges of racism that could result in his dismissal.

Elgar was non-committal about whether he personally would testify in Boucher's defence in hearings which have been delayed until May because Boucher intends to call some current players to testify.

It was announced on Tuesday that the hearings would be delayed until South Africa has completed a tour of New Zealand and an incoming tour by Bangladesh.

"It was news to me that that's the process," he told a departure press conference ahead of the two-Test tour of New Zealand.

"As a player you don't have much control over that. It's something we are going to have to chat about as a group. Whether or not it's going to affect the team, I doubt it. This process has been in the air for quite some time now.

"We had a feeling that it might come to this point that players might be asked to testify. I'm sure we'll cover those grounds in the next month."

Elgar said he expected the South African Cricketers' Association, which represents the players, to assist players regarding the process.



Asked whether the Boucher issue was something that would be "hanging over" the players or whether it would galvanise them, Elgar said, "I'd like to think the latter. Of late we've had these experiences that we've had to deal with as a players' group. If anything it's really helped us.

"We've realised cricket comes first for us. We know what the head coach is going through and we are supporting him because we know how much value he adds to our system and our group."

It was announced earlier that

As a player you don't have much control over that. It's something we are going to have to chat about as a group. Whether or not it's going to affect the team, I doubt it.

DEAN ELGAR

new batting star Keegan Petersen was ruled out of the New Zealand tour after testing positive for COVID-19.

Petersen, 28, was named player of the series after South Africa's 2-1 series win against

India last month.

Playing in only his second series, Petersen filled the key number three batting position for South Africa and topped the run-scorers with 276 runs at an average of 46.00 with his top score

of 82 coming in a crucial run chase in the third Test.

Petersen will be replaced by Zubayr Hamza, 26, who played the most recent of his five Tests against England in 2019/20.

"It's another curve ball for us," said Elgar. "I was looking forward to seeing him build on what he has achieved so far."

South Africa will play two Test matches against New Zealand, the world Test champions. Both matches will be at the Hagley Oval in Christchurch, starting on February 17 and 25.

AFP

Rising South African star Petersen ruled out of New Zealand tour

Johannesburg, South Africa - The South African cricket team suffered a blow ahead of their tour of New Zealand when new batting star Keegan Petersen was ruled out after testing positive for COVID-19.

Cricket South Africa announced Petersen's forced withdrawal on Wednesday, less than 12 hours before the team's departure on Wednesday evening.

Petersen, 28, was named player of the series after South Africa's 2-1 series win against India last month.

Playing in only his second series, Petersen filled the key number three batting position for South Africa and topped the run-scorers with 276 runs at an average of 46.00 with his top score of 82 coming in a crucial run chase in the third Test.

Petersen will be replaced by Zubayr Hamza, 26, who played



Keegan Petersen was named player of the series after South Africa's 2-1 series win against India last month

the most recent of his five Tests against England in 2019/20.

In a statement, CSA said Petersen was "well and asymptomatic" but that CSA's medical staff would stay in close contact

with him to ensure his physical and mental well-being.

South Africa are already without key strike bowler Anrich Nortje, who also missed the India series because of a hip injury.

South Africa will play two Test matches against New Zealand, the world Test champions. Both will be at the Hagley Oval in Christchurch, starting on February 17 and 25.

REVISED SOUTH AFRICAN SQUAD:

Dean Elgar (captain), Temba Bavuma (vice-captain), Sarel Erwee, Zubayr Hamza, Simon Harmer, Marco Jansen, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Duanne Olivier, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Lutho Sipamla, Glen-ton Stuurman, Rassie van der Dussen, Kyle Verreynne (wkt).

AFP

Man Utd's Mason Greenwood released on bail after arrest

Manchester, United Kingdom - Manchester United forward Mason Greenwood has been released on bail after being questioned over the alleged rape and assault of a young woman, police said on Wednesday.

The 20-year-old was arrested on Sunday after images and videos were posted online, and while he was still in custody on Tuesday he was further arrested on suspicion of sexual assault and threats to kill.

Greater Manchester Police have not named the footballer, but said in a statement, "A 20-year-old man arrested on Sunday January 30, 2022 on suspicion of the rape and assault of a woman has been released on bail pending further investigation."

A spokeswoman for the force confirmed, "The man has been released on bail for everything."

Within hours of the allegations appearing on Sunday, Greenwood, regarded as one of the rising stars of English football, was suspended from playing or training with United until further notice.

The posts have since been deleted from the social media page on which they appeared.

People who allege they are victims of certain sexual offences receive lifelong anonymity under English law.

United issued a new statement following Tuesday's developments, saying, "Manchester United reiterates its strong condemnation of violence of any kind. As previously communicated, Mason Greenwood will not train with,

or play for, the club until further notice."

The club have removed all Greenwood merchandise from their website, with his name absent from a drop-down list of players' names for replica shirts.

Sponsors

A number of sponsors have reacted by distancing themselves from Greenwood.

Sportswear giant Nike said it had suspended its deal with the player and video game company Electronic Arts said he had been removed from offline modes in FIFA 22.

United shirt sponsor TeamViewer said it was closely monitoring developments. "TeamViewer condemns any form of violent behaviour," the company said in a statement. "We are in close contact with our partner Manchester United, appreciate their immediate actions and support them in the measures taken."

"We are closely monitoring the developments and trust that the authorities will provide clarity in this matter."

Chocolate-maker Cadbury, an official partner of United, said it would not feature Greenwood in any marketing or products it created.

"Cadbury does not condone violence in any form," it said in a statement. "Our partnership is with the Club itself and not the individual players."

"Greenwood, who made his United debut in 2019 after coming through the youth ranks, has played 129 times for the club, scoring 35 goals.

AFP



File photo of Manchester United's Mason Greenwood during the English FA Cup match against Aston Villa on January 10 (AFP)

ISC Women, OWCA, MCCC Yellow register big wins



Suhani Dadhwaj and Jayadhanya of ISC Women

MUSCAT: Suhani Dadhwaj struck an elegant 64 to help ISC Women to an emphatic 62-run victory against Muscat Women in a Women's League T20 game at Oman Cricket Turf 2 in Am-erat.

Suhani, who hit seven fours and a six, got good support from Jayadhanya Gunasekar (37) as the duo added 109 runs for the second wicket. ISC ended its 20 overs at a robust 146 for four. Amanda Dcosta took two for 23.

Muscat failed to make a match of it, getting bundled out for 84 in 19.4 overs, Nikita Rajesh topscoring with 29. Jayadhanya claimed two for nine.

BRIEF SCORES

(Women's League T20): ISC

Women 146 for four in 20 overs (Suhani Dadhwaj 64 - 7x4, 1x6, Jayadhanya Gunasekar 37 - 4x4, Amanda Dcosta 2-23) beat Muscat Women 84 all out in 19.4 overs (Nikhita Jagadish 29 - 2x4, Jayadhanya Gunasekar 2-9) by 62 runs.

Minduli bowls OWCA to victory

In another match, Minduli Medagoda's superb spell in which she picked up four for 13 powered OWCA Women to a mighty 10-wicket win over Wadi Kabir Women at OC Turf 1.

Minduli was instrumental in having Wadi Kabir dismissed for 60 with brilliant bowling by Afida Aftab and Anshita Lalit

who claimed two wickets each. Shreya Suresh top scored with 20.

OWCA had a cakewalk chase, racing to the target in only 6.5 overs, scoring 61 without loss for a massive win.

BRIEF SCORES

(Women's League): Wadi Kabir Women 60 all out in 20 overs (Shreya Suresh 20 - 2x4, Minduli Medagoda 4-13, Afida Aftab 2-14, Anshita Lalit 2-2) lost to OWCA Women 61 for 0 in 6.5 overs (Sakshi Vijaya 32 - 5x4, Nitya Joshi 23 - 3x4) by 10 wickets.

Kriv stars in MCCC Yellow win

In a Junior League Under-13 T20

game, MCCC Yellow rode on an excellent 93 by Kriv Rajesh to thrash ISWK B by 161 runs.

MCCC Yellow's total of 244 for 2 also included superb fifties by Mohammed Imran (55) and Shravan Sridhar (50).

ISWK B could not find any rhythm, limping to 83 for 9 in 20 overs due to brilliant bowling by Pradhiyin (2 for 9) and Vihaan Sanjay (2 for 10). Naitik Tushar was its main batter, scoring 20.

BRIEF SCORES

(Junior Division U13): MCCC Yellow 244 for 2 in 20 overs (Kriv Rajesh 93 - 13x4, Mohammed Imran 55 - 7x4, Shravan Sridhar 50 - 4x4) beat ISWK B 83 for 9 in 20 overs (Naitik Tusharkumar 20 - 1x4,

Pradhiyin 2-9, Vihaan Sanjay 2-10) by 161 runs.

BRIEF SCORES

(Junior Division U13): MCCC Blue 137 for 9 in 20 overs (Abdul Muqith 40 - 7x4, Pranav Nivash 26 - 4x4, Hadi Muhammed 3-25, Nithin Jayarajan 2-22) lost to ISM 138 for 1 in 16 overs (Hafiz Mohamed 46 - 4x4, Swagath Navaneetha 40 - 5x4) by 8 wickets.

BRIEF SCORES

(Junior Division U13): MCCC Red 169 for 3 in 20 overs (Karnik Samir 70 - 6x4, Yohan Sriram 56) beat BSC B 78 all out in 20 overs (Aarav Saraiya 11, Sivabala Siddeshwaran 3-9, Vatrana Radhika 2-2) by 91 runs.

Queiroz eyes glory with Salah, Egypt at AFCON

Yaoundé, Cameroon - Carlos Queiroz won the Under-20 World Cup with Portugal, lifted the Champions League trophy as an assistant to Alex Ferguson at Manchester United and has twice taken Iran to the World Cup.

The vastly experienced Portuguese coach now stands just one game away from the Africa Cup of Nations final, as he leads Egypt into a last-four tie against hosts Cameroon on Thursday.

The 68-year-old, born in Mozambique before the southern African country gained independence from Portugal, had sampled football in most corners of the globe before arriving on the banks of the Nile.

Appointed by Egypt last September, Queiroz is hoping to lead Mohamed Salah and his teammates to what would be the country's record-extending eighth AFCON crown.

He also has his sights set on taking the Pharaohs to the World Cup in Qatar later this year for what would be their fourth appearance at the finals after 1934, 1990 and 2018.

To do that they will have to beat Senegal in a play-off in March, a match-up that will see Salah and his Liverpool colleague Sadio Mane go head to head.

Before that, though, comes the climax of this Cup of Nations for a man straight out of the renowned Portuguese school of coaching. Queiroz led Portugal to back-to-back FIFA World Youth Championship titles, in 1989 and then again in 1991 with a side featuring the likes of Luis Figo and Rui Costa.

After failing to take Portugal's



Egypt's forward Mohamed Salah (L) and Portuguese head coach Carlos Queiroz (C) attend a training session at the Olembe stadium (AFP)

senior side to the 1994 World Cup, he set off on his tour of the world, coaching in New York, succeeding Arsene Wenger at Nagoya Grampus Eight in Japan and having a spell in charge of the United Arab Emirates.

He managed South Africa at the 2002 Cup of Nations and qualified them for that year's World Cup, only to leave before the tournament in Japan and South Korea.

'Split identities'

Instead he went on to enjoy great success at Old Trafford alongside Ferguson, either side of a

spell as coach of Real Madrid.

"There are many Portuguese people in football, but I have the best one here in Carlos Queiroz," Ferguson said in 2005 after Queiroz returned to United.

"It needed someone with a good working capacity, technical knowledge, who could speak in various languages, had a European culture and was able to bridge the different nationalities. Queiroz is the perfect man for the job," Queiroz won the 2008 Champions League with Ferguson and then coached at three consecutive World Cups, with Portugal in 2010 followed by tak-

ing Iran to the tournaments in Brazil and Russia.

He then had a disappointing stint in charge of Colombia before moving into his current role, back on the continent where it all began. "I spent the best years of my life there," he once told French newspaper Le Monde of growing up in Mozambique.

"I still consider myself to be a European-African, with split identities."

Thursday's semi-final against Cameroon brings together the two most successful teams in the history of the Cup of Nations, with 12 titles between them.

It also sees Queiroz come up against another Portuguese coach, with Toni Conceicao the man in charge of Cameroon.

"He is a great lad and one of the new, young generation of coaches in Portugal," Queiroz said of Conceicao, who at 60 is still a veteran and spent most of his career working at clubs in Portugal and in Romania.

"He is doing a brilliant job in Cameroon. As a friend and colleague I wish him the best of luck in all the games he is going to play except the next one against us."

AFP



Samuel Eto'o attends a training session of the Cameroon's national football team at the Olembe stadium in Yaounde (AFP)

Egypt coach Queiroz hits out at Eto'o for calling AFCON semi-final 'war'

Yaoundé, Cameroon - Egypt coach Carlos Queiroz hit out at Cameroon legend Samuel Eto'o for sending a "very bad message" after likening Thursday's Africa Cup of Nations semi-final between the sides to a "war".

Eto'o, who is now president of Cameroon's Football Federation, made the comment to his team in a video widely published on social media.

"Prepare yourselves because this is going to be a war. That is how we need to approach this match. A war! You can't let this opportunity pass you by" he said.

The semi-final will be played at the Olembe Stadium in Yaounde in the first game to be staged there since eight people died and 38 were injured in a crush before Cameroon beat the Comoros on January 24.

"It is a very bad message to the people of Cameroon. I think he forgot that Cameroon people died at the stadium a couple of days ago," Queiroz told media after an Egypt training session in

Yaounde.

"To make this declaration of war before a game I think he has learned nothing from being in professional football."

He called on the Confederation of African Football to take action against Eto'o, the one-time Barcelona striker.

It was a very very, unfortunate comment because football is not about war, football is about celebration, joy, it's about happiness

CARLOS QUEIROZ

"It was a very very, unfortunate comment because football is not about war, football is about celebration, joy, it's about happiness," Queiroz said.

AFP

CAF sanctions Egypt, Morocco for quarter-final locker room fight

Cairo, Egypt - The Confederation of African Football (CAF) has suspended several Egyptian and Moroccan players and dished out fines after their Africa Cup of Nations quarter-final ended in a "fight".

The sanctions fell Wednesday, on the eve of Egypt's date with hosts Cameroon in the semi-finals after a locker room brawl following Sunday's 2-1 win against Morocco.

The seven-time winners will be missing assistant coach Rogerio Paulo Dos Santos Cesar De Sa and the President of the Moroccan FA Mr. Fouzi Lekjaa," CAF said in a statement from their Cairo HQ.

"A general fight followed in which Morocco player Sofiane



Trouble began after altercations between Egypt assistant coach and the President of the Moroccan FA

Boufal and Egypt player Marwan Mostafa Daoud were identified," the CAF said. Daoud's suspension came due to "his violent conduct" while Rogerio De Sa's was because of "using an obscene gesture".

CAF also suspended Moroccan

players Soufiane Chakla and Soufiane Boufal for "violent behaviour". That rules the pair out of Morocco's World Cup play-off game against the Democratic Republic of Congo in March.

The confederation imposed a fine of \$10,000 on the Moroccan

Federation and \$25,000 on the Egyptian Football Association.

It also imposed an additional \$100,000 fine (\$50,000 suspended) on Egypt for breaching the Cup of Nations' media protocols and directives.

AFP



Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang

I'm here! Aubameyang tells Barcelona fans after delayed signing

Barcelona, Spain - "It's Auba time!" declared Barcelona on Wednesday as they signed Gabon striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang as a free agent.

The club's tweet also included a video of Aubameyang declaring "I'm here Barcelona fans! Forca Barca!" The player will sign a contract until June 30, 2025.

"I'm very happy, very happy to be here and I'm already looking forward to being on the pitch," Aubameyang told the Barca website.

AFP

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WINTER OLYMPICS

Sport begins at Beijing Olympics under shadow of COVID, rights fears

Beijing, China - Curling started the sport at the Beijing Winter Olympics on Wednesday in front of a smattering of spectators as China tried to move on from the diplomatic boycotts and COVID-19 fears that have dogged the lead-up to the Games.

The Olympics do not officially launch until Friday's opening ceremony but the action began with mixed doubles curling at the "Ice Cube" - known as the "Water Cube" when the Chinese capital hosted the 2008 Summer Games - in front of a limited number of masked fans occupying every other seat.

The build-up to these Olympics, which will unfold within a huge COVID-secure "bubble", has been overshadowed by controversies ranging from rights concerns to Peng Shuai and warnings about snooping on competitors by the Chinese government.

Adopting the catchphrase "Together for a shared future", China, its ruling Communist Party and the International Olympic Committee hope all the rancour will be forgotten once the Games get into full swing.

China has barred overseas fans because of the pandemic but some spectators will be invited to attend and organisers say venues could be up to 50 percent full.

Arenas were mostly empty at last summer's pandemic-delayed Tokyo Games to stop the spread of infection.

When Beijing hosted the 2008 Games, the torch relay took in swathes of China and other countries - where it met protests in places - but this time



USA's and Italy's short track speed skaters take part in a training session at the Capital Indoor Stadium in Beijing on February 01, 2022 ahead of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics Games.

Adopting the catchphrase "Together for a shared future", China, its ruling Communist Party and the International Olympic Committee hope all the rancour will be forgotten once the Games get into full swing

it will last just three days, ending at the "Bird's Nest" stadium for the opening ceremony.

Beijing 2022 official Cai Qi said at the start of the relay Wednesday, which will involve more than 1,000 torchbearers and included former NBA star Yao Ming, that he hoped the Games would help "dispel the gloom of the pandemic".

If the 2008 Olympics were the country's coming-out party, these Games will take place in a

China under President Xi Jinping which is increasingly belligerent on the global stage and boasting the world's second-largest economy. When Washington said it would stage a diplomatic boycott because of rights concerns - with Australia, Britain and Canada

among those following suit - China warned the United States would "pay the price".

The Biden administration will not send diplomatic or official representation over what it called China's "ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity" against Muslim Uyghurs in the region of Xinjiang.

Athletes of the boycotting countries will compete at the Games, which run until February 20, but a US rights monitor

sounded the alarm over athletes' safety after the hosts threatened "punishment" for anti-Beijing comments.

Surveillance

There are other controversies. IOC president Thomas Bach says that while in Beijing he will meet Peng, a Grand Slam-winning tennis player who alleged in November that she had been sexually assaulted by a former vice-premier. Peng was not heard from

for nearly three weeks, only to reappear, but there are concerns about how free she really is.

Fearing surveillance, some Western nations have told their athletes to leave their personal devices at home and use temporary burner phones.

There are signs that China is tightening the noose on anyone daring to spoil the party, with human rights activists and some academics having their WeChat messaging app accounts restricted in recent weeks.

China, where COVID-19 emerged towards the end of 2019, has pursued a zero-COVID policy nationwide and is taking the same approach at the Olympics by cocooning participants inside a "closed loop".

The highly infectious Omicron variant presents a new challenge, both to the Games and the country, putting already jittery authorities further on edge. Cases in Beijing have been ticking upwards, albeit from a low base number.

Organisers say they expect cases in the bubble - nearly 250 have already been recorded - but their goal is to keep the spread to a minimum. They hope the bubble will be impregnable, keeping the nearly 3,000 athletes together with thousands of support staff, volunteers and media cut off from the outside world.

The Games will be held in three zones. In addition to downtown Beijing, the two other areas are outside the capital and will rely on artificial snow to cover what would otherwise be brown mountainsides.

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Australia's Matt Graham (25) and James Matheson (22) inspect the moguls course ahead of the 2022 Winter Olympics (AFP)

Australia fly in coffee expert to power them to Beijing gold

Beijing, China - Australian athletes at the Winter Olympics have a "performance-enhancing stimulant" to power them to gold - flying their own barista into the COVID-secure Beijing bubble.

The coffee-loving Australians did the same thing at the Tokyo Games last summer and it was such a hit they have replicated it in the Chinese capital.

"The purpose of the barista was it's a tried and true assistance for high performance," Geoff Lipshut, the Australian chef de mission, said on

Wednesday, two days ahead of the opening ceremony for the Beijing Games.

"We had the barista in Tokyo, where the team did incredibly well. It seemed like a no-brainer.

"Given our winter athletes travel so long away from Australia, we can bring a little touch of home and have that available."

Phil Bellingham, who is going in the cross-country skiing, hopes the caffeine shot from a Queensland barista brewing Australian coffee will propel him

AFP

Olympic champ says man-made snow in Beijing like 'bulletproof ice'

Zhangjiakou, China - The Beijing Olympics snowboard slopestyle course is like "bulletproof ice", twice defending champion Jamie Anderson said Wednesday, adding that she was "scared" riding on the artificial snow.

The Beijing Games, which begin on Friday, are taking place mostly on man-made snow because they are happening in one of the driest parts of China.

America's Anderson got her first taste of the course on Wednesday in Zhangjiakou, about 180 kilometres (110 miles) northwest of Beijing.

The 31-year-old, who won the inaugural Olympic women's slopestyle gold in 2014 and defended her title four years later, said the course was "very firm".

"I think the majority of it is artificial snow so it's not quite ideal, but I would say we're all making the most of it," she said.

"You definitely don't want to fall. It feels like pretty bulletproof ice."

Anderson has suffered a catalogue of serious injuries in her



An athlete practises on the slopestyle course at the Beijing Games

career, including a ruptured spleen that saw her spend six days in intensive care in 2009.

She said the Beijing course was "pretty gnarly" and admitted her first ride on it was "a little challenging".

"There's a lot of options and with the snow condition it made me feel a bit more scared," she said.

"I think it's going to get rowed

in and start to ride better and better," she added.

Anderson's US team-mate Courtney Rummel said the snow was "not bad" but she did not "want to fall" on it.

"I've been adjusting to riding it," said Rummel.

"It's no different to the snow back in Wisconsin, which is all man-made."

AFP

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