

HM issues 3 Royal Decrees

Appoints undersecretaries, orders Medical City for security units

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued three Royal decrees on Thursday reading as follows:

Royal Decree No 94/2022 conducts placements in some positions.

Article 1 appoints the following as stated below:

- Dr Wa'il bin Saif bin Salim al Harrasi as Undersecretary of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs
- Dr Said bin Harib bin Mannaa al Lamki as Undersecretary of the Ministry of Health for Health Affairs
- Mohsin bin Hamad bin Saif al Hadhrami as Undersecretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and Dr Munthir bin Hilal bin Badr al Busaidi as Deputy Chairman of Oman 2040 Implementation Unit, with the Special Grade.

Article 2 says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 95/2022 establishes a Medical City for Military and Security Units and promulgates its bylaw.

Article 1 sets up a medical city to be named 'Medical City for Military and Security Units' that shall have a legal entity, shall enjoy financial and administrative autonomy and function in accordance with the system (bylaw) attached.

Article 2 states that the Medical City for Military and Security Units shall have its headquarters



in Muscat Governorate and that, under a decision by its board, it may establish branches in other governorates.

Article 3 stipulates that all the allocations, origins, rights obligations and assets of Medical Services in the departments mentioned below shall be transferred to the Medical City for Military and Security Units. The

departments are stated as follows: The Royal Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Royal Oman Police, the Royal Court Affairs, the Internal Security Unit, the Royal Guard of Oman and the Sultan's Special Force.

It also stipulates that occupants of medical and paramedical jobs and other personnel of

the Medical Services in the above-mentioned departments shall be transferred to the Medical City for Military and Security Units, along with their existing ranks, financial grades and financial allocations.

The implementation of provisions of this Article shall be in accordance with the mechanism and regulations endorsed by the

Board of Directors of the Medical City for the Military and Security Units, after coordinating with the Commanders-in-Chief and Commanders of the military and security units.

Article 4 states that the Chairman of Board of Directors of the Medical City for Military and Security Units shall issue the regulations and decisions necessary for the application of provisions of this decree and the bylaw. Till such time, the regulations and decisions that are in force in the departments mentioned in Article (3) of this decree shall continue to be enforced, where no specific text in this regard is stated in this decree or the attached system, and without prejudice to its provisions.

Article 5 cancels all that contradicts this decree or the attached system or contravenes their provisions.

Article 6 says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 96/2022 appoints a Chairman for the Medical City for Military and Security Units.

Article 1 appoints Eng Odai bin Hilal bin Nasser al Ma'awali as Chairman of the Medical City for Military and Security Units, with the Special Grade.

Article 2 says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

ONA

Fate of 727 candidates to be decided today

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Voting for various municipal councils for the third term will be held on Sunday from 7am to 7pm.

According to the Ministry of Interior, 731,767 Omani voters will choose 126 representatives from 727 candidates, including 27 women.

This is the first time that the voting will be done through an electronic application - 'Intakheb' - available for download from app stores. Given a high level of security that the app has; a voter will be verified in a safe manner through AI facial recognition, besides reading his/her identity card electronically without any manual intervention.

In Muscat, 103,949 voters will choose 12 members from among 85 candidates, while 84,818 voters in Dhofar will exercise their franchise to elect 20 members from among 145 candidates. In Musandam, 11,864 voters will elect eight representatives from 22 contestants.

There are 16,696 voters in Buraimi with 20 candidates contesting for the six seats, while 83,338 voters in Dakhiliyah will elect 18 representatives from the registered 85 candidates.

In North Batinah, 148,849 voters will elect 12 members from among 97 candidates. In South Batinah, 91,988 voters will choose 12 members from 49.

In South Sharqiyah, 75,729



voters will choose ten from 61 candidates, while in North Sharqiyah, 63,358 will cast their votes to elect 14 from among 45.

In Dhahirah, 38,583 will vote to elect six members from 31 candidates, while 12,595 voters in Al Wusta will choose eight members from among 56 candidates.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik during his meeting with the sheikhs and dignitaries of the governorates last year, stressed on the activation of the roles of the governorates, investing in their own resources and benefiting from them.

In view of the ongoing preparations to hold municipal council elections, His Majesty the Sultan on Wednesday spoke on the powers entrusted to members of municipal councils. His Majesty instructed the members of Majlis A'Shura to focus on the powers granted to them - by virtue of the Oman Council Law - and facilitate the integration of roles between the Shura and the municipal councils to avoid any duplication or clash between the functions of the two bodies.

Over 77 children died due to abuse, neglect in three years: OHRC official

Our Correspondent
Muscat

More than 77 children have died during the past three years due to abuse and neglect, according to an official from the Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC).

Labiba bint Mohammed al Ma'awlia, an expert on women's affairs at the Ministry of Social Development, and head of the monitoring and receiving communications committee at OHRC, confirmed this unfortunate string of incidents, noting "a rise in the number of cases linked to neglect and abuse of children in recent years".

More than 77 children, who have died due to neglect and abuse during the past three years, include those forgetfully left in buses or private cars, and



OHRC also took steps to provide the family members with a safe environment to live in and constantly evaluate their psychological and health status

LABIBA AL MA'AWLIA

due to drowning in valleys and swimming pools.

"The committee, in cooperation with the concerned authorities, monitored these cases and took necessary legal measures.

"It also took steps to treat the family members of those deceased children - providing them with a safe environment to live in and constantly evaluating their psychological and health status," Labiba said.

She informed that the com-

mission, in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Development and the Omani Women's Association, regularly conducts programmes across Oman to reduce neglect and abuse of children. Last week, a similar programme was held in the wilayats of Khasab, Bukha and Dibba in the Governorate of Musandam.

Talking about children's healthcare, she said, "The committee dealt with a number of

complaints this year.

"The committee, in cooperation with the concerned authorities and civil society institutions, provided those children with full healthcare."

Regarding the right to education, she said that the committee had received a number of reports on children with disabilities in education.

"The committee dealt with these cases in order to provide those children with educational and rehabilitative services, and spread awareness among their parents of the procedures followed in this regard."

According to Labiba, OHRC, in cooperation with the concerned authorities, implements many programmes to promote awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities, in order to integrate them into the mainstream society.



RT-PCR test must in India for arrivals from 5 Asian nations



Madrid's 'toy hospital' marking its last Christmas

Rains likely in northern parts of Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The northern parts of Oman are expected to receive light to moderate rainfall till Wednesday due to air troughs affecting the sultanate.

The latest weather maps and analysis of the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre show that the fist of two upper air troughs is likely to affect Oman till Sunday.

According to the Directorate General of Meteorology, the governorates of Musandam,

North Batinah and Buraimi are expected to witness clouds advection and chances of isolated rains and thundershowers on Sunday.

'Isolated rain from 10-30 mm may cause wadis to overflow, while fresh downdraft winds with speed of 30-60km per hour will prevail in the three governorates. Sea state will be moderate to rough with maximum wave height of 2.5m,' the Civil Aviation Authority stated in a special weather report.

The authority stated that the second upper trough will affect

Oman for three days, starting gradually on Monday afternoon and continuing until Wednesday night. 'It will be associated with clouds advection over northern governorates with chances of rain showers ranging between 10-50 mm.'

Rains have already started hitting Musandam on Saturday evening, leading to the flow of wadis.

The Civil Aviation Authority advised all to take precaution during rain and flow of wadis and to check the visibility and sea state before sailing.

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MUSCAT DAILY PRESENTS

2022 OMAN'S MOST TRUSTED BRAND AWARDS

Visitors throng Jabal Shams as freezing cold sweeps hills

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Jabal Shams has been experiencing freezing temperatures for the past few days with 0.3° recorded on Wednesday night. With the drop in mercury, visitors are rushing to the area to feel the chill and enjoy its varied tourist attractions.

Jabal Shams, Oman's highest peak, is about 3,100m above the sea level, which makes its climate different from the other places in the sultanate.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Abdullah al Khatri, owner of Jabal Shams Moon guesthouse, said that during the winter season - October to April - Jabal Shams receives a large number of visitors from both within and outside Oman.

Jabal Shams or the 'Mountain of the Sun' offers one of the most picturesque settings in Oman, especially during the winter season. It is also one of the most popular destinations for camping.

Currently, the area is witnessing a large turnout of foreign tourists, residents and citizens alike. "On an average more than 300 European tourists are visiting Jabal Shams daily to enjoy the freezing temperatures as well as to watch the night sky," Khatri informed.

"We have five air-conditioned rooms and they are mostly getting occupied, especially during the weekends. The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has devel-



oped a reinforced fence to help people see Jabal Shams' famous canyons and take a tour of the several hiking trails."

Khatri further informed that tourists are coming from Amer-

ica, France, the Netherlands, Canada, Germany, Belgium and Russia to enjoy the frost-covered hills, watch stars and the sunset.

Apart from this, tourists are also going for trekking to explore

the area. "We have several hiking trails, some of which run up to 12km."

Adventure seekers, particularly those who like mountain climbing, are also rushing to the

On an average more than 300 European tourists are visiting Jabal Shams daily to enjoy the freezing temperatures

ABDULLAH AL KHATRI

hills of Jabal Shams. "This is the reason why tourists from various countries come here to enjoy its varied offerings. Our guesthouse offers accommodation with free bikes, private parking, a shared lounge and a garden. Boasting a shared kitchen, this property also provides guests with a sun terrace and an indoor pool. It also organises evening gigs for the guests," said Khatri.

The guesthouse owner is hopeful that more tourists will throng the area with the onset of the festive season culminating in New Year celebrations.

"We are expecting a huge increase in number of tourists in the coming days for camping in Jabal Shams. This will undoubtedly revive tourism in the area."

Speaking about environment, he said that Jabal Shams is considered one of the most beautiful places for camping in Oman and it should be conserved for sustainable tourism. "We are working on developing our services and increasing our programmes to attract more tourists."



OIA delegation in Jordan reviews investment scopes

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A delegation from the Omani Investment Authority (OIA) explored investment opportunities in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan while on a visit to its capital Amman on Wednesday.

The delegation representing a number of Omani companies working in the fields of telecommunications, food industries, logistics and ports met with Kholoud Saqqaf, Jordan's Minister of Investment.

The delegation was visiting the kingdom to follow up on the outcome of King Abdullah II bin al Hussein's visit to Oman in October, especially pertaining to enhancing joint investments in various fields.

During the meeting, talks were held over the untapped investment opportunities in Jordan, with Kholoud inviting the Omani Investment Authority to start a company in Jordan, as investment laws allow for the Arab and foreign sovereign funds to establish one or more public shareholding companies in the



Kholoud Saqqaf

country.

She explained that enhancing joint investment between the two countries will contribute to increasing economic and trade cooperation.

She emphasised on the role of the private sector in boosting bilateral trade and for the sector to benefit from investment opportunities in the two countries in the energy, tourism, education, information technology, logistics and other sectors.

Kholoud highlighted her ministry's efforts towards realising economic and development visions by increasing growth, improving competitiveness and business climate, besides generating jobs. She also dwelt on key reforms that brought developments in the economic fields.

Oman Broadband signs deals to stimulate investments in ITC sector

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Broadband signed four agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) last week with local and international companies, to enhance joint cooperation and boost economic integration in the telecommunications and information technology (ITC) sector.

The first agreement was signed with the OQ Group making its optical fibre infrastructure accessible to Oman Broadband, while considering the operational and commercial aspects of both

entities.

Signed by Said Abdullah Mohammed al Mandhari, Chairman of the Oman Broadband's Board of Directors, and Mansour bin Ali bin Mansour al Abdali, Managing Director at OQ Gas Networks, the agreement promises to help Oman Broadband benefit from the OQ's fibre optic network across the sultanate, and make the network available in remote areas.

The second agreement was reached with the Oman Airports Management Company (Oman Airports).

As per the agreement, Oman



Broadband will install and provide a fibre optic network in all the airports of Oman.

This step aims at ensuring the provision of telecommunication services in accordance with the international standards for li-

censed telecommunication service providers in Oman, a press release said.

The agreement was signed by Mandhari and Moamen bin Abdullah al Busaidi, Chief Information Officer at Oman Airports.

The third MoU was signed with the Go Lands. Signed by Mandhari and Elias al Harthi, a Go Lands representative, the MoU allows the inclusion of the fibre optic network maps in the Go Land application to make it

easier for users to identify the broadband coverage.

The last agreement was signed with the Mohsin Haider Darwish ITICS company, QuadGen Communications Solutions and FiberHome Telecommunica-

tion Technologies.

The MoU paves the path for conducting studies related to the development of fibre optic network technologies, in order to ensure that all parties are aligned with future changes in the industry, while providing the best and latest solutions to customers in the sultanate.

The MoU was signed by Mandhari; Jayaprakash Menon, CEO of MHD ITICS; Utyendra Zalani, General Manager of Sales at Quadgen Communications Solutions; and Bruce Gao, Regional Head of FiberHome Telecommunication Technologies in Oman.

Fishing Boats for Sale



Abu Timam Chartered Certified Accountants in their real capacity as official liquidators of one of the companies announce the sale of two fishing boats. Interested parties can see the boats in Sur. Bids are to be submitted to liquidator office within two weeks from the date of this announcement.

For more details,
please call 71555163

OPINION

SALEH MIRI, MUSCAT DAILY COLUMNIST, IS AN ARCHITECT WHO CAME TO OMAN IN THE EARLY 1980S

We are witnessing strange movements in the region which require probably a better understanding of what lies behind all this. The world's policies have always been guided by economy matters and never had economy influencing directly the politics.

The present world in December 2022 faces the following realities:

In North America, the US prints money without any backing and develops military strength with this money. The global debt has surpassed 30 trillion dollars and the US needs changes in order to avoid bankruptcy. South America has its own rules and does not represent a vital interest for the West.



THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Europe has 27 countries with a global GDP growth of less than 1%, and needs a new area to develop and enhance its economy.

Africa has already been separated and divided by the Western powers and their influence is challenged now by

the Chinese who are boosting their influence in this continent.

Asia is dominated by China and India which represents one fourth of the world's population.

The only area, which can represent a new market, is the Middle East. However, for the new economy to start, several major changes need to happen. These could likely be the following:

Witnessing radical changes in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have no attraction for the Western economies anymore.

Iran too will require fundamental changes. The country has a vast influence in the region and in the countries neighbouring Russia, representing around 500mn people. The country's new government will need to get the assistance of

the Western world interested to benefit from this opportunity. The issue of oil is part of the past and today's topic is more about gas, of which Iran has quite a substantial reserve.

The new markets will be Lebanon, Syria, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Yemen, and some others. Oman will play an important role as an intermediary country and neutral partner. The GCC market will also boost its influence in the Eastern African region.

Today's problems and revolution in Iran are the steps towards this change in the Middle Eastern policies and even if not planned, at least supported by the Western world. The future of this region will depend on the speed at which these changes can be implemented.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of Muscat Daily or Apex Press & Publishing

Housing ministry inks pacts worth RO2mn for 25 projects

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP) on Thursday signed 25 usufruct contracts to the tune of RO2,049,000 to award plots of land for investment projects in six governorates.

The contracts were signed by H E Hamad Ali al Nazwani, Undersecretary in the Ministry of Housing, and the representatives of those firms that obtained lands under the usufruct system.

The contracts cover three industrial projects in South Sharqiyah, 15 residential and commercial projects in Dakhiliyah, three industrial and commercial projects in Muscat, two commercial and industrial projects in Dhofar, a commercial



Projects include setting up of a plastic bag production unit, a commercial complex, a school, warehouses, an ice factory, and office complexes

project in Al Wusta and a commercial-cum-residential project in Dhahirah.

Some of the projects to be developed under the agreements include setting up of a plastic bag production unit, a commercial complex, a school, warehouses, an ice factory, office complexes, and workers' accommodations.

Artefacts dating back to 1st millennium BC found in Al Wusta

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT), in cooperation with a Czech mission, discovered ancient artefacts dating back to the 1st millennium BC in Al Wusta.

A statement issued by the ministry said, 'Excavations carried out at the Nafun archaeological site, now in the second season, resulted in the unearthing of pottery, copper objects and shells in a mass grave, which dates back to the 1st millennium BC of the Iron Age.'

The ministry informed that the artefacts were used to store cosmetics.

MHT further said that the



mission had recently discovered about 155 archaeological finds, including rock inscriptions, tombs and stone formations in the Nafun area. 'These stones were used for religious rituals and are believed to be linked to the ancient trade routes of the Iron Age,' it added.

Bids called for Port Sultan Qaboos services

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) has invited local and international companies to bid for operation, management and development of services at Port Sultan Qaboos.

The initiative comes within the context of a comprehensive system to develop ports in Oman undertaken by the ministry to boost investments in the sultanate.

According to the ministry, the last date for submission of bids is April 9, 2023.

Among the four tenders floated, the first one is for operation, management and development of 'Ship Services Activity', which include providing ships with foodstuffs and water, besides the cleaning operations.

The second one is for operation, management and development of 'crew change' or replacing of ship crews at the port, while the third one is for ship repair activity in the mooring areas.



The fourth tender has been floated for operation, management and development of a luxury yacht berthing.

The ministry seeks to increase the country's capacity to manage higher number of ships and volume of goods.

It has taken steps to develop various ports with berths for raw materials and mined items. It recently gave an initial approval to

Oman Minerals Development Company to construct the Shuwaimiya Mining Port in Dhofar, while it is currently overseeing construction of a berth for raw materials in Shinas port.

The development of Shinas port is 85 per cent complete and the ministry expects the construction to be complete by the first quarter of 2023.

The ports in Oman, including

the Sultan Qaboos port will also see an increased activity with the start of the cruise season.

The winter cruise tourism season (2022-23) for Muscat began with the arrival of *Mein Schiff 6* at the Port Sultan Qaboos on October 28, bringing more than 2,100 tourists to the city. According to the ministry, 99 cruise ships visited the sultanate in the 2021-22 season.

MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

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Companies specialized in the field and registered with Tender Board, may obtain tender documents for the website through the following link:
(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) against non-refundable fees as mentioned below starting from the date of this announcement and until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No.	No E-Tender	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/22/130	2022/MM/QS-74 Re-Call	Design & Construction of Car Parking at Bousher HTS, Lump Sum Contract (Re-Tender)	Rail 25	10/01/2023	30/01/2023	First
PRE/22/140	2022/MM/QS-75 Re-Call	Design & Construction of Internal Roads at Ghala (Re-Tender)	Rail 25	10/01/2023	30/01/2023	First
PRE/22/152	2022/MM/QS-81 Re-Call	Construction of Proposed Solution to Resolve storm Water problems in Hail North Walayt AL Seeb (Re-Tender)	Rail 25	10/01/2023	30/01/2023	First
PRE/22/162	2022/MM/QS-86	Supply of Bollards for Road Maintenance Department – 2023	Rail 25	10/01/2023	30/01/2023	Specialist
PRE/22/163	2022/MM/QS-87	Design & Construction of Roads Improvements & Parkings at alKhaud Phase 7	Rail 25	10/01/2023	30/01/2023	First
PRE/22/165	2022/MM/QS-88	Rehabilitation Works at Mutairah Roundabout in Mutrah	Rail 25	10/01/2023	30/01/2023	First
PRE/22/170	2022/MM/QS-89	Hire of Machinery for Road Construction in Al Seeb	Rail 25	31/12/2022	10/01/2023	Specialist

Tender Conditions :-

1- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of abond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.

- Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond and to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) .
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om) or call (+96824402200).
- For technical support of E-Bond through e-tendering system please send an email to (esnad@gstb.gov.om) or call (+96824402200/24402330).

The last date for submission of bids is February 12, 2023.

Apart from the Silver Jubilee Park, which will boast new facilities once complete, Sohar Municipality is working on to develop other parks in the city with modern facilities.

In 2020, OQ, Sohar Municipality and Jusoor Foundation signed a memorandum of cooperation to install modern recreational games and rides in six public parks in the wilayat of Sohar.

Those six parks are - Silver Jubilee Park, Hambar Park, Al Hadhira Park, Sawaihra Park, Al Owainat Park and Al Mynal Park.

2040 by utilising public land for investment purposes."

The project also aims to create a healthy atmosphere for families and visitors in parks, which is expected to boost the tourist and recreational attractions in Sohar.

Tenders invited to revamp Silver Jubilee Park

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Office of the Governor of North Batinah has invited bids for the development of the Silver Jubilee Park - a major tourist attraction in Sohar.

The park with its natural scenic settings is an ideal place for people to unwind - taking a break from their hectic city life.

An official from the governor's office said, "The office has launched a tender inviting Omani companies to bid for further development of the Silver Jubilee Park. The project aims to support domestic tourism and achieve the targets of Oman Vision



2040 by utilising public land for investment purposes."

The project also aims to create a healthy atmosphere for families and visitors in parks, which is expected to boost the tourist and recreational attractions in Sohar.

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Oman's nominal GDP jumps 30.4% in first nine months

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's nominal GDP - the gross domestic product at current market prices - recorded a whopping 30.4 per cent growth during the first nine months of 2022, the fastest economic expansion in over a decade, the latest official data showed.

The sultanate's economy is witnessing a remarkable expansion this year as higher oil prices, increased oil and gas production and stronger non-oil growth have provided a much needed boost to the country's GDP.

Nominal GDP surged to RO32.045bn in the first nine months of 2022 compared to RO24.618bn in the same period of 2021, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The GDP figures show that Oman's economic growth is broad-based with all major sectors - oil and gas, industry, mining and services - recording robust expansion during the January-September period this



year. However, the sharp rise in nominal GDP is mainly attributed to the surge in hydrocarbon activities.

Supported by an oil price surge and higher gas production, hydrocarbon GDP jumped 72.5 per cent to RO12.487bn in the first nine months of the year from RO7.239bn in the same period last year.

The value of Oman's oil production surged 79.1 per cent to RO10.949bn in the first nine months of 2022 against RO6.114bn in the corresponding period of 2021, while the value of natural gas output increased

36.7 per cent to RO1.538bn.

Non-oil growth

Oman's non-oil nominal GDP grew 14.9 per cent to RO20.765bn in the first nine months of this year from RO18.115bn recorded a year ago.

Among non-oil sectors, industrial sector's output grew 28.6 per cent to RO6.274bn, while the services sector activity increased 9.7 per cent to RO13.872bn.

In the industrial sector, manufacturing expanded more than 65.6 per cent to RO3.511bn in the first nine months of 2022, while mining and quarrying grew

15.5 per cent to nearly RO194mn.

Meanwhile, construction sector activities remained 2.2 per cent lower at RO1.851bn during the January-September period of 2022 against RO1.893bn recorded in the corresponding period a year ago.

Within the services sector, wholesale and retail trade recorded 16.1 per cent growth to RO2.630bn in the first nine months of 2022 against RO2.265bn in same period last year. Financial and insurance sector activities also grew 10.7 per cent to RO2.035bn.

MSX signs deal with Saudi Exchange for cross listings

Muscat - An agreement was signed on Thursday between the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), the Saudi Exchange, Muscat Clearing Company and Edaa Company.

The agreement allows companies to cross list on both Omani and Saudi stock exchanges, while allowing investors access to two thriving capital markets in the Gulf region.

The agreement between two exchanges aims to ensure an orderly market in the trading of shares across the Muscat Stock Exchange and Saudi Exchange. As per the agreement, both exchanges will share relevant information related to cross-listed securities in both markets as required to fulfil regulatory requirements.

The agreement also aims to coordinate efforts to carry out



corporate actions for cross-listed securities, in addition to other areas of collaboration required to enable cross listings.

Muscat Clearing and Depository Company and Edaa, the Securities Depository Company, also signed an agreement to enable the smooth transfer of shares between Oman and Saudi Arabia for cross-listed issuers.

The agreements were signed on the sidelines of the GCC Financial Markets Committee Summit in Riyadh, and follow an

MoU signed between Muscat Stock Exchange and Saudi Tadawul Group in 2021, which sought to enhance trade and encourage collaboration across both capital markets.

The collaboration marks an important milestone for Oman and Saudi Arabia as both countries work towards developing advanced financial markets on-par with global financial hubs, unlocking new opportunities locally and internationally for investors and issuers alike.

ONA

Oman, Saudi Arabia focus to expand commercial relations



Muscat - The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion on Thursday held a joint meeting with the Saudi Ministry of Commerce. The two sides mulled ways of enhancing commercial relations, while at the same time consulting regional and international experiences in developing bilateral commercial, industrial and investment structures.

The Omani side at the meeting was headed by H E Qais Mohammed al Yusef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and the Saudi

side was led by Dr Majid Abdullah al Qasabi, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Commerce, Acting Minister of Media. The meeting was attended by undersecretaries and other government officials from both sides.

The two sides also explored methods of overcoming difficulties and augmenting trade exchange between the two countries.

During the meeting, the experiences of Saudi Arabia in the field of e-commerce was reviewed. They discussed mechanisms for controlling

e-commerce action, enabling access to target markets for non-oil exports and investments, addressing obstacles facing trade between the two countries, providing protection for national products from practices deemed harmful to international trade and upgrading private sector contribution to external trade.

The meeting was in pursuance of efforts to consolidate commercial exchange in a sustainable manner, as well as forging new economic partnerships.

ONA

Russia threatens to cut oil output

Moscow, Russia - Moscow could cut oil production by up to seven per cent in early 2023 following an oil price cap agreed by Western countries, a Russian deputy prime minister said Friday.

"At the start of next year, we could make a reduction of 500,000-700,000 barrels per day. For us, that's around 5-7 per cent," Alexander Novak, who is in charge of Moscow's energy policy, said according to Russian news agencies.

He said Russia will not supply oil to countries that are enforcing a price cap - a part of punitive measures on Moscow following its offensive in



Alexander Novak

Ukraine. The price ceiling of US\$60 per barrel agreed by the European Union, G7 and Australia came into force in early December and seeks to restrict Russia's revenue while making sure Moscow keeps supplying the global market.

Introduced alongside an EU embargo on seaborne deliveries of Russian crude oil, the cap aims to ensure Russia cannot bypass the embargo by selling its oil to third countries at high prices.

Russia has said the cap will not affect the Ukraine offensive and expressed confidence it would find new buyers.

AFP

Global stocks mixed as oil prices jump on Russian threat

New York, US - Global oil prices were jolted higher by a Russian threat to curtail production.

Stock markets remained mixed on Friday. After opening in the red, US indices bounced back and finished moderately higher following mixed economic data, while the US Congress reached final passage of a US\$1.7tn package to keep the government running.

Oil prices jumped more than two per cent on supply concerns after a senior official warned Friday that Russia could cut up to seven per cent of its oil production next year.

Moscow is looking to follow through on a vow not to sell crude to nations implementing an international price cap over its invasion of Ukraine.

Among major oil producers, shares of Chevron gained 3.1 per cent, while Apache won 5.7 per cent and Halliburton put on 4.1 per cent.

"Ultimately, a late afternoon push higher left the main indices near their best level of the session, albeit with slim gains, to close out the first day of the so-called Santa Claus rally period," said Briefing.com.

The broad-based S&P 500 finished up 0.6 per cent for the



day, but with a narrow loss for the week.

Orders for big-ticket US manufactured goods dropped more than expected in November due to a slump in new orders for aircraft.

Earlier, London posted minor gains on a shortened trading day, while Frankfurt added 0.2 per cent and Paris fell by an equal amount.

Asia's main stock markets slipped after Wall Street ended well in the red on Thursday.

Tokyo's main stocks index shed one per cent as Japan's inflation hit a 41-year high, reinforcing expectations that the country's central bank would lift interest rates next year.

The yen surged this week after the Bank of Japan tweaked monetary policy, in a surprise move that hinted at future rate hikes.

Hopes meanwhile that China's growth will surge as it rolls back its zero-Covid strategy have been dashed by a jump in cases across the country that has kept people at home, and battered travel and economic activity.

"The spike in Covid-19 infection rates following the easing of mobility restrictions will still constrain economic activity in the December-January time frame," said Guan Yi Low of M&G Investments.

AFP

Alshawamikh receives first batch of biodiesel from Wakud Refinery

Muscat - Alshawamikh Oil Services Company received the first quantity of environmentally friendly bio-fuel (biodiesel) from Wakud International, the first biofuel production plant in Oman, located in Khazaen Economic City in the Wilayat of Barka.

The biodiesel will be used in the operations of Alshawamikh aiming to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and achieve zero carbon emissions.

This comes within the sustainability strategy of Alshawamikh - a local community company in the oil and gas sectors - in line with Oman Vision 2040 to support renewable energy projects, and achieve Oman's goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and reach zero carbon neutrality by 2050.

The partnership is considered a direct support for the circular economy in the sultanate in terms of encouraging small and medium companies to collect used cooking oils, recycle them and produce biodiesel.

Dr Afrah al Hadhrami, CEO of Alshawamikh Oil Services, commented that the use of biodiesel aims to reduce dependence on gas in generating electricity and support Oman's strategy to



reach zero carbon neutrality by 2050.

He said, "This step comes as a continuation of the partnership with Wakud and an enhancement of Oman's contributions to the renewable energy sector by 20 per cent by 2030."

Hadhrami added that the sultanate is taking advanced steps to achieve optimum utilization of energy and develop renewable energy projects to support economic diversification plans and promote sustainable energy, in line with the Paris Cli-

mate Agreement.

He also stressed that Alshawamikh Oil Services Company, within its responsibility, works to promote renewable energy use projects by expanding partnerships with various sectors and institutions to meet the growing needs of the sultanate for energy and contribute to its prosperity.

Maher al Habsi, CEO of Wakud International, confirmed that the export of the first shipment of biodiesel is one of the fruits of cooperation with Alshawamikh in renewable energy

projects, which was proactive in supporting Woqod.

"This partnership is only in support of Oman's directions towards expanding the use of renewable energy projects and making it at the forefront of countries in this vital and promising sector. Alshawamikh has implemented and installed a solar energy system in Wakud biodiesel factory, which feeds the electrical loads of the entire plant and thus makes it the first biodiesel refinery in the world powered by solar energy," he explained.

MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSX posts weekly loss as financial stocks drop

The main index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) last week posted a loss due to declines in financial and industrial sector stocks. The MSX30 Index closed lower by 0.37 per cent on weekly basis.

The announcement of Oman's preliminary Budget 2023 is expected to play a role in supporting the market.

The GCC and foreigners were net buyers of about US\$0.8mn worth of securities. Within the sub-indices, Financial Index dropped the most by 0.56 per cent while Industrial Index closed down by 0.11 per cent. Services Index, however, closed up by 1.27 per cent. The MSX Shariah Index also climbed 1.13 per cent on weekly basis.

Budget 2023

Oman's government announced an expansionary budget for the year 2023, with main consideration given to increasing the level of spending. The government expects to earn a revenue of RO11.65bn in 2023 which is 10 per cent higher than the budgeted revenue of 2022 and 18 per cent lower than the actual revenue estimated to have been achieved in 2022.

The government has budgeted an 11.2 per cent increase in its oil production and expect average oil prices to be at US\$55 per barrel. Higher production and higher assumed price compared to the previous year are expected to increase the revenue.

The government has budgeted spending of RO12.95bn for 2022 compared to RO12.13bn in 2022, higher by 6.7 per cent when compared to last year's budgeted numbers and about 1 per cent lower than the preliminary actual expenditure numbers of 2022. The budget deficit for 2023 is estimated at RO1.30bn vs RO1.55bn deficit budgeted for 2022 and an actual surplus estimated at RO1.15bn for 2022.

In terms of last year's preliminary performance, actual total revenue is projected to have reached RO14.2bn compared with the budgeted figure of RO10.58bn, higher by 34.5 per cent. Public spending is estimated to have grown to RO13.09bn, higher by 7.9 per cent as compared with 2022 budget.

However, instead of a budgeted deficit of RO1.55bn for 2022, the country is on track to post a budget surplus of RO1.15bn. This is a direct result of oil prices averaging at US\$94 per barrel against an assumed price of US\$50 per barrel, leading to an oil revenue increase of RO7.46bn, while gas revenue increased to RO3.56bn and non-oil revenue increased to RO3.22bn.

Local news

►National Life & General Insurance Company (NLGIC) announced the offer acceptance from shareholders of Al Ahlia Insurance Company, with reference to the offer announcement dated November 20, 2022 re-



garding the offer made by NLGIC to acquire 47.5 per cent of the issued share capital of Al Ahlia Insurance.

►Oman Cement Company announced that in cooperation with Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, it has launched a new product named 'Sarooj'. This product will support construction and maintenance of forts, Aflaj, houses and sites of heritage and archaeological importance in a very efficient and environment friendly way replacing complicated conventional systems being used in past.

►Oman National Engineering & Investment Company (ONEIC) announced that it has been awarded by Ministry of Health the contract for operation and maintenance of equipment at Sohar hospital and its affiliated health units at North Batina Governorate for the sum of RO3mn for the period of three years commencing on January

31, 2022. The company anticipates realizing reasonable profits from this contract.

►The inflation rate of Oman stood at 2.06 per cent during November 2022, according to the latest data issued by NCSI. The data indicated a rise in the prices of main groups in November compared to the same month a year ago.

►Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the integrated sovereign wealth fund of Oman, said that it is planning to ramp up investments across its sizeable portfolio in 2023, as well as exit certain other investments as part of a strategy to align its growth objections with the nation's broader economic development. A total of 65 new investments and expansions are planned in 2023 that are distributed across diverse sectors: logistics 19, energy - 5, communications and information technology - 12, mining - 5, services - 12, and food secu-

rity/fisheries - 12.

GCC markets

Qatar approved its 2023 fiscal year budget with estimated revenue at QAR228b and expenditure at QAR199bn, that would result in a fiscal surplus of QAR29bn. Qatar, which just hosted the 2022 World Cup, posted a surplus of QAR30bn in the first nine months of 2022, boosted by rocketing oil and gas revenues this year on the back of high global energy prices. GDP growth hit 4.4 per cent year-on-year in the first half of this year but is expected to ease in 2023. Economic activity should continue to be supported by investments related to the North Field gas expansion and robust growth in logistics, manufacturing and trade sectors.

The Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates (CBUAE) projected the real GDP to grow by 7.6 per cent in 2022, instead of its previous expectation of 6.5 per cent. In its Q3 review, the bank attributed the upward review to the robust performance of some non-oil sectors, including tourism, hospitality, real estate and manufacturing. The review expected the non-oil GDP to grow by 6.1 per cent in 2022, against 4.3 per cent previously, with the oil GDP to expectedly grow by 11 per cent this year.

Global news

The economic, financial, and political chaos of 2022 has exposed the limits of forecasting.

Recall the outlook from mid-2021, when very few observers were worried about inflation. The 'Blue Chip' consensus - reflecting the views of 50 private-sector forecasters - was that the US consumer price index would rise by just 2.5 per cent in 2022. Yet over the last 12 months, 'core' CPI, which excludes volatile food and energy prices, has risen by 6 per cent. Similarly, the US Federal Reserve's preferred measure - the core personal consumption expenditures index - was expected to rise by just 2.7 per cent, but it is up 5 per cent.

China kept benchmark lending interest rates unchanged for the fourth consecutive month, matching the forecasts of most market watchers who nevertheless expect further monetary easing to prop up a slowing economy. The one-year loan prime rate (LPR) was left at 3.65 per cent, while the five-year LPR was held at 4.30 per cent.

The People's Bank of China (PBOC) last week increased cash injections into the banking system and said it would keep its one-year medium-term lending facility rate (MLF) unchanged for a fourth month. Market watchers regard MLF announcements as guides to any LPR changes.

Corporate earnings growth is expected to slow in the year ahead in many countries as higher inflation and rising interest rates take an even bigger toll and companies brace for the likelihood of a global economic

downturn. The US companies are forecast to have the slowest full-year profit growth since 2020 and the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Some top equity strategists predict no profit growth or even a decline in earnings. Investors have been watching estimates fall in recent months.

S&P 500 fourth-quarter 2022 earnings now are expected to decline 1.1 per cent year-on-year, which would be the first quarterly earnings fall since the third quarter of 2020, according to IBES data from Refinitiv. For the US benchmark S&P 500, analysts project full-year 2023 profit growth of 4.7 per cent following estimated growth of 5.7 per cent for all of 2022, based on Refinitiv data.

Recommendation

The US stock indexes closed higher towards the end of the week for their biggest daily gains so far in December with help from upbeat Nike and FedEx quarterly earnings, as well as improving consumer confidence.

Regionally, all markets closed the week up, likely on OPEC+ announcement as higher oil prices support the GCC countries. Saudi Arabia and Qatar were the best performing markets for the week.

Locally, Oman's preliminary Budget 2023 announcement played a role in supporting the market. However, inflation expectations and recessionary fears continue to cloud the outlook.

By special arrangement with U Capital

US Congress green-lights \$1.7tn government spending package

Washington, US - US lawmakers approved a sweeping annual spending package Friday that includes US\$45bn in Ukraine aid and reforms to election law aimed at avoiding a repeat of last year's assault on the Capitol.

The US\$1.7tn blueprint passed by senators on Thursday was rubber-stamped by the House of Representatives just hours ahead of a midnight deadline to keep the federal government open - although a damaging holiday season shutdown was never a serious threat.

"This bill is further proof that Republicans and Democrats can come together to deliver for the American people, and I'm looking forward to continued bipartisan progress in the year ahead," President Joe Biden said in a statement welcoming the vote.

Failure to get the package to Biden's desk would have been an embarrassment, days after his



US President Joe Biden delivers a Christmas address from the White House in Washington, DC (AFP)

Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky visited the White House to argue for the US\$44.9bn emergency military and economic aid proposed as part of the legislation.

But it ultimately enjoyed a smooth passage through the lower chamber, where Democ-

rats have a slim majority for a few more days, until the Republican-led 118th Congress opens for business.

Nine Republicans crossed the aisle to help the package cross the line by 225 votes to 201, while one Democrat - New York progressive Alexandria Ocasio-

Cortez - voted no.

"In this legislation, we proudly deliver another consequential round of security, economic and humanitarian aid," departing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in what is almost certainly her last speech as the nation's top lawmaker.

"And it really is not - as the president of Ukraine said the other night - about charity. It's about security, it's about working together."

The giant bill keeps the lights on until next October, paying for almost every aspect of the day-to-day management of the federal government, from law enforcement to printing money.

But it also features add-ons less obviously connected to funding, such as a reform tightening a 19th century law to make clear that vice presidents do not have the power to overturn elections.

AFP

Facebook to settle Cambridge Analytica lawsuit for \$725mn

San Francisco, US - Facebook parent Meta has agreed to pay US\$725mn to settle a long-running lawsuit that accused the social network of allowing third parties, including Cambridge Analytica, to access users' private data.

The amount was disclosed in a court filing late on Thursday.

"The proposed settlement of \$725,000,000 is the largest recovery ever achieved in a data privacy class action and the most Facebook has ever paid to resolve a private class action," lawyers for the plaintiffs said in the filing.

Facebook has not admitted any wrongdoing as part of the settlement, which still requires approval by a judge in the San Francisco division of the US District Court.

"We pursued a settlement as it's in the best interest of our community and shareholders," Meta spokesperson Dina El-



included the British firm Cambridge Analytica, which had been linked to Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

Cambridge Analytica, which has since shut down, then collected and exploited the personal data of 87mn Facebook users without their consent, the lawsuit alleged.

That information was allegedly used to develop software to steer US voters in favor of Trump.

Facebook has since removed access to its data from thousands of apps suspected of abusing it, restricted the amount of information available to developers, and made it easier for users to calibrate restrictions on personal data sharing.

Federal authorities fined Facebook US\$5bn in 2019 for misleading its users and imposed independent oversight of its personal data management.

AFP

Ukraine estimates grain harvest fell around 40%

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukraine estimates its grain harvest fell by around 40 per cent year on year due to the Russian invasion, a representative for the country's industry told AFP Friday. "We expect a grain harvest of 65-66mn tonnes" by the end of the year, the head of the Ukrainian Grain Association Sergiy Ivashchenko said, following a record harvest of 106mn tonnes last year.

"The main reason is the

war," which immediately led to fuel shortages and hindered sowing, Ivashchenko said.

Ukraine is a major exporter but Russia's invasion in late February stopped shipments and blocked 20mn tonnes of grain in Ukraine's ports

Ukraine is a major exporter but Russia's invasion in late February stopped shipments

and blocked 20mn tonnes of grain in Ukraine's ports.

"Ports were blocked... this

course the war, meant farmers did not have enough money to buy fertilisers, their yield decreased," he explained. A landmark deal signed in July and brokered by the UN and Turkey established a safe shipping corridor for exports to resume. "The occupation of several regions, fighting in the fields, and the destruction of infrastructure" still crippled production, Ivashchenko said.

"We usually sowed grains broke a cycle" by cutting farmers' source of income, Ivashchenko said. "That, and of

over about 25mn hectares. This year we only harvested over 18-19mn hectares," he said.

The landmark deal was extended for 120 days in November after intense negotiations with Russia, which temporarily pulled out of the agreement. Overall, 580 ships transporting around 15mn tonnes of cereals have left Ukrainian ports since then, according to the country's authorities.

AFP

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Ooredoo celebrates springboard graduates



Encouraging Omani talent to thrive and live up to their full potential, Ooredoo celebrated the latest wave of 175 graduates from its 21st edition of Springboard and 7th edition of Spring Forward educational programmes.

Held under the auspices of H E Prof Rahma Ibrahim al Mahrouqi, Minister of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation, the ceremony also showcased winning projects from the workshops pro-

vided to a number of Ooredoo's key stakeholders from government and non-government organisations.

Springboard focuses on women's empowerment and entrepreneurship and Ooredoo recently offered women from their Incubators in Bahla, Al Khaboura, Izki, as well from Oman Bahjah Orphan Society, the chance to take part, a press release said.

Spring Forward, which supports the professional develop-

ment of both women and men, saw training conducted in the Wilayat of Samail. Participants were from the Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Housing, Samail Municipality, Ministry of Labour, as well as from the Sewage Treatment Plant at Samail Municipality. In Muscat, Ooredoo trained employees from the Civil Aviation Authority, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, and the

National University of Science and Technology.

Over the years, the Springboard and Spring Forward programmes have become a benchmark for successful public-private sector collaboration.

To date, Ooredoo has provided more than 1,800 women and men the opportunity to enhance their skillsets, as they work closely with industry leaders and licensed trainers to pursue professional and personal development and growth.



Audi, Oman Air partner for corporate affinity programme

Audi Oman represented by Premium Motors, is extending a special offer for employees of Oman Air on a range of Audi models as part of its corporate affinity programme. In this context, an Audi model was put on display at the Oman Air headquarters in Muscat.

The Audi corporate programme is tailored to meet the mobility requirements of corporate executives and employees. They are offered competitive deals, priority vehicle ordering and allocation, bargains on accessories and promotional items and invitation to exclusive Audi events, a press release said. Christian Nehme, general

manager of Premium Motors Oman, said, "We are happy to team up with Oman Air, our valued business partner for the corporate affinity programme. This partnership provides employees of companies we partner with additional purchase incentives on top of existing offers. All employees of Oman Air are eligible to purchase or lease a new Audi vehicle at a special price through us."

He added, "Our team at Audi are there to help make the right choices when selecting from our diverse model range. We strive to offer a tailored ownership experience with every Audi and

will help find the model to suit everyone's personal needs."

Audi range has a model for every business need while offering latest safety, communications, and driver assistance technologies. Audi models boast of high horsepower engines with incredible handling, luxurious interiors, and class-leading technologies.

The range of Audi models are available for viewing and test drives at the Premium Motors showroom located at Alfardan Heights at Ghala. Premium Motors is spread across three floors and designed in accordance with global standards and corporate identity.

beIN awarded for FIFA coverage

BeIN Sports, the official FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 broadcaster for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and France, has been awarded the Media Rights Licensees (MRL) Content Exchange Trophy by HBS Production, for sharing its extensive coverage of the Middle East's debut of the world's biggest sporting event.

A FIFA contracted company - HBS Production, the host broadcaster of the FIFA World Cup said the trophy was in recognition of beIN Sports significant contribution and eager participation in enhancing the variety of MSL commentary and footage content for global coverage of the world's biggest sporting event, a press release said.

BeIN contributed 204 reportages and content clips throughout the tournament featuring coverage of fan celebra-



tions and fan zones along with exclusive interviews and reactions from a range of sporting stars including Croatian captain Luka Modric, Brazilian star Ronaldinho, French F1 Driver Pierre Gasly, FIFA President Gianni Infantino and football legends Ruud Gullit and Nigel De Jong. Additionally, daily forecasts were given by Qatar-based giant Chinese pandas, Thuraya and Suhail, throughout the month-long tournament including the conclusive Argentina final

victory over France.

As the Official Broadcast Partner, beIN Sports played a central role in showcasing the historic tournament.

Offering audiences premium broadcast, analysis, and commentary of each game across its seven channels, beIN Sports' viewing figures for the month-long tournament underlines the unprecedented appetite of football fans in the region for this historic first staging in the Arab World.

Conference on Minimum Access Neurosurgery held

Under the Auspices of Oman Neurosurgery Society, Lama Polyclinic, in association with Muscat Family Physicians group and Global Treatment Services, held an International Medical Conference on December 16 at Grand Hyatt Hotel.

The conference was attended by around 45 doctors which included neurosurgeons, radiation oncologists, radiation therapists, spine surgeons, oncologists and family physicians from both, government and private health establishments.

Dr Ahmed al Azri, president, Oman Neurosurgery Society was the guest of honour, a press release said.

The speakers were from BGS Gleneagles Global Hospital, Bengaluru, India.

Dr Naveen Mandya, senior consultant neuro and spine surgeon, said, "Minimal Access



Neurosurgery, also called as key hole surgery, is a game changer in Neuro-spine speciality. The advancement in technology and equipment has made a big difference in terms of smaller incisions, less postoperative pain, shorter hospital stay, early mobilisation and early return to work.

At our hospital, we perform minimally invasive brain and spine surgeries in most of the cases with almost nil complications."

Dr Matangi J, senior consultant - Radiation Oncology, informed, "Trueknife is the fastest safest and smartest way of doing stereotactic radiotherapy like

SRS to benign brain and spine tumours and SBRT to malignant tumours in lung, liver, bone, prostate etc. It's a completely painless treatment and a non-invasive frameless procedure.

At our hospital, we have treated many such patients from across the globe successfully with satisfying good results".

ISG victorious in junior interschool football



Indian School Al Ghubra emerged champions in the Pocari Sweat Inter-School Football Tournament held from last week at the French International School Muscat.

The tournament was organised by the Oman School Sports Association.

ISG emerged winners from among seven international schools in the governorate. In the quarterfinal, the Junior ISG football team defeated the French International School Muscat, 3-1 while in the semi-finals it defeated the Pakistan School in a one-sided match

with the victory margin reading, 5-0.

In a nail-biting final, ISG defeated Indian School Darsait by a solitary goal.

With this phenomenal victory, ISG has qualified for the All Oman Inter School Football tournament which will be held in

the month of January 2023.

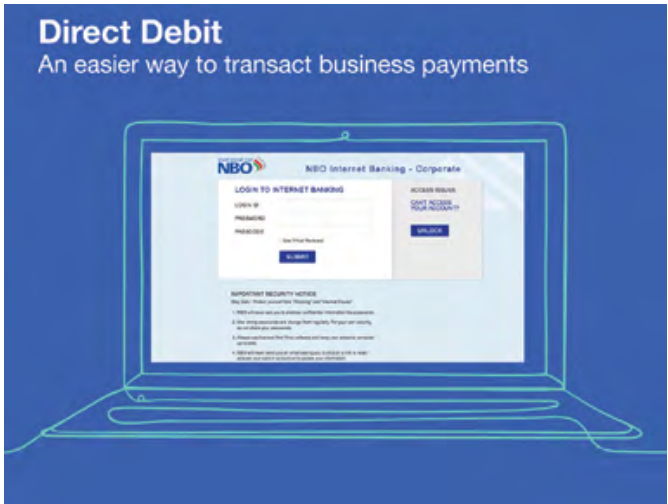
The victorious football team comprised players from class 4 - Druthin Appaiah, Aaron Sunil Paily, Aaron Jacob Chandu, Fran Sojan, Kevin Jaydon Raj, Reyana Singh, Mohammed Izaan, Aamil Shan, Shourya Nitin Kangne, and Shravan Sharat Kurup.

NBO launches 'online direct debit' service

In line with its digital growth strategy, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has recently launched its 'Online Direct Debit' processing service to streamline payment processes for corporate clients.

The new digital offering has been implemented under the guidance of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) and for the first time in Oman, enabling companies to automate their periodic collections online (monthly and yearly), eliminating the need for cheques. 'Online Direct Debit' ensures that payments are made automatically on a set date, while it is no longer required to wait for authorisation.

Mohammed bin Yahya al Jabri, assistant general manager and head of Global Transaction Banking at National Bank of Oman, said, "Providing convenient, one-stop and efficient online access to financial products and services is part of our digital banking transformation. He added, "The 'Online Direct Debit' service simplifies Collections of



payments underpinned by an easy registration process. This service will see our corporate clients streamline their banking requirements, improve, while enjoying elevated levels of security and flexibility."

Corporate clients can seamlessly apply for the new 'Online Direct Debit' service through NBO's Corporate Internet Banking (CIB) platform. They can activate the Direct Debit

Module, complete the direct debit mandate, and submit the document online. Using cutting-edge technology and leading security features, NBO's CIB platform empowers companies and government entities to make instant transactions, payments and transfers, access account balances, make on-the-spot enquiries, access non-financial services and complete transactions.

MHD ACERE unveils three JETOUR models in Oman

Mohsin Haider Darwish Automotive, Construction Equipment and Renewable Energy (MHD ACERE), revealed the renowned automobile brand from China - JETOUR - to Oman at hotel InterContinental Muscat on Wednesday.

The three models displayed included the X70FL, X70 Plus and X90 Plus, each featuring a distinct characteristic of city-based SUVs that accommodate advanced technology and the highest-quality safety and luxury features.

Speaking during the launch, Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE, said, "It is truly an honour to bring a well-established brand and be its local distributor within the local market. We seek to create a strong foundation for these vehicles and



make an effort in reflecting its global reputation as one of the fastest-growing global car brands. We believe that the introduction of JETOUR and its state-of-the-art vehicles will help elevate our customer's driving

experience, through excellent performance and the presence of intelligent technology, well-equipped to match our customer's needs and personalities."

Established in 2018, JETOUR

is a rising Chinese auto brand focusing on the concept of travel. Its name is derived from the Mandarin words, 'Jet' and 'Tour' which translates to 'convenient' and 'travel'.

This is aligned with the

brand's vision to manufacture the best SUV models that provide its passengers with convenient journeys, complemented by stylish, unique, intelligent, spacious and multi-functional designs and features.

The JETOUR X70FL boasts a 1.5L turbocharged engine, with a maximum of 156hp and maximum torque of 230N.m.

The JETOUR X70 Plus is a slightly larger variant of the X70 based on the same platform with a redesigned front and rear to give the vehicle a more sporty feel.

The JETOUR X90 Plus combines intelligent safety and a comfortable driving experience with multi-functional features, a high-strength cage body and luxurious car dimensions and expansive storage space.

'Tharwa' from Alizz Islamic offers premium banking service

Alizz Islamic Bank offers a variety of sharia-compliant banking services and products including its Wealth Management segment 'Tharwa' service, which is one of the highest quality banking services in the sultanate.

Tharwa members can enjoy a variety of benefits that raise their standard of living when it comes to accommodation and dining while travelling. In addition, Tharwa provides a variety of exclusive offers and discounts and gives access to VIP lounges, special events & more than 550 various lounges at all airports worldwide and much more, a press release said.

Through Tharwa, Alizz Islamic Bank is committed to providing unprecedented banking services that guarantee service quality and peace of mind. All banking solutions have been designed to offer ideal levels of quality services that meet the customers various banking needs. Through deposits, finance and high value deposit accounts like Izdihar savings account, Term Investment Deposit accounts and Wakala accounts, Tharwa customers will be able to know the expected profits and will be qualified to get discounts on the transaction and service charges that will be available to customers at various branches.

Tharwa customers can also carry out banking transactions privately and comfortably in the Tharwa lounges, which have been designed in such a way that enables them to carry out transactions in an environment that



ensures comfort and confidentiality. At such lounges, they can watch the latest news and relax. This is in addition to their personal relationship managers who are specialised in counseling and assisting customers both inside and outside the bank premises.

"Our team comprising leading international experts as well as our regional and international partners. We find solutions for all of your wealth management requirements. Tharwa's World MasterCard gives you flexibility to discover the best deals & offers. Worldwide acceptance and valuable benefits mean that you have the freedom to do the work you like whenever you like. The special advantages and benefits while traveling give you the exceptional services you expect from MasterCard, like access to airport lounges in more than 400 cities all over the world, insurance while travelling against accidents and flight cancellation, special health club offers, special year-round flight offers and other numerous offers and benefits which can be reviewed on our website," said Mohammed bin Juma al-Ghassani, AGM and chief Consumer Banking officer.

Omantel wins two international HR awards

Omantel won two awards for Employee Engagement and Internal Communications at the International Brilliance Awards Ceremony organised by BOC institution in London.

This achievement comes as a culmination of the strategic initiatives implemented in both fields of employee engagement and internal communication programmes, which was initiated in Omantel several years back, during which the company launched a number of events and programmes that

had a huge positive impact on enhancing employees' outreach, Omantel's leadership in the human resources sector, especially with regard to caring for competencies and creating an attractive work environment that stimulates innovation and creativity.

Dr Ghalib bin Saif al Hosni, chief human resources officer at Omantel, said, "We are proud to win those two awards, which are the result of the company's clear vision and effective strategy towards human re-

sources, in addition to the efforts and initiatives it launched during the past period, as Omantel worked to build a work culture based on strengthening the relationship between its employees and strengthening bonds among them by involving employees in the company's business, in addition to integrating them into joint programs and activities that contribute to improving performance and raising employee productivity."

He added, "Omantel was

one of the first entities in the Sultanate of Oman to establish a department concerned with enhancing job engagement in 2013. Before that, it also established a human resources care center to be a one-stop shop for employees' service dealing with all enquiries and requests related to human resources in the company in addition to launching the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy within the company's vision aiming at providing an ideal and modern environment for its employees as it included

the implementation of a set of projects and programs that ensure equality between employees and promote diversity and inclusivity.

It is worth mentioning that Omantel has made outstanding achievements in the field of human resources throughout the years. In 2021, the percentage of women in senior executive management increased by 20.6% in comparison to 2018, in addition to the on-the-job training of young people in the Generation Z Programme.

Mazda CX-9 - sleek and sporty SUV well received



On November 2, Dr Mahdi Rouhi Athar, a professor at the College of Applied Sciences, purchased the Mazda CX-9 (2.5L Turbocharged) from the Salalah showroom.

The Mazda CX-9, as one of the market's sleekest, sportiest, and most stylish 7-seater SUVs, provides the ultimate satisfying driving experience.

Following up on the purchase, one of our team members approached Dr. Mahdi's wife who drives the car to ask about her experience so far.

"From the sophisticated grey colour to the exceptional performance, I have found everything more than just satisfying," she said. Equipped with a 2.5Ltr turbocharged engine, Mazda CX-9 accelerates to 60 mph in approximately 7.1 seconds providing a thrust of power whenever needed while Mazda's well-managed suspension expertly balances a comfortable, refined ride with exceptional body control in corners.

"I am falling more and more in love with Mazda CX-9 with each smooth drive I make with it," the lady added. Following Mazda's tradition of making responsive steering, Mazda CX-9 adds a premium interior to it so that the driver experiences luxurious comfort alongside a smooth drive.

Mazda CX-9 embodies the Kodo Soul of Movement expression of Mazda's creative design philosophy.

A Titanium Gray Metallic front grill and alloy wheels with a brilliant Silver finish make Mazda CX-9 the ultimate head-turner.

"Also, I feel like the price of the Mazda CX-9 is fair when one experiences the premium features of the car. I recommend taking a test drive if one wants to check out the car," she said, adding, "Overall it was a pleasant experience at the TAC showroom as the staff showed me around, listened to my requirements, and suggested models according to my needs."



OPAZ organises first annual forum

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) held the first annual forum for the one-stop-shop employees of all its affiliated zones.

The forum attracted a group of employees and specialists from OPAZ, the Special Economic Zone at Duqm, the free zones in Sohar, Salalah, Al Mazunah and the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn).

The forum highlighted the

one-stop-shop development works, completed initiatives, 'Invest Easy' portal services and fees, as well as the launch of OPAZ Call Centre. In addition, the forum touched on the developed electronic services, work permits portal, usufruct contracts and land lease initiatives, and further discussed the opportunities to improve and develop the different services provided to investors.

IO Kitchens, NHI train Omani culinary talent

IO Kitchens, the first Omani cloud kitchen partnered with the National Hospitality Institute (NHI) earlier this year to offer a unique nine-month training, development and mentoring programme for young Omani culinary talent looking to immerse themselves in one of the fastest growing segments in the F&B industry.

The first cohort of the programme saw four Omani culinary talents successfully graduate and join the IO Kitchens team as full-time employees, whilst receiving ongoing training in their chosen field by culinary experts.

Hisham Hasan, co-founder and CEO of IO Kitchens, said, "We are very proud to support and drive national efforts to create more in-country value in the



years ahead, by up-skilling and training our local community. We have also offered employment opportunities to these young talented Omani culinary students in our hope to create a strong pipeline of Omani culinary experts."

Robert MacLean, principal at NHI, "We are delighted to work

with IO Kitchens on this project. The students have really enjoyed the engagement with the company during their training and are excited to take up their full time positions. We look forward to starting the next project with IO kitchens in the development of the next group of young Oman chefs."

Zahara Travel collaborates with Amadeus

Corporate travel specialist in Oman with over 50 years of experience, Zahara Travel partners with Amadeus to expand its premium customer offering

For more than 50 years, Zahara Travel has become renowned for demonstrating an entrepreneurial and pioneering approach to corporate travel. This strategy has helped the company gain prominence as a premium service-oriented organisation, resulting in winning the 'Oman Award for Excellence' in the tourism category six times. Now, with collaboration with Amadeus, the corporate travel specialist plans to boost its level of automation to deliver enhanced and personalised customer



service, a press release said.

Zahara Travel has chosen to implement the latest cloud-based Amadeus Selling Platform, which delivers fast access to a comprehensive range of travel services using real-time connec-

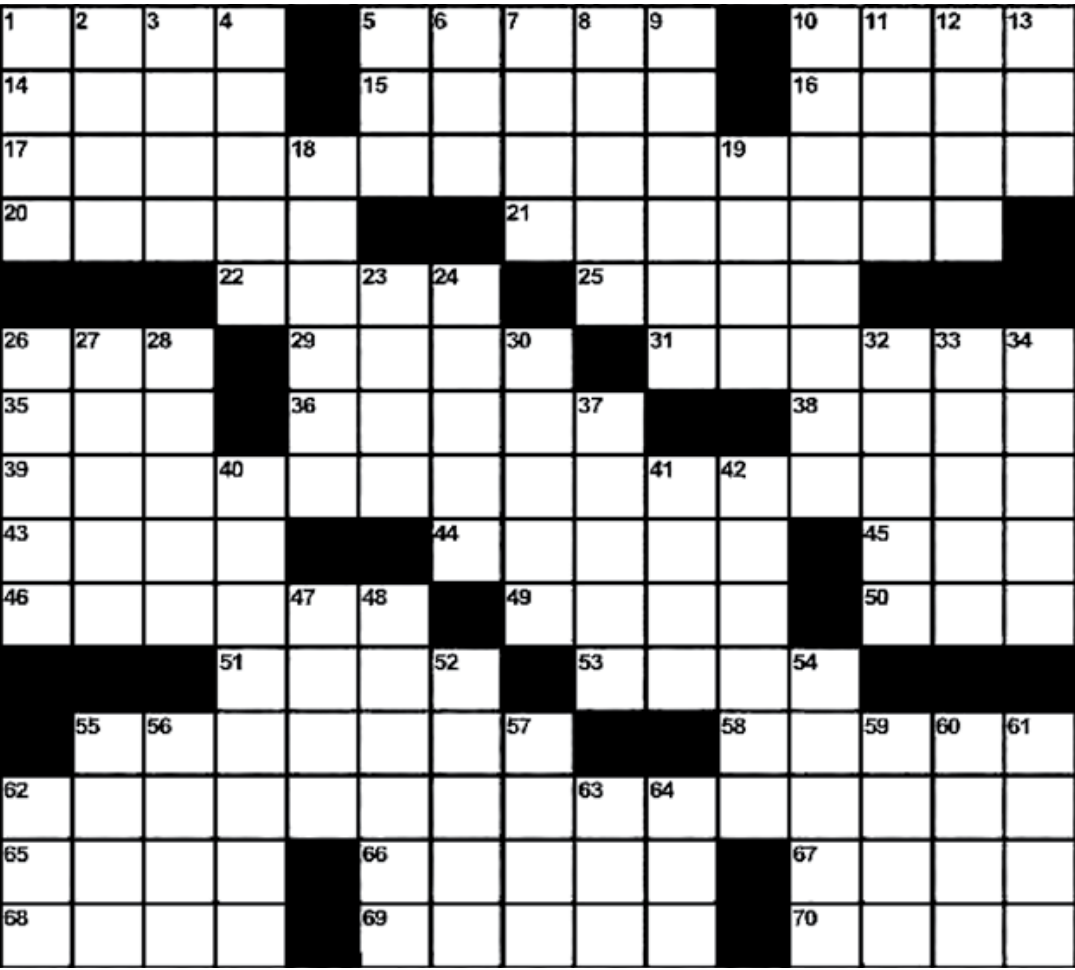
tivity for the most up-to-date inventory and pricing. To benefit customers further, Zahara Travel will deploy Amadeus Productivity Suite, which is a behind-the-scenes set of tools that enable travel consultants to focus on de-

livering the best customer service rather than the administrative processes that need to be managed. Amadeus Web Services is another key component of the agreement between the two companies.

Gautam Broota, CEO of Zahara Travel and Service Bureau, said, "As a pioneer in the Travel and Tourism business in Oman, we strive to offer our customers the most efficient and seamless award-winning service. Our partnership with Amadeus ensures we are using highly advanced products and services that enhance our ability to deliver customer service in a personalised manner."

Ernesto Sanchez Beaumont, managing director, Amadeus Gulf, added, "Amadeus' travel solutions will help enhance the services offered by Zahara Travel and is backed by our commitment to support our customers every step of the way."

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Aesop character
5) Assume to be true
10) Head light?
14) Departure
15) Pawl grabber (Var.)
16) "Ars amatoria" poet
17) One's child, typically
20) Costa del Sol feature
21) All together
22) Hilo feast
25) Rod at a pig roast
26) Telekinesis, e.g.
29) Indoor sports facilities
31) Accommodates, in a way
35) "At Seventeen" singer
Janis
36) Nun's attire
38) "I had no..."
39) Not to be fooled with, in a way
43) Long, long time
44) "Par_" (airmail stamp)
45) What "it" plays
46) Mockeries
49) Freudian topics
50) Guileful
51) Cries of triumph

53) Blood-related
55) Either of two continents
58) Robot of Jewish legend
62) Another chance for happiness
65) Unadorned
66) Salmon do it
67) Army insects
68) Did Daytona
69) Crow's home of old
70) Snack

DOWN

1) "S.O.S."
2) Angle between stem and stalk
3) Baltic capital
4) Type of alcohol
5) Old hand
6) Stumblebum
7) Eyelid bump
8) Desktop pictures
9) Thuds
10) Dairy breed
11) "We try harder" company
12) This puzzle's theme word
13) Flowery poem

18) Instructed
19) Commuter line
23) Nursemaid in India
24) Blackest part of a shadow
26) Seasoned rice dish
27) Fat-nosed antelope
28) Read between the lines
30) It doesn't hold water
32) Cleans up prose
33) Kind of code
34) Drooping
37) Evergreen-forested landscape
40) Avoided
41) Captured
42) Naval Academy grad
47) Viscount's superior
48) Least extroverted
52) Suffix with "sea" or "moon"
54) Director Christopher
55) Take_ (snooze)
56)_ mortals
57) "... and make it fast!"
59) Prefix with "type"
60) Semiaquatic salamanders
61) Fit together, as gears

62) Stomach muscles, briefly
63) Ram's ma'am
64) Low digit

NOTE PAD

A	R	A	B	A	B	S	O	R	B	C	O	B
S	H	I	A	S	O	I	R	E	E	O	W	L
H	O	D	G	E	P	O	D	G	E	S	D	N
				P	L	E	B	E	D	E	A	L
S	E	M	I	D	R	Y	A	S	I	M	O	V
T	R	O	P	E	S	A	S	I	M	O	V	
R	I	D	E	S	A	D	A	R	T	E	L	L
A	C	E	T	O	D	D	L	E	R	T	R	I
P	A	R	T	B	O	L	E	A	T	O	L	L
N	O	W	I	S	E	U	P	H	I	L	L	
S	U	D	R	A			A	M	P	U	L	E
P	L	A	I	N	T		A	S	P	E	N	
I	N	N	G	O	D	C	H	I	L	D	R	E
L	A	C	L	O	A	N	E	R	E	U	R	O
L	E	E	E	T	H	E	N	E	R	E	A	D

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

The heavens are full of unpredictable energies at the moment, which you just love. They're right up your alley. Does this mean you'll be inspired to be even more impulsive and enthusiastic than you usually are? Yes. Is that good news, or what? It could make it a bit tough for you to concentrate and even tougher for you to sit still long enough to finish any of the projects you've got going, but you'll love the surprises.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

In the mood for some last-minute changes? Of course you are. You can make a spontaneous turnaround the most irresistible thing on the planet. Just try not to sound too excited about it when you call to cancel your current plans. Remember, whoever you're talking to is bound to be disappointed. If you're feeling generous, you could either mention an alternate date or invite them to join you and the usual suspects for the upcoming adventure. It's only fair.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

You have a very intense, bright energy deep inside of you, and you need to let it out to shine and enlighten the world! So what if you don't have a plan or any specific idea about what to do with all of it? Just open up your mouth and the right words will come out. Start singing and the song will be beautiful. Take that leap and your creativity will carry you safely to the ground. Start trusting yourself more and you'll see that your energy can take on a life of its own.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

It doesn't matter who delivers the offer or how reputable they seem to be. You need to remember one thing above all else: if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is, especially if your instincts are twitching. It could be more than easy to pull the wool over your eyes with a few glib comments, especially if they're delivered by someone you're rather fond of. When in doubt, ask for help. And don't sign on the dotted line until you get it.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Minimize your expectations for today. Things might not work out exactly the way you want them to, but if you're prepared to be okay with the day's news, you'll end up happier than if you raise your hopes too high. After all, the higher your hopes, the greater the crash if they're dashed to the ground. This might seem like a pessimistic attitude to take, but it's just pragmatic. And pragmatism is going to help you stay on top when challenges arise.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Ready for the pace of life to change, to pick up considerably? Good, because that's what's going to happen. However, it will be fun, mostly because it's going to be your doing (whether you know it or not right now) and also because you've really been itching for a change for a long time. So if someone comes to you with what seems to be a totally unexpected shift in your schedule, think for a second. Weren't you really begging for this?

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Your charms are legendary, and they've been known to change quite a few minds in the past, but today you're going to have to use more than flattery, humor, and sex appeal to get what you want! Dig down deep and let yourself be a little bit more vulnerable. Show your smarts. Share some information that you know someone else will find interesting. Use the facts to make your point. You'll not only impress people by showing them a whole new side of yourself, you will get your way.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Are you suddenly in the mood to see a distant shore? Not having any luck finding someone who's brave enough to drop everything and go along with you? Well, go alone. You know you won't have any trouble finding appropriate company once you get there. After all, when was the last time you ever sat by yourself, no matter where you were, for more than five minutes? Be brave. You certainly won't be lonely. And just think of the wonderful, interesting people you'll meet.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Long-distance friends and lovers are on your mind and in your heart now. Constantly, in fact. You might even be moved to get packed and hit the road.

hat goes double if you've got something to celebrate, and you probably do. Just don't forget that there may be someone who'd like to join you, someone who's just dying for an invitation. Call them, make some plans, and get ready to party.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

A very challenging person could test your patience to the breaking point today, but you can handle things just fine if you don't take their behavior personally. Remember, they're like this with everyone, not just with you! Focus on what benefit they bring to your life, and if you can't come up with anything, just get your distance from them for a while. Understanding why you need to tolerate their behavior will help you get through it.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

If you're having financial problems, there might be one solution you hadn't yet thought of. What about consulting with a family member? There is definitely at least one someone out there who you've bailed out in the past when they were in a bit of a bind. Why not give them a call now? Every now and then even tough, resilient, independent types like you get to ask for help. Think of this as simply your turn, and take it with confidence.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You're in the mood to sit and talk, to break bread with dear ones, and have some serious fun. That's a good thing, because they're in a similar frame of mind. It might also be time to let a certain secret slide out (but only to the appropriate person), especially if you know it's the best thing to do.

Don't worry. Every now and then it's absolutely necessary to clear the air, and it's such a tremendous relief!

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

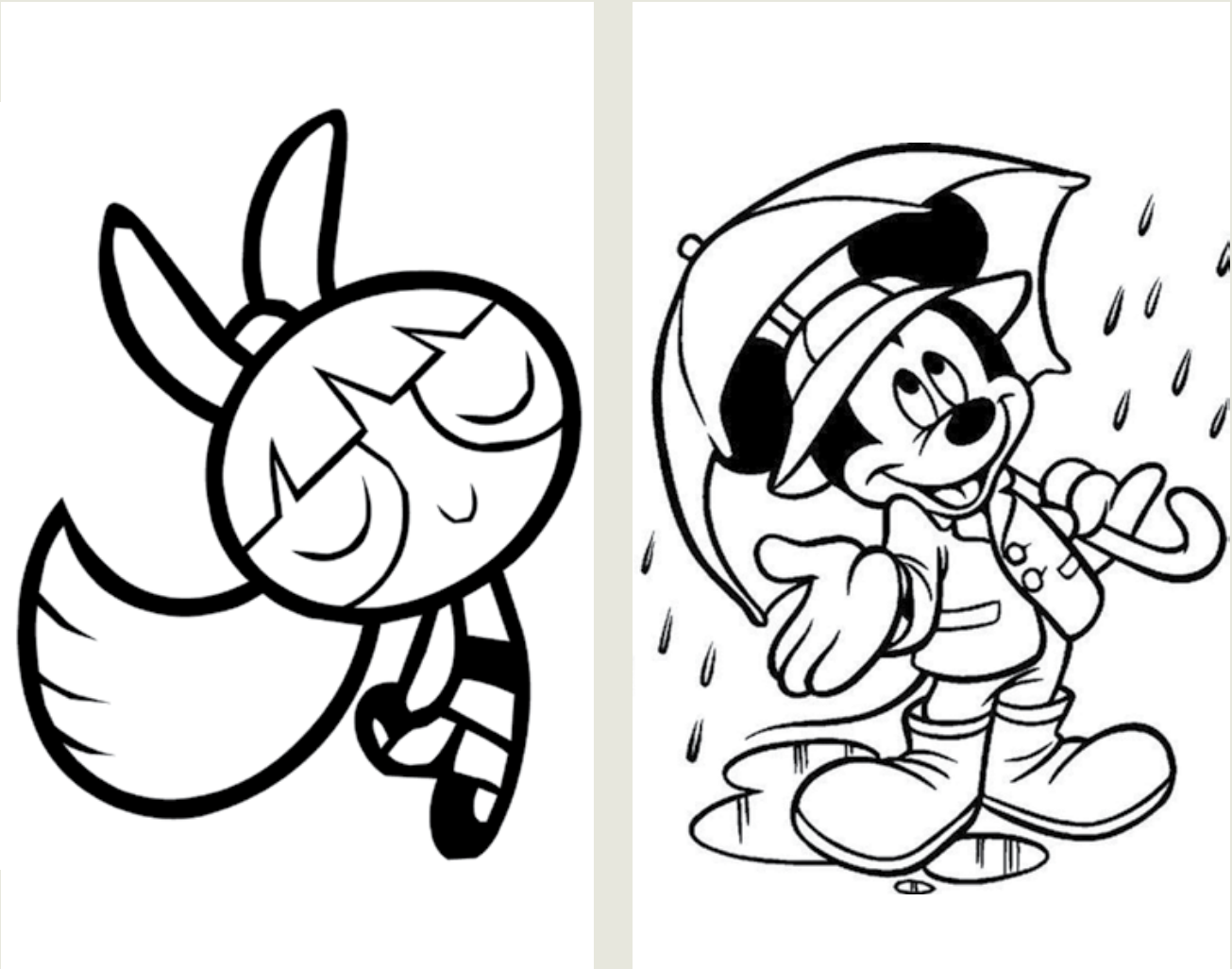
01. In the 2020 Summer Olympics several sports made an Olympic debut, including which of these?
A. All of them
B. Karate
C. Surfing
D. Sport climbing

02. Which country forcibly colonised the island now known as Taiwan in 1895?
A. The Netherlands
B. China
C. Japan
D. UK

03. What is the word for bending at least one knee to the ground, a gesture of deep respect for a superior that was introduced in 328 BC by Alexander the Great into his court, a practice then already followed in Persia?
A. Kneeling
B. Curtseying
C. Genuflection
D. Kerning

Answers: 1.A 2.C 3.C

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

O	R	E	R
D	Y	S	E
A	M	E	O
P	I	L	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

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

WORD BUILDER

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

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

ANSWER

L	Z	9	6	4	G	8	I	E
I	E	8	9	L	Z	6	4	G
6	G	4	8	I	E	Z	L	9
4	6	L	I	G	8	E	9	Z
9	8	Z	4	6	L	G	I	E
G	I	E	L	Z	9	4	8	6
8	L	G	Z	6	I	9	E	4
Z	9	I	E	8	4	G	6	L
E	4	6	G	9	L	Z	8	

Zelensky blasts Russia after Kherson shelled

Shelling on Christmas Eve left at least eight dead in Kherson city, which Kyiv’s forces had recaptured

Kherson, Ukraine - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Saturday blasted Russian ‘terror’ after shelling on Christmas Eve left at least eight dead and 17 injured in Kherson city, which Kyiv’s forces recaptured in November.

Despite Russia’s retreat from the southern port city, Kherson remains within reach of Moscow’s weaponry and under constant threat.

“Kherson. In the morning, on Saturday, on the eve of Christmas, in the central part of the city,” Zelensky said on Telegram, publishing images of the attack and calling it ‘killing for the sake of intimidation and pleasure’.

“It is the real life of Ukraine... The world must see and understand what absolute evil we are fighting against,” Zelensky said.

On the day marking 10 months since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, a string of shelling rained down around a busy market, where a fire erupted.

AFP journalists at the scene saw several bodies lying on the ground in the street, including a man killed in his car.

Another man, whose car had been blown up, had severe head injuries.

‘At least eight civilians were killed and 17 were injured,’ the Kherson region’s prosecutor’s office said on social media.

‘Several people were hospitalised with serious injuries,’ it added.

Cars also caught fire in a residential area of the city after shelling, the emergency services said.

The fires were put out after 40 minutes but the number of dead and injured was still being ‘established’, they said on Telegram.

Kherson toll

Russian President Vladimir Putin in September announced the annexation of four regions in the east and south of Ukraine, including Kherson, after Moscow proxies held referendums there - denounced as a sham by Kyiv and the West.

His troops never fully controlled any of the territories and



An injured man stands on a street after Russian shelling to Ukrainian city of Kherson on Saturday, where eight were killed and 17 injured (AFP)

last month were forced to retreat from the Kherson region after a months-long Ukrainian counteroffensive.

But Kherson has been regularly bombarded ever since,

On Friday alone the Kherson region was targeted by 74 Russian strikes, leaving five dead and 17 injured, according to regional authorities

On December 15, Russian shelling killed two people including a Red Cross worker in Kherson and completely cut electricity as temperatures plunged below freezing.

Much of Ukraine is struggling without heat or power after Moscow started targeting electricity and water systems nearly two months ago.

The UN’s human rights chief has warned the campaign has inflicted ‘extreme hardship’ on Ukrainians this winter, and also decried likely war crimes by Russian forces.

Zelensky visited the White House this week to meet with US President Joe Biden and argue for a US\$44.9bn emergency military and economic aid package for Ukraine.

AFP

On the day marking 10 months since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, a string of shelling rained down around a busy market, where a fire erupted. AFP journalists saw several bodies lying on the ground



People shout slogans following a shooting along rue d'Enghien in the 10th arrondissement, in Paris on Friday (AFP)

Paris shooter who killed three people admits being ‘racist’

Paris, France - A 69-year-old white French gunman who opened fire at a Kurdish cultural centre in Paris killing three people told investigators he was racist, a source close to the case said on Saturday.

The shots at the centre and a nearby hairdressing salon shortly before midday on Friday caused panic in the trendy 10th district of the French capital, a bustling area of shops and restaurants that is home to a large Kurdish population.

Three others were wounded in the attack that the gunman attributed to his being ‘racist’, the source said.

He was found with a case loaded with a box of at least 25 cartridges and ‘two or three loaded magazines’, the source added.

The weapon was a ‘much-used’ US Army Colt 1911 pistol.

French President Emmanuel Macron said ‘the Kurds in France have been the target of an odious attack in the heart of Paris’ and ordered the Paris police chief to meet with leaders of the Kurdish community on Saturday.

The gunman, who has a history of racist violence, initially targeted the Kurdish cultural centre before entering a hairdressing salon where he was arrested. Of the three wounded people, one was being given intensive care in hospital and two were treated for serious injuries.

According to the Kurdish Democratic Council in France (CDK-F), the dead included one woman and two men.

Emine Kara was a leader of the Kurdish Women’s Movement in France, the organisation’s spokesman Agit Polat said.

Her claim for political asylum in France had been rejected.

The other victims were Abdulrahman Kizil and Mir Perver, a political refugee and artist, according to the CDK-F.

A police source confirmed that Kara and Kizil were among the victims.

The Kurdish community centre, called Centre Ahmet Kaya, is used by a charity that organises concerts and exhibitions, and helps the Kurdish diaspora in the Paris region.

The Kurdish community is due to hold a demonstration in Paris on Saturday afternoon.

Within hours of the attack, Kurdish protesters clashed with

The shots at the centre and a nearby hairdressing salon shortly before midday on Friday caused panic in the district

Twenty-two killed in fire at nursing home in Russia

Moscow, Russia - A fire erupted overnight in a private illegal nursing home in the Siberian city of Kemerovo, killing 22 people, Russia’s investigative committee said on Saturday.

In a video released by the emergency services, a long row of emergency vehicles lined up outside the burning building, as firefighters tackled flames which sent plumes of smoke into the night sky.

Images released by emergency services showed the building later completely burned out.

Russia’s investigative committee - which investigates major crimes - said it opened a probe into causing death by negligence.

“A fire broke out overnight in a private property used as a nursing home,” the investigative committee said on Telegram, adding that ‘the death toll has risen to 22’. A previous statement on Telegram had called it an ‘illegal’ home, but a later version edited the phrase out.

However a police source quoted by the Russian state-run news agency TASS also called the home illegal.

“Six more were injured, two of them were hospitalised and are in a serious condition with burns,” the Telegram statement added. An earlier statement from the emergency services reported 20 people had died.

The fire spread over 180 square metres in a two-storey wooden building, TASS reported.

Faulty stove

The committee said a 31-year-old man had been taken for questioning, who had ‘rented out a private property to people in (a) difficult situation’.

“On the eve of the incident, the tenants informed the accused that the stove was faulty, but he did not take any action to repair the equipment,” the investigative committee said.

“Inspections on the scene are ongoing,” the committee said, adding that ‘witnesses are being questioned’.

The committee published a video of one detainee with his face blurred.

The emergency services said the premise had been identified in 2021 and an inspection had been scheduled.

“On December 7, the inspector of the State Fire Supervision Service arrived at the facility for a check. The management of the shelter denied him access to the premise,” the emergency services said on Telegram.

AFP



Russia emergency services battling a fire in a private nursing home in the Siberian city of Kemerovo on Saturday (AFP)

Iran to retry rapper reportedly on death row

Tehran, Iran - Iran’s supreme court has ordered the retrial of a Kurdish rapper who was reportedly sentenced to death over protests sparked by Mahsa Amini’s death, the judiciary said on Saturday.

Protests have gripped Iran since the September 16 death of Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian of Kurdish origin, after her arrest in Tehran for an alleged breach of the Islamic republic’s dress code for women.

Iran this month executed two people in connection with the protests. It has sentenced another 11 people to death. One of them, Mahan Sadrat, secured a retrial earlier this week. On Saturday the judiciary’s Mizan Online website said the Kurdish rapper Saman Seydi - also known as Saman Yasin - and another protester, Mohammad Ghobadlou, would be retried.

Hours later, however, Mizan issued a new statement from the supreme court that said Ghobadlou’s appeal had been rejected and confirmed his sentence. It did not elaborate.

Rights groups outside Iran have said Seydi and Ghobadlou had been facing the death penalty based on accusations of involvement in the protests.

Mizan did not specify the verdicts, but confirmed both were charged with offences punishable by death.

Ghobadlou was charged in Tehran with ‘corruption on earth’ for ‘attacking police with a car, which resulted in the death of one officer and the injury of five others’.

Seydi was accused of ‘moharebeh’, which means ‘enmity against God’. Rights groups said the rapper had been accused of firing a pistol into the air three times during the demonstrations.

Saturday’s developments come three days after Mizan said the supreme court had ordered the retrial of Sadrat, who had been sentenced to death after being convicted of capital offences during the protests.

Iran has arrested thousands of people over the unrest in which the authorities say more than 200 people have been killed, including dozens of security personnel.

AFP

Chilean firefighters battle to contain blaze

Viña Del Mar, Chile - Chilean firefighters battled on Friday to contain a devastating blaze that ravaged scores of homes in a coastal resort city, killing two people.

Officials said at least 130 homes were destroyed by the fire in Vina del Mar, northwest of the capital Santiago.

“We lost everything - documents, our vehicle,” resident Oscar Gonzalez said, adding that what hurt most was the loss of his dogs.

President Gabriel Boric arrived at Vina del Mar on Friday afternoon to head an emergency meeting and visit affected areas.

“They can rest assured that we will not abandon them,” the president said, underscoring the need to redouble prevention efforts at the start of a particularly hot, dry Southern Hemisphere summer.

“In our country we are standing on a powder keg. What happened (in Vina del Mar) could happen elsewhere,” he said.

The light of day revealed a



Chile’s President Gabriel Boric inspects damages after a forest fire affected the hills of Viña del Mar, in the Valparaíso region, Chile, on Friday (AFP)

grim panorama of destruction left by the fire, which broke out on Thursday and roared down a forested mountainside.

Manuel Monsalve, an assistant to the interior minister, said better weather should help firefighters to control the blaze by the end of Friday.

By late afternoon, it had been contained to three forest blazes outside the urban area.

‘Everything is burnt’

Officials have given shifting assessments of the fire’s toll.

As of Friday afternoon, they said two people had died - an 85-

year-old woman and a man of 62.

Thirty people were injured and 130 houses and 125 hectares of land destroyed.

Vina del Mar Mayor Macarena Ripamonti said the number of homes lost in the region, some 120km (75 miles)

from Santiago, was probably much higher.

Fanned by strong gusts of wind, the fire had roared from the upper areas of town down ravines and hills to more heavily inhabited sections of Vina del Mar, most of them lower-income neighborhoods with narrow streets and houses of flimsy construction.

Several neighbourhoods were ordered evacuated.

“The houses were burning one after the other,” said 66-year-old Daniel Velazquez. “Everything is burnt.”

The government declared a state of emergency in the larger Valparaíso region.

“There was a very quick response to the beginning of the fire but... it spread very aggressively and quickly,” said Monsalve. Wind gusts of 40 to 50km per hour complicated the work of more than 400 firefighters and 150 forest rangers deployed to battle it with the help of 10 helicopters.

AFP

‘Rambo’ Rabuka returns to power as Fiji’s prime minister

Rabuka replaces Frank Bainimarama who toppled government in a 2006 coup

Suva, Fiji - Former military commander Sitiveni Rabuka was on Saturday confirmed as Fiji’s prime minister, after accusing the outgoing government of stoking ‘fear and chaos’ to derail his return to power.

Rabuka replaces the imposing Frank Bainimarama, who toppled the government in a 2006 coup and became prime minister a year later.

The 74-year-old Rabuka said he felt ‘humbled’ as he made his way out of parliament to be sworn in by the country’s president. The two-time coup leader and former prime minister - nicknamed ‘Rambo’ - narrowly triumphed over Bainimarama by 28 votes to 27 in a secret ballot held in parliament, speaker Naiqama Lalabalavu announced.

A smiling Bainimarama appeared to accept defeat as he told reporters after the vote: “This is democracy”. A chorus of cars honked in celebration as they drove past the parliamentary building in the capital Suva. New Zealand Prime Minister



Fiji’s Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka takes the oath of office during a ceremony in Suva on Saturday (AFP)

The two-time coup leader and former prime minister - nicknamed ‘Rambo’ - narrowly triumphed over Bainimarama by 28 votes to 27 in a secret ballot held in parliament

Jacinda Ardern congratulated Rabuka in a statement.

“We strongly value Fiji as a close friend and partner as we progress our shared priorities for the region,” she said.

Fiji is one of the most populous and prosperous Pacific island nations, and has grown closer to China under Bainimarama.

Rabuka has signalled a willingness to shift away from Beijing in favour of traditional allies Australia and New Zealand.

The military had been deployed on the streets of Suva as Rabuka and Bainimarama raced to cobble together a coalition government following a deadlocked general election.

Citing unsubstantiated reports of ethnic violence, Bainimarama said the military was needed to maintain ‘law and order’.

But Rabuka - who served as prime minister between 1992 and 1999 - said the government was ‘sowing fear and chaos’ and ‘trying to set the nation alight along racial lines’.

‘Climate of fear’

Many Fijians feared the government’s claims of ethnic violence - and the subsequent military deployment - were a pretext for a ‘creeping coup’ designed to keep Rabuka in opposition.

While not an outright autocrat, Bainimarama’s government had frequently used the legal system to sideline opponents, silence critics and muzzle the media.

Police last week summoned Rabuka for questioning after he asked the military to step in and help resolve alleged ‘anomalies’ in preliminary election results.

“The way this government has operated, we’ve been talking about a climate of fear,” he said at the time. “This is how they instil that fear.”

Rabuka led two military coups in 1987, which aimed to increase the political influence of Indigenous Fijians, who make up about 60 per cent of the country’s 900,000 population.

For this reason Rabuka has long been viewed with suspicion by the country’s sizable ethnic Indian minority, who were further marginalised in the aftermath.

Incoming deputy prime minister Biman Prasad, a close political ally, has helped to soften Rabuka’s image.

Rabuka, a former Fijian rugby international, locked in a coalition deal to form a government on Friday afternoon, after successfully wooing the kingmaker SODELPA party.

SODELPA had earlier chosen Rabuka’s People’s Alliance over Bainimarama’s Fiji First, but that first vote was ruled invalid by the country’s election supervisor. AFP



This file photo shows Aung San Suu Kyi and detained president Win Myint during their court appearance in Naypyidaw on May 24, 2021 (AFP)

Myanmar’s Suu Kyi to hear final verdicts in trial

Yangon, Myanmar - A Myanmar junta court could hand down the final verdicts in an 18-month trial of Aung San Suu Kyi next week, closing the latest chapter in the military’s decades-long battle with the democracy figurehead.

The Nobel laureate, 77, has already been found guilty on 14 charges ranging from corruption to illegally importing walkie-talkies and breaching the official secrets act.

Since her trial began she has been seen only once - in grainy state media photos from a bare courtroom - and has been reliant on lawyers to relay messages to the world.

Many in Myanmar’s democracy struggle she has dominated for decades have abandoned her core principle of non-violence, with ‘People’s Defence Forces’ clashing regularly with the military across the country.

The nation has been in turmoil since generals seized power last year and deposed Suu Kyi’s civilian government.

Final arguments for her trial on five remaining corruption charges are set for Monday and verdicts are expected shortly after. The court could add up to 75 years in prison to the 26 she has already been sentenced to, concluding a closed-door trial that rights groups say is a sham.

It is ‘unlikely’ the junta will press any more charges, said Richard Horsey of the International Crisis Group.

The military wants the focus next year to be on celebrations for the 75th anniversary of independence from Britain, ‘and on elections it is likely to hold mid-year’, he told AFP.

But after the polls, any new military regime ‘could perhaps approach Suu Kyi and try to use such negotiations to try to divide the opposition’, Horsey added.

Analyst Soe Myint Aung said there is ‘always a possibility of an unexpected pardon and release’ for Suu Kyi once her trial is finished.

AFP

California: One dead in plane crash on beach

Los Angeles, US - A plane crash on the golden sands of California’s Santa Monica beach that killed one man was being investigated by authorities on Friday.

Footage shows the Cessna 150 violently flipping over as it made an emergency landing on Thursday just metres from the world-famous Santa Monica pier, a popular tourist spot.

Beachgoers looked on helplessly as the pilot appeared to try to land on the packed sand at the edge of the water before the light plane somersaulted as it hit the waves.

Emergency workers raced to free the pilot and passenger. The 95-year-old passenger, Rex Minter, who was mayor of Santa Monica in the 1960s, died.

No information was given on the condition of the pilot.

Federal Aviation Administration spokesman Ian Gregor said an investigation was under way. “The pilot reported engine issues after departing from Santa Monica Airport,” he said.

Bystander Josh Feenberg said he and a friend were on the beach when the plane crashed.

“My friend saw a plane flying really low and was really confused,” Feenberg told ABC 7. “Then we saw it fly down there and we thought it would be a smooth landing but it hit the water and flipped over. It was pretty scary.”

AFP

Chinese city seeing half a million COVID cases a day: Official

Beijing, China - Half a million people in a single Chinese city are being infected with COVID-19 every day, a senior health official has said, in a rare and quickly censored acknowledgement that the country’s wave of infections is not being reflected in official statistics.

China this month has rapidly dismantled key pillars of its zero-COVID strategy, doing away with snap lockdowns, lengthy quarantines and travel curbs in a jarring reversal of its hallmark containment strategy.

Cities across the country have struggled to cope as surging infections have emptied pharmacy shelves, filled hospital wards and appeared to cause backlogs at crematoriums and funeral homes.

But the end of strict testing mandates has made caseloads



A man stands in front of a cordoned-off area, where COVID-19 patients lie on hospital beds, in the lobby of the Chongqing No. 5 People’s Hospital in China’s southwestern city of Chongqing on Friday (AFP)

virtually impossible to track, while authorities have narrowed the medical definition of a COVID death in a move experts have said will suppress the number of fatalities attributable to the

virus.

A news outlet operated by the ruling Communist Party in Qingdao on Friday reported the municipal health chief as saying that the eastern city was seeing ‘be-

tween 490,000 and 530,000’ new COVID cases a day.

The coastal city of around 10mn people was ‘in a period of rapid transmission ahead of an approaching peak’, Bo Tao re-

‘Epic’ winter storm wallops US, leaving 1mn without power

Chicago, US - More than a million US power customers were in the dark on Friday as a ‘bomb cyclone’ winter storm walloped the country, closing highways, grounding flights and causing misery for Christmas travelers.

Heavy snow, howling winds and air so frigid it instantly turned boiling water into ice took hold of much of the nation, including normally temperate southern states.

Over 200mn Americans were under weather warnings, as wind chills sent temperatures down as low as -55 Fahrenheit (-48 Celsius), according to the National Weather Service (NWS).

In Hamburg, New York, 39-year-old Jennifer Orlando huddled down with her husband. “I can’t see across the street,” she told AFP. “We’re not going anywhere.”

Her power was out for four



Detroit residents brave the frigid temperatures and heavy gusts of wind in downtown Detroit on Friday (AFP)

hours after a vehicle slid into a power line on the highway, she said.

The biting cold is an immediate concern for hundreds of

thousands of electricity customers who were without power, according to tracker power-outage.us.

In El Paso, Texas, desperate

migrants who had crossed from Mexico huddled for warmth in churches, schools and a civic center, Rosa Falcon, a school teacher and volunteer told AFP.

But some still chose to stay outside in -15 Fahrenheit temperatures because they feared attention from immigration authorities, she added.

In Chicago, Burke Patten of

derwear, blankets and sleeping bags, along with hand and foot warmers.”

Major Caleb Senn, Chicago area commander for the Salvation Army, said the organisation had centres open for people to shelter from the fierce weather.

“Some of the people we’re seeing right now, they’ve just become homeless this year,” he

Some, however, were taking the biting cold in their stride.

In Canada, stoic last-minute holiday shoppers in downtown Toronto shrugged off the plunging temperatures.

Jennifer Campbell, of Caledon, Ontario, told AFP: “I think every few years we get some big storms and we just adjust. We are Canadians, that’s the way we do it.”

Transportation departments in North and South Dakota, Oklahoma, Iowa and elsewhere reported near-zero visibility whiteouts, ice-covered roads and blizzard conditions, and strongly urged residents to stay home.

At least two traffic fatalities were reported in Oklahoma on Thursday. Andy Beshear, governor of Kentucky, confirmed three in his state.

AFP

Some of the people have just become homeless this year. Some of these people are actually frightened. This is the first time they’ve been in the elements without someplace to go

CALEB SENN

said.

“Some of these people are actually frightened. This is the first time they’ve been in the elements without someplace to go.”

INDIA

RT-PCR test mandatory for arrivals from 5 Asian nations



A health worker collects a swab sample from a passenger to test for the COVID-19, on arrival at Anna International Airport in Chennai on Saturday (AFP)

Gandhinagar, India - Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya on Saturday announced that RT-PCR test has been made mandatory for passengers coming from five countries including China.

"The RT-PCR test to be mandatory for international arrivals from China, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand. On arrival, if any passenger from these countries is found symptomatic or tests positive for COVID-19 infection, then he/she will be put under quarantine," Health Minister Mandaviya said in a conversation with ANI. He also said that the Air Suvidha form filling to declare the current health status will also be made compulsory for international passengers arriving from these Asian countries.

Taking note of the rising cases of COVID globally, Man-

The RT-PCR test is to be mandatory for international arrivals from China, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand. Passengers who test positive will be put under quarantine

MANSUKH MANDAVIYA

daviya on Friday said that the Centre and States need to work in 'tandem' and in a 'collaborative spirit' as was done during the previous surges.

Mandaviya, while chairing a virtual meeting on Friday with the health ministers of the states, Principal Secretaries, Additional Chief Secretaries and Information Commissioners, said that the country needs to be on the alert and be fully prepared for COVID management. The meeting was held in view of the recent upsurge in cases in some countries like China,

Japan, Brazil and the United States in the presence of Union Minister of State for Health Bharati Pravin Pawar, NITI Aayog member V K Paul to review the public health preparedness for containment and management of COVID-19 and progress of national COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

Manadaviya has also stressed the importance of public awareness campaigns regarding adherence to COVID-appropriate behaviour in view of the upcoming festive season. He asked the State

Health Ministers to personally monitor and review the preparedness of all infrastructure and ensure adequate stock of essential medicines.

Notably, Union Health Ministry has already issued 'Operational Guidelines for Revised Surveillance Strategy in context of COVID-19' in June 2022 which calls for early detection, isolation, testing and timely management of suspected and confirmed cases to detect and contain outbreaks of new SARS-CoV-2 variants.

On Thursday the Union Health Minister told Parliament, India will start randomly testing two per cent of international passengers arriving at its airports for COVID-19 in view of rising cases of COVID in China and other countries.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare informed on Saturday morning that in the

past 24 hours, India recorded 201 new COVID-19 infections.

The country's active case-load currently stands at 3,397 which accounts for 0.01 per cent of the total cases.

The recovery rate currently is at 98.8 per cent. As many as 183 recoveries were made in the last 24 hours, thereby taking the total recoveries to 4,41,42,791.

The daily positivity rate stood at 0.15 per cent, while the weekly positivity rate stood at 0.14 per cent.

Mandaviya told parliament on Thursday that the government has started random RT-PCR sampling among the passengers arriving at international airports in the country amid the recent surge of coronavirus infection in various countries including China, Japan, South Korea, France, and the United States.

ANI



Chanda Kochhar former MD and chief executive officer of ICICI Bank and her husband Deepak Kochhar (ANI)

CBI gets three-day remand of Chanda Kochhar, husband

Mumbai, India - The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on Saturday got a three-day remand of former Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of the ICICI bank Chanda Kochhar and her husband Deepak Kochhar.

The CBI arrested the couple on Friday in connection with the alleged ICICI Bank-Videocon money laundering case. The CBI lawyer in the court said that they have arrested accused number four and five, as per the First Investigation Report registered with them.

"Accused 4 was MD and CEO of ICICI in 2009 and the fifth one is her husband," the lawyer said.

He said that after Chanda Kochhar became the MD and CEO of the bank, six loans were sanctioned to Videocon and its subsidiary companies and Chanda was a part of the committees that sanctioned two of the loans. "The loan amount of Rs 1,800 crore has been given to the company," the CBI lawyer added mentioning that another loan of amount Rs 300 crore was given to a company whose part was Deepak Kochhar.

"We are filing an application to invoke IPC section 409 also in this case. We had already given a notice to both the accused under section 41 of the CrPC, but since they did not cooperate so we arrested them," he said underscoring that they had sent a notice to the couple to appear before it on December 15 but they said they would appear four days later and did not come on December 19 as

well.

"They came yesterday (December 23) and due to non-cooperation, they were arrested. To confront them with the spam evidence and documents of the case we should be given three days custody of both the accused," the CBI lawyer argued.

Meanwhile, the advocate of the Kochhars, Amit Desai argued, emphasising that the registered FIR also included industrialist Venugopal Dhoot of the Videocon Group.

He said: "Years after the FIR was registered against them, none of the Kochhars were called for joining the investigation and then they suddenly sent notice for December 15 which was changed to yesterday only with the approval of the CBI. "If there was no need for investigation till January 2019, why have they been arrested now?" he asked.

The case is related to the alleged irregularities and corrupt practices in the sanction of a Rs 1,875 crore loan disbursed by ICICI Bank to the Videocon Group during 2009 and 2011.

During its preliminary enquiry, the CBI found six loans worth Rs 1,875 crore were sanctioned to the Videocon Group and companies associated with it between June 2009 and October 2011 in an alleged violation of laid-down policies of ICICI Bank, which are part of the probe. The agency has said that the loans were declared non-performing assets in 2012, causing a loss of Rs 1,730 crore to the bank.

ANI

Malaysia campsite landslide search ends with 31 dead

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia - Rescuers have called off the search for bodies after a massive, predawn landslide blanketed a campsite north of Malaysia's capital killing 31 people, officials said on Saturday.

According to police, 92 people, including dozens of children, were sleeping at the unlicensed campsite at an organic farm in Batang Kali, Selangor state on December 16 when tonnes of soil and mud thundered down a hill.

All of those killed were Malaysian nationals, including 11 children, while 61 campers were rescued.

"We found the last body, that of a boy," senior rescue official Hafisham Mohamad Noor told AFP.

"We will end our search and rescue operations."

Many of the victims were families enjoying year-end holidays. Two of the deceased, a mother and her toddler daughter, were found hugging each other, while a man was uncov-

ered still clutching his dog.

Nearly 700 personnel from different government agencies and the emergency services, backed by police tracker dogs and earthmoving machines, trawled through mud and debris to search for survivors and bodies.

The farm did not have a licence to operate a campsite, according to authorities.

Landslides are common in Malaysia after heavy rains that regularly punctuate the end of the year.

However, no heavy rain was recorded in the Batang Kali area on the night of the landslide.

In March, four people were killed after a landslide buried their homes in a Kuala Lumpur suburb.

In one of the deadliest such incidents, a mudslide in 1993 brought on by heavy rain caused a 12-storey residential building outside the capital to collapse, killing 48 people.

AFP

'Serpent' serial killer Sobhraj arrives in France

Paris, France - French serial killer Charles Sobhraj, responsible for multiple murders in the 1970s across Asia, arrived in France on Saturday after almost 20 years in prison in Nepal.

Nepal's top court ruled on Wednesday that he should be freed on health grounds and deported to France within 15 days.

On Friday, he was released and put on a flight at Kathmandu airport to take him to Paris via Doha. While on the flight to Doha, he insisted to an AFP journalist that he was 'innocent'.

Sobhraj's life was chronicled in the series *The Serpent*, co-produced by Netflix and the BBC, detailing how he terrorised the continent with a string of murders that targeted tourists.

Sometimes posing as a gem trader, he would befriend his victims - many of them Western backpackers on the 1970s hippie trail - before drugging, robbing and murdering them.

The court ordered Sobhraj, who had heart surgery in 2017, be released on health grounds after he served more than three-quarters of his sentence for mur-

dering a US tourist and a Canadian in Nepal in the 1970s.

"I feel great... I have a lot to do. I have to sue a lot of people. Including the state of Nepal," Sobhraj told AFP on Friday on-board the plane.

Asked if he thought he had been wrongly described as a serial killer, the 78-year-old said: "Yes, yes."

He landed in the French capital on Saturday morning, an AFP reporter confirmed.

On arrival at the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris, he was taken away by border police for extra 'identity checks', according to an airport source.

The source said he had left the airport, evading a media scrum waiting in the arrivals hall.

His French lawyer, Isabelle Coutant-Peyre, told reporters at the airport she was 'very happy' he had been released, adding that he had been 'unjustly sentenced in a fabricated case with false documents by the Nepali police'.

"It's a scandal, he is presented as a serial killer, which is completely false."



Charles Sobhraj sits in an aircraft departing from Kathmandu (AFP)

'Bikini killer'

Born in Saigon to an Indian father and a Vietnamese mother who later married a Frenchman, Sobhraj embarked on an international life of crime and ended up in Thailand in 1975.

Suave and sophisticated, he was implicated in the murder of a young American woman, whose body was found on a beach wearing a bikini.

Nicknamed the 'bikini killer', Sobhraj was eventually linked to

more than 20 murders.

He was arrested in India in 1976 and ultimately spent 21 years in jail there, with a brief break in 1986 when he drugged prison guards and escaped. He was recaptured in the Indian coastal state of Goa.

Accused of at least 15 murders across 10 countries, by the time he left Indian jails, his alleged other crimes had fallen under the statute of limitations in Thailand.

Released in 1997, Sobhraj lived in Paris, giving paid interviews to journalists, but went back to Nepal in 2003.

'Karma'

He was spotted in a casino playing baccarat by journalist Joseph Nathan, one of the founders of the *Himalayan Times* newspaper, and arrested.

"He looked harmless... It was sheer luck that I recognised him," Nathan told AFP on Thursday.

"I think it was karma."

A court in Nepal handed Sobhraj a life sentence the following year for killing US tourist Connie Jo Bronzich in 1975. A

decade later, he was also found guilty of killing Bronzich's Canadian companion.

Talking to AFP among bemused fellow Qatar Airways passengers on Friday, Sobhraj insisted he was innocent of the killings in Nepal.

"The courts in Nepal, from (the) district court to high court to supreme court, all the judges, they were biased against Charles Sobhraj," he said.

"I am innocent in those cases, OK? So I don't have to feel bad for that, or good. I am innocent. It was built on fake documents," he added.

Thai police officer Sompol Suthimai - whose work with Interpol was instrumental in securing the 1976 arrest - had pushed for Sobhraj to be extradited to Thailand and tried for murders there.

But on Thursday, Sompol told AFP he did not object to the release, as both he and the criminal he once pursued were now too old. "I don't have any feelings towards him now that it's been so long," said Sompol, 90.

AFP

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Bangladesh bowlers rattle India in the second innings to leave Dhaka Test hanging in the balance

Dhaka, Bangladesh - Bangladesh fought their way into what earlier appeared a lost cause on Saturday, knocking over four Indian wickets to leave the visitors teetering after Liton Das compiled a gritty half-century on the third day of the second Test in Dhaka.

The Bangladesh bowlers were given 145 runs to defend after Liton's steely 73 and a wagging tail steered the hosts to 231 all out.

Despite the subpar score, spinners Mehidy Hasan and Shakib Al Hasan rose to the challenge, reducing India to 45-4 at stumps with 100 still left to chase, leaving the match unexpectedly hanging in the balance.

Mehidy claimed three wickets after Shakib's initial breakthrough, removing Cheteshwar Pujara (six), Shubman Gill (seven) and Virat Kohli (one). Shakib started the slide with the wicket of captain KL Rahul for two.

Axar Patel survived the day to stay unbeaten on 26 alongside nightwatchman Jaydev Unadkat (three), with first-innings heroes Rishabh Pant and Shreyas Iyer yet to come in.

Liton said after the close of play that Bangladesh could keep India under pressure and eke out a win with early wickets on Sunday.

"It is possible to win if we can take one or two more wickets in the early morning," he said.

"Rishabh and Iyer are yet to come, they are of course good players, but as I said if we can take one or two more wickets



Bangladesh's Mehidy Hasan Miraz (R) celebrates with Liton Das after the dismissal of India's Virat Kohli on the third day of their second Test in Dhaka on Saturday (AFP)

they will remain under pressure."

For India, building a partnership remains vital.

"I feel we should not overthink that four wickets have gone. If one of our batsmen get set, there won't be much pressure on us," pacer Mohammed Siraj said.

Regular wickets

Axar had earlier downed three Bangladesh batters and all of India's bowlers were among the wickets.

But Liton rode his luck in an innings where he was dropped twice by Kohli - first off Axar and

then Ravichandran Ashwin - to score what could be 73 vital runs.

There was little support for him on the other end after opener Zakir Hasan (51) fell soon after lunch until wicketkeeper Nurul Hasan joined him at the crease and the pair compiled an aggres-

sive 46-run stand. That stand was broken by Axar when he drew Nurul out of his crease to set up an easy stumping for Pant.

Liton then added another brisk 60 runs alongside Taskin Ahmed (31 not out) before he was bowled by a Siraj delivery that

nipped back in and found the gap between bat and pad.

Even with those small pockets of resistance, India looked to be in complete control of the match, picking up regular wickets with all their bowlers getting a part of the spoils. Ashwin had Najmul Hos-

sain trapped leg-before for five in the second over of the day before Siraj removed Bangladesh's first-innings top-scorer Mominul Haque for the same score.

Unadkat then got skipper Shakib (13) to spoon a length delivery to Gill at cover in his first over of the day.

With the hosts struggling, Axar added to their misery on the stroke of lunch, trapping the experienced Mushfiquir Rahim lbw for nine.

He added two more to his tally after the break, getting Mehidy

It is possible to win if we can take one or two more wickets in the early morning

LITON DAS

lbw for nought before dismissing Nurul for 31. Siraj, Ashwin, and a run-out accounted for the final three wickets.

The Bangladesh bowlers had given their side a glimmer of hope in Friday's final session, restricting India's lead to 87 runs just when the visitors looked like they might amass a mammoth score.

Pant and Iyer were running rampant, with both crossing fifty at rapid pace, ending at 93 and 87 respectively, but Bangladesh knocked over the last six Indian wickets for 61 runs to restrict India to 314.

AFP

Dromedary CC clinch Camel Trophy

Muscat: Dromedary Cricket Club won the annual cricket fixture for Camel Trophy against the Chairman's XI at the Oman Cricket Academy ground recently.

In an entertaining 25-over-a-side match, Dromedary CC defeated Chairman's XI by eight wickets.

Organised by Oman Cricket, the Camel Trophy is played between Dromedary CC, a team of British expatriates in Oman, and

OC's Chairman's XI since 2018.

Put to bat first, Chairman's XI, led by Alkesh Joshi, were restricted to 139 for five.

Parviz Abdul Qadir al Balushi top-scored with 19 before retiring out while Syed Aamir Ali and Hemal Mehta scored 18 runs each.

Five of the seven bowlers picked up a wicket each. Dromedary CC opening batters - Crossy and Goose - shared an explosive opening stand of 47

runs in three overs. Goose had to retire first, scoring 31 in just eight deliveries that included three sixes and three boundaries.

Crossy retired for 30 and Luke's unbeaten 29 sealed the win in just 15 overs as they reached 140 for 2. Alkesh Joshi and Zeeshan Siddiqui picked up a wicket each.

As it is an exhibition game, batters are forced to retire out after reaching 30 runs or playing

out 25 balls. Later, Dromedary skipper James Lansdell said: "It was indeed our pleasure to come and play at the lovely turf of the Oman Cricket Academy Ground. Oman Cricket has always been cordial hosts and we enjoy playing some quality cricket with the stalwarts of the game.

"We are looking forward to have a fixture in February to retain the coveted Camel Trophy."



Players of Dromedary Cricket Club and Chairman's XI pose for a photograph before the start of the game

Warner fires shot at Cricket Australia over leadership appeal

Melbourne, Australia - Veteran David Warner accused Cricket Australia Saturday of a lack of support in his appeal against a lifetime leadership ban and revealed he struggled mentally during the recent series against the West Indies.

The dynamic opener and former Test vice-captain was banned from any leadership role over his part in the Cape Town ball tampering affair in 2018.

He launched a bid to overturn the sanction in February but gave up the fight on the eve of the second Test against the West Indies in Adelaide this month.

Warner was furious that the process had dragged on so long and that an independent review panel wanted to make the hearing public, which he said would be traumatic for his young family.

The 36-year-old, who will play his 100th Test in the Boxing Day clash against South Africa in Melbourne, said it left him struggling mentally leading into the first Test against the Caribbean



David Warner

team in Perth, where he scored 5 and 48.

"My mental health probably wasn't where I needed to be at, to be 100 percent -- and that was challenging at the time," he told reporters in Melbourne.

"If I had my way, we would have had that (the review) all sorted.

"From the CA point of view, I didn't really have any support," he added.

AFP



Pakistan's Sarfaraz Ahmed during a training session at National Stadium in Karachi on Saturday (AFP)

Pakistan and New Zealand seek revival after England battering

Karachi, Pakistan - Pakistan and New Zealand will hope for a reversal of fortune in the two-match Test series starting in Karachi from Monday after both were whitewashed 3-0 by England in their last series.

New Zealand were scuppered in England in May as the home team under coach Brendon McCullum introduced the aggressive 'Bazball' style of cricket.

The never-say-die style also saw England inflict a first-ever 3-

0 series defeat on Pakistan this month. Since then, the Pakistan Cricket Board has undergone a revamp, with Ramiz Raja removed as chairman and chief selector Mohammad Wasim sacked.

Skipper Babar Azam is also under scrutiny after losing four home Tests on the trot.

Azam vowed his team would seek a quick turnaround.

"There have been difficult times in the last series," said

Azam, who has had to lead a side hard-hit by injuries.

"With new players it's different because when the opposition attacks them, it places a sharper kind of pressure on them," he said.

Spearheads Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf will miss both the New Zealand games, having still not recovered from injuries, but Naseem Shah is available after missing the last two Tests.

Shahid Afridi to head new Pakistan selection committee

Karachi, Pakistan - Former captain Shahid Afridi will head the new interim selectors committee for the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB), officials said Saturday, the latest change since the team was thrashed by England.

The PCB underwent a major overhaul on Thursday when a 14-member management committee took over after Ramiz Raja was sacked as chairman.

The main committee, headed by former chairman Najam Sethi, also dismissed chief selector Mohammad Wasim before appointing Afridi.

Former players Abdul Razzaq and Rao Iftikhar were also named selectors, the PCB said.

The changes follow Pakistan's first-ever 3-0 home whitewash by England this month.

"I feel honoured to have been assigned this responsibility," said Afridi, who retired from international cricket in 2017.

"We need to get back to our winning ways and I have no doubts that through meritocratic



Shahid Afridi

and strategic selection decisions, we will help the national side to perform."

Afridi played 27 Tests, 398 one-day and 99 Twenty 20 international for Pakistan in a career remembered for his hard-hitting batting.

Pakistan are currently involved in a two-match Test series against New Zealand with the first match in Karachi starting from Monday.

AFP

BACK TO THE GRIND

Mikel Arteta wants leaders Arsenal to seize title chance as Premier League returns after World Cup break

London, United Kingdom - Mikel Arteta has urged leaders Arsenal to carry on from where they left off by winning their first Premier League title since 2004 when English football's top-flight resumes after the World Cup break. The Gunners were in superb form, with 12 wins from 14 matches, when the league was paused in unprecedented fashion to allow for the first World Cup held in a northern hemisphere winter to take place in Qatar. All season long, fans and pundits have been debating whether the break will be a help or a hindrance to clubs' ambitions, with Arsenal now without Gabriel Jesus after he was sent home early from the World Cup with a knee problem sustained in Brazil's shock defeat by Cameroon. Arteta, however, was in buoyant mood ahead of his side's return to Premier League action against London rivals West Ham at the Emirates on Monday.

"You know, I want the team to play a certain way, and the more consistent we are on that the more we are going to win," he told Sky Sports. "There is excitement, and we should be excited and we should be embracing the opportunity that we have ahead of us."

Arsenal are currently five points clear of reigning champions Manchester City. City will be the last of the title contenders in action during the Boxing Day holiday round of fixtures when they travel to strugglers Leeds on Wednesday.



There is excitement, and we should be excited and we should be embracing the opportunity that we have ahead of us

MIKEL ARTETA, ARSENAL MANAGER

Saudi-backed Newcastle, riding high in third place, are away to Leicester on Monday. The Magpies last won a major domestic trophy in 1955 and such is the northeast club's desire to end that drought, Howe used all five of his players who had been in Qatar during a hard-

fought 1-0 win over Premier League rivals Bournemouth that secured a place in the last eight of the League Cup. Champions League qualification also remains a real possibility, with Tottenham and Manchester United, fourth and

fifth respectively, snapping at Newcastle's heels. United, given their status, may be under most pressure to achieve a top-four finish, although manager Erik ten Hag said: "I think also for the manager of Chelsea (Graham Potter), of Newcastle (Eddie Howe), all



Arsenal players celebrate a goal

those clubs invest a lot in their squad. So for every manager it's a big pressure to get into the Champions League, that's clear." Tottenham travel to Brentford while Liverpool will try to kick-start their season again away to Aston Villa on Monday. Bottom of the table Wolves

begin their quest for top-flight survival under new manager Julen Lopetegui when the former Spain and Real Madrid coach, who oversaw a midweek League Cup win over Gillingham, makes his Premier League debut away to Everton. "For me, the only aim in front

is the next match," said Lopetegui, who replaced the sacked Bruno Lage. Fulham's match against Crystal Palace on Monday was not even on the bench for Thursday's League Cup win over holders Liverpool at the Etihad Stadium.

Premier League chiefs announced there will be a moment's applause before all top-flight matches between Boxing Day and December 28 in honour of Cohen, with all players and officials wearing black arm-bands as a mark of respect. AFP

Kane's state of mind no concern to Conte after World Cup penalty pain



Harry Kane is crestfallen after England's defeat to France

London, United Kingdom - Tottenham Hotspur manager Antonio Conte has insisted Harry Kane will be in the right frame of mind when the England striker returns to Premier League action following his World Cup heartache. Kane's missed penalty late on against Spurs team-mate Hugo Lloris was a key moment in England's 2-1 quarter-final loss to France. However, Conte expects his star player to put that disappointment behind him now he's back on club duty, starting with Monday's clash at London rivals Brentford. "No, honestly (I am not worried) because we're talking about a world class striker," Conte told reporters on Friday. "In football you can have exciting moments and you can also have a moment where you are a bit disappointed because you

missed a second penalty. The first he scored. "I am not worried about him. I saw him very well in these two days with us." Tottenham are currently fourth in the table but eight points behind leaders Arsenal, having played a game more than their bitter north London rivals. Conte's contract is set to expire after the end of the season, although Spurs do have the option to extend it by 12 months. "I think I would like also in the future to not speak about this matter in the press conference because I think it is much more important the game we are going to play," Conte said. "In this case Brentford but what I can tell you is I am really happy in the club, to work here and I have a really good relationship with the club." AFP



Marcus Rashford

Rashford signs new Manchester United deal

London, United Kingdom - Manchester United attacker Marcus Rashford has signed a contract extension keeping him at the club until 2024, the English outfit announced on Saturday. The new contract on a reported £250,000-a-week plus bonuses, makes him the highest-paid English player in the Premier League. The 25-year-old agreed a new deal alongside Diogo Dalot, Fred and Luke Shaw with the four

players' current contract up at the end of the season. The England forward came through United's academy and was part of the squad that reached World Cup quarters. "We want to develop, we want to support those players and we want them to keep in our process," United coach Erik Ten Hag said. "We want to construct a team for the future, so for longer years, and those players have to be part of it," he added.

Portugal right-back Dalot, 25, joined the 20-time league champions in 2018, 27-year-old England left-back Shaw arrived four years earlier and Brazil midfielder Fred, who turns 30 in March, moved from Shakhtar Donetsk four seasons ago. Ten Hag's side, fifth in the table, return to Premier League action following the World Cup break on Tuesday as they host Nottingham Forest. AFP

Guardiola accuses Calvin Phillips of returning from World Cup 'overweight'

London, United Kingdom - Pep Guardiola said Friday that Manchester City midfielder Calvin Phillips had returned from his World Cup stint with England "overweight" and unable to train. City manager Guardiola was initially vague over why the injury prone 27-year-old was not even on the bench for Thursday's League Cup win over holders Liverpool at the Etihad Stadium. But following a 3-2 victory that took City into the quarter-finals, Guardiola said: "He's not injured. He arrived overweight. I don't know (why). He didn't arrive in the condition to do training sessions and to play." City had 16 players on international duty at the World Cup, more than any other Premier League club, and they were all given time off after their involvement at Qatar 2022 ended, which in Phillips' case came after England's quarter-final loss to



Calvin Phillips

France. "When he will be ready he will play, because we need him, we need him a lot," said Guardiola, who added he had "absolutely" no issue with England's training regime. Asked if he was disappointed, the Spanish boss replied: "It's a private conversation with Calvin." City resume their Premier League title defence away to Phillips' former club Leeds on Wednesday. AFP

Villa boss Emery will speak to Martinez about World Cup celebrations

London, United Kingdom - Aston Villa manager Unai Emery will speak to Emiliano Martinez about the Argentina goalkeeper's controversial World Cup celebrations when he returns to club duty with the Premier League side. Martinez made a key save to deny Randal Kolo Muani in extra-time and then denied Kingsley Coman in a penalty shoot-out in Qatar as Argentina beat France in a thrilling final.

But he was seen making a crude gesture after winning the golden glove trophy for the best goalkeeper at the tournament. Then, during Argentina's victory parade in Buenos Aires, he was seen holding a baby doll with its face covered by a photograph of France star striker Kylian Mbappe. In the final, Mbappe scored a hat-trick as France twice fought back to take the game to a penalty shootout and then beat



Martinez with the opening spot-kick.

"When you have big emotion, sometimes it is difficult to control it," Emery told reporters on Friday.

When you have big emotion, sometimes it is difficult to control it

UNAI EMERY

"I will speak to him next week about some celebrations. We are so proud of him. He won the World Cup with his national team and it's amazing. "He's coming back next week. I want him to rest now because after big emotion and hard work, he has to have some

days off to rest then he'll come back to work with us." French sports minister Amelie Oudea-Castera, speaking earlier Friday, was scathing about Martinez's conduct. "I find it pitiful," she said. "It's just vulgar, inappropriate, really not up to the occasion."



Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return to Austria's Sebastian Ofner during the 2022 World Tennis League exhibition match in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on Friday (AFP)

Novak Djokovic hopes for warm welcome on Australian Open return

Dubai, United Arab Emirates - Novak Djokovic is hoping he will receive a warm welcome from the public when he returns to the Australian Open next month, now that the drama surrounding his vaccination status and deportation is officially behind him.

A nine-time champion at Melbourne Park, Djokovic was unable to compete in the opening Grand Slam of the season in 2022 after he was deported from Australia over fears he would incite anti-vax sentiment.

As a result of his deportation, also forced to sit out the US Open.

However, he finished his 2022 campaign with a bang, winning titles in Tel Aviv, Astana and the ATP Finals in Turin, as well as reaching the final of the Paris Masters.

He also picked up trophies in Rome and Wimbledon and tallied up a 42-7 win-loss record throughout the season.

The Serb had mentioned in the past he would like to play into his 40s.

Asked if he still felt that way,

After obviously what happened earlier this year, hopefully I can have a decent reception there and hopefully that can help me play some good tennis

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

Djokovic was banned from entering Australia again but that decision has been reversed and the world number five is pleased he will get the chance to vie for a 10th title in Melbourne and a men's record-equalling 22nd major crown overall.

"I always ask the best from myself so let's see. Over the years I've been really fortunate to start very strong in Australia and I love playing there," Djokovic told reporters at the World Tennis League in Dubai on Friday.

"After obviously what happened earlier this year, hopefully I can have a decent reception there and hopefully that can help me play some good tennis."

The 35-year-old Djokovic was unable to compete in two of the four majors this year as his vaccination stance meant he was

Djokovic said: "I would like to play as long as I possibly can. I don't have really any number in my head. Things are progressing so far pretty well for me. I can't complain. So as long as I play at this level, as long as I have the fire, I'll keep going."

Meanwhile, world number one Iga Swiatek was happy to see herself land in the fifth spot on Forbes' annual list of the world's highest-paid female athletes. However, the 21-year-old Pole admits she hopes to expand her endorsement portfolio so her earnings aren't just dependent on her performances on court.

According to Forbes, Swiatek has made \$14.9 million over the past year, \$9.9 million of which came from tournament prize money.

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Blaise Matuidi

French World Cup winner Matuidi retires

Paris, France - Blaise Matuidi, a World Cup winner with France in 2018, said on Friday he is retiring, a year after he last played.

The 35-year-old, who started the World Cup final win over Croatia in Russia four years ago, had been omitted from Inter Miami's squad for this season.

Midfielder Matuidi won Ligue 1 with Paris Saint-Germain and Serie A with Juventus after spending time with Saint-Etienne and Toulouse.

He made 84 international appearances, scoring nine times before his final Les Bleus game in 2019.

"I've decided to end my career as a professional footballer," he said in a video on YouTube.

"I had the chance to play for the biggest European clubs, wear the France shirt, give my family a buzz, live my passion and they are images that will stay with me," he added.

He is the first member of France's 2018 squad to retire.

AFP

'One more night together': Pele's daughter shares photo with father

Sao Paulo, Brazil - Pele's daughter posted a photo of the Brazilian football legend from his hospital bed in Sao Paulo on Friday with the caption "one more night together."

In the photo, Kely Cristina Nascimento is seen hugging her 82-year-old father, with only one side of his face visible in the image. Pele is suffering from worsening cancer as well as kidney and heart problems.

"We're still here, in the fight and in the faith. One more night together," Nascimento wrote below the photo shared on Instagram around 11:00 pm local time (Saturday 0200 GMT).

On Wednesday, the Albert Einstein Hospital, where the three-time World Cup winner is staying, announced that his colon cancer was showing "progression" and he needed "more extensive care to treat kidney and heart failure."

Minutes earlier, Nascimento and Flavia Arantes, another one of Pele's daughters, had announced on Instagram that their



Kely Nascimento with Pele

father would spend Christmas at the hospital.

Last Sunday, Nascimento had posted a photo of Arantes massaging their father's left foot as he watched the World Cup final on TV.

After the match, Pele congratulated Argentine Lionel Messi for his "deserved" victory against France.

During this World Cup, Pele saw Neymar equal his international goal-scoring record for the Selecao (77).

Pele is considered by many to be the greatest footballer of all time and has received several messages of support since his hospitalisation, including from the French star Kylian Mbappe, who called on followers to "pray for the King."

Pele was hospitalised in Sao Paulo on November 29 for what his medical team called a re-evaluation of his chemotherapy treatments, which he has been receiving since having surgery to remove a colon tumour in September 2021.

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KHERSON REGIONAL MUSEUM

ART ATTACK

Ukraine museum in 'shock' after looting spree by Russian soldiers who took away valuables, including gold coins, imperial medals, furniture, and military uniforms

Shattered display cases and empty shelves highlight the extent of Russian looting at a history museum in the southern Ukrainian city of Kherson where Olga Goncharova has worked for four decades.

Since Russian forces retreated last month after an eight-month occupation, Goncharova, its acting director, has been trying to account for the damage and theft -- a process she described as 'a

stab in the heart'.

"When I saw this, it was a very scary shock," she told AFP during a tour of exhibition rooms that have been left in shambles. "I realised very sharply and vividly from this example of vandalism that the great Russian culture that they talk about doesn't exist," she said, decrying how the soldiers could have been "so cruel to the museum".

The Kherson Regional Museum is one of four cultural institutions in the city that saw widespread pillaging by Russian troops, Human Rights Watch said in a statement this week.

The others are the Kherson Regional Art Museum, St Catherine's Cathedral, and the Kherson Region National Archives.

"Kherson residents had already suffered months of torture and other abuses during the Russian occupation, and then watched their cultural and historical heritage get packed up and taken away," said Belkis Wille, HRW's crisis and conflict associate director.

"The people of Ukraine are entitled to have all the stolen objects returned, and to justice for their theft."



Everything was broken

Specialising in local history, the Kherson Regional Museum housed about 180,000 objects in its collection prior to Russia's invasion in February, and Goncharova had personally worked on preserving many of them.

"I didn't know any other job. This is my second or maybe my first home. So all the exhibits that were here have passed

through my hands," she said.

"All the photographs, all the documents, everything that was here, it was all very familiar to me. And when I came in, the feeling was unlike anything I've felt before. It was like a stab in the heart."

She ticked off a long list of items that are now gone - gold, rare coins, weapons, military medals. "Everything which was valuable, materially, they stole, kidnapped

and moved to an unknown direction," she said.

Ukrainian prosecutors suspect her predecessor, Tetiana Bratchenko, of having collaborated with Moscow's forces. She is understood to have fled to Russia as Ukrainian troops were closing in on the city.

Over the summer, Russians in civilian clothes visited the museum numerous times and used the venue to mark Russian National Flag Day in August, HRW said in its statement, citing testimony from a security guard.

In October, a larger group of around 70 people arrived and, as Russian soldiers



Empty shelves indicate the extent of the plunder which included guns and weapons, besides other valuables

stood guard, drove objects away in three trucks, HRW said.

The rights group said it had "identified at least 450 objects as missing from the glass display case labels, including Scythian gold, other gold and silver, imperial Russian medals, and coins". Other missing objects include paintings, furniture and Soviet military uniforms.

Ukrainian media has reported that pilaged items have since reappeared on display in Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula annexed by Russia in 2014.

Goncharova said it was not just the scale of the looting that disturbed her, but the reckless manner in which it was carried out.

"It was barbaric. They used crowbars to undermine everything," she said. "Everything was broken up and destroyed."

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FAMILY TRADITION

Antonio Martinez Rivas, 70, has been repairing toys for people coming to him from far off places for decades

Wearing a white lab coat, a screwdriver in hand, Antonio Martinez Rivas examines a remote-controlled car at his workshop in Madrid, a 'toy hospital' which is about to close its doors after 50 years of repairs.

His bespectacled eyes focused on the task in hand, this 70-year-old toy specialist, who will retire on December 31, is hunched over his 'operating table' just days before his workshop's last Christmas.

"Now it's me they are going to repair," he tells a customer in his gravelly voice, alluding to his ongoing battle with cancer.

Lit by a neon light and surrounded by tools and spare parts, his workbench is in the corner of a veritable Aladdin's cave with thousands of colourful toys packing shelves that reach from floor to ceiling.

Among them are dolls, teddy bears, board games, wooden horses and more, all sent in by customers from Spain, France, Britain, Portugal and even as far away as Uruguay.

"We are the only ones working on every type of toy," in Spain, said Rivas, a Madrid native who learnt from his father how to repair toys. "You don't learn this in school."

The toy's essence

Most customers are adults who are nostalgic about something they had as a child, he said, adding, "Some tell me, 'don't change it'. And if you want to put new stuffing in, they tell you to leave what's already there because that's part of the toy's essence. There are those who

TOY story

In Madrid, a 'toy hospital' marks its last Christmas as the owner craftsman bows out to take on his fight with cancer

think like that, just as there are those who talk to their dolls."

David Hinojal, 40, has come to pick up a cuddly monkey which squeaks when its tummy is squeezed.



Now it's me they are going to repair

ANTONIO MARTINEZ RIVAS

"I bought him as a present for my mother-in-law years ago and, after she died, we kept him because we're very fond of him," smiled Hinojal, who works in tourism.

Some even make the trip to Madrid just to visit Rivas' toy hospital, like Julia Fernandez and her husband, who have come from Barcelona.

"We heard the toy hospital was going to close and we thought it would be really interesting to visit it," the 60-year-old teacher told AFP.

"It's a real art and we're leaving with a

sense of nostalgia and sadness but also really glad that we were able to come," she admitted, saying she'd seen a small slide projector and a papier mache horse like ones she'd had as a child.

Learning to value toys

"To be honest, it's a real shame it's closing...because it's a way of recycling toys so you don't keep buying more," said Hinojal. For the elderly toy mender, the work is about appreciating toys.

"We need to value toys more.. If we keep on throwing them out without

rhyme nor reason, we're going to be drowning in rubbish," said Rivas, whose retirement ends a decades long family tradition.

His father opened a small shop of hand-made toys in 1945 before turning increasingly to repairs following the mass influx of plastic toys in the 1950s and 60s.

"When I came back from school when I was 12 or 13, I would finish my homework and sit with him at his workbench and learn how to do it," he said, recalling how he learnt woodwork, arts and crafts, clockmaking, mechanics and electrics.

From customers to friends

He took over the workshop from his father in the 1970s and, working alone, he had to deal with the arrival of the video games that caused interest in traditional toys to fall.

"Now they've all got tablets, mobiles or consoles," he sighs. None of his three children has shown any interest in taking up his trade and the few interns who have worked with him know that it pays nothing.

"You can be working 10 to 12 hours a day and you only earn 8 to 10 euros an hour (US\$8.50 - 10.50)," Rivas says. Even so, it's not easy to close.

"After so many years, you feel a lot of sadness (at closing) because there are so many customers who have become friends," he admits, his head bowed.

As a tribute, his friends have put up a sign behind the counter that reads, "Almost everything for sale (the boss wouldn't let us put a price tag on him)." AFP



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