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MAKING THE TIES STRONGER

Oman, Saudi Arabia establish forum, sign agreement to boost joint investments

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman and Saudi Arabia signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to promote and encourage joint investments during the launch of the Omani-Saudi Investment Forum on Monday.

The forum will introduce business opportunities in the two countries which would eventually boost investments in the sultanate and Saudi Arabia in various fields.

The MoU was signed by H E Qais al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and Eng Khalid bin Abdulaziz al Falih, Minister of Investment, Saudi Arabia.

Another MoU was signed between Oman's Fisheries Development Company and the National Aquaculture Group (NAQUA) of Saudi Arabia for the establishment of a shrimp farming project in Al Jazer in Al Wusta governorate.

H E Yousef said, "We see in

this honourable visit a serious desire to give a further push to a growing partnership in the strategic economic sectors of interest to the two countries. We are fully prepared to advance this partnership and achieve areas of integration."

Eng Falih stressed that Saudi Arabia and Oman are full of "promising investment opportunities" that provide a fertile ground to establish diversified partnerships between the Saudi and Omani business sectors, especially that the targeted investment volume under the Saudi Vision 2030 reaches 12tn Saudi riyals, "while Omani Vision 2040 is full of ambitious targets, such as increasing the foreign investment percentage to the GDP to ten per cent, and increasing the contribution of non-oil sectors to the GDP to more than 90 per cent".

Eng Redah bin Juma al Saleh, chairman, Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said that the forum and the accompanying bilateral meetings are a



The MoU was signed by H E Qais al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (right) and Eng Khalid bin Abdulaziz al Falih, Minister of Investment, Saudi Arabia

SAUDI INVESTMENT IN THE SULTANATE MAINLY FOCUSES ON TRADE, CONSTRUCTION, AND SERVICES

SAUDI IS STRATEGIC PARTNER IN

- Khazaen Economic City
- Salalah 2 IPP - Greenfield Project
- United Power Company (Manah IPP)
- Salalah Independent Water Project (IWP)
- Ibriz - Independent Power Producer (IPP)
- Such Fund for Development (SFD)

confirmation of the two countries' ambitions to launch joint Omani-Saudi projects that would contribute to economic diversification. "The chamber is ready to support the private sector and the Omani-Saudi Joint Business Council to provide all facilities, economic advice and support joint investment initiatives," he said.

According to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the two sides will continue with their joint efforts to further improve trade relations, partnership and integration in order to achieve common national goals.

The focus will be on to find investment opportunities in the targeted sectors, holding bilateral meetings between businessmen, putting forward sectoral projects of common interest and emphasising the importance of raising the level of cooperation.

H E Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, in his meeting with Eng Falih discussed areas of cooperation related to the food security and further investment opportunities between the two countries.

MoUs signed

On the sidelines of the Oman-Saudi Investment Forum, many

bilateral meetings were held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Center between representatives of the government agencies, Omani businessmen and their Saudi counterparts, which resulted in the signing of a number of agreements and memoranda of understanding between the two sides.

While one memorandum of understanding was signed to extract benefits from the Khazaen project, another one was signed to facilitate the use of services of the Saudi's 'Naqil', besides two other MoUs between the Oman Logistics Services Company and Saudi's Mandoob and Zajel.

Businessmen from Oman and Saudi Arabia attending the meetings stressed the importance of such visits, which they said would contribute to establishing commercial and investment partnerships between the two countries. Nasser Saud al Sahli, chairman, Saf Industrial Group of Saudi Arabia, said that these meetings provide opportunities and a platform for communication between businessmen to discuss commercial partnerships, "which would develop trade between the two countries, raise the volume of investment and provide partnerships between the businessmen in the two countries."



HONOURABLE LADY VISITS CRAFT CENTRE IN SALALAH

The Honourable Lady visited the Craft Training Centre of the Royal Court Affairs (RCA) in the wilayat of Salalah on Monday. She was briefed about the traditional industries, and the efforts made to preserve and develop them (RCA)

Bahrain King Hamad receives Sayyid Badr

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, was received by Bahrain King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa on Sunday at Sakhr Palace. Sayyid Badr conveyed to him the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq. The meeting was attended by Prince Salman bin Hamad al Khalifa, the Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Bahrain. The meeting was held on the occasion of the Oman's Foreign Minister's visit to the Kingdom of Bahrain to participate in the seventh meeting of the Oman-Bahraini Joint Ministerial Committee.

King Hamad took pride in the deep-rooted historical fraternal relations between Bahrain and Oman, praising bilateral cooperation at all levels. He asked the Omani minister to convey his greetings to His Majesty the Sultan and his best wishes to the Omani people of further growth.

King Hamad commended the key and constructive role of His Majesty the Sultan in boosting bilateral relations, praising the remarkable achievements witnessed by Oman under his leadership. He lauded the advanced level of the Bahraini-Omani relations and their perpetual growth thanks to common keenness to bolster them.

King Hamad praised the positive outcome of the Bahraini-Omani Joint Ministerial meeting in boosting cooperation and integration in various political, economic, commercial and cultural fields. The meeting also cast light on regional issues of common concern.

"Honoured to convey the greetings of His Majesty the Sultan to King Hamad bin Isa al



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi (left) was received by Bahrain King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa on Sunday at Sakhr Palace (ONA)

Honoured to convey the greetings of His Majesty the Sultan to King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa and to the Crown Prince. Relations are expanding

SAYYID BADR BIN HAMAD AL BUSAIDI

Khalifa and to the Crown Prince. Relations are expanding. Wonderful to co-chair our Joint Committee with Foreign Minister Dr Abdullah bin Rashid al Zayan," Sayyid Badr tweeted.

The Omani Foreign Minister expressed thanks and respect to King Hamad for the gracious welcome and hospitality, commending his efforts to promote bilateral fraternal ties. He stressed strong and growing relations between both countries thanks to the leaderships' support and keenness to promote bilateral cooperation and serve common interests.

Three MoUs signed

The seventh meeting of the Omani-Bahraini Joint Ministerial Committee was held on Sunday in Manama under the chairmanship of Dr Abdullah bin Rashid al Zayani, Bahraini Minister of

Foreign Affairs and Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister of Oman.

Dr Zayani highlighted in his speech the strong historic relations between Bahrain and Oman and their growth thanks to the support of King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa and His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq.

The two ministers signed three memoranda of understanding. An MoU was signed between the Mohammed bin Mubarak al Khalifa Academy for Diplomatic Studies and the Diplomatic Institute in the field of diplomatic studies, research and training.

An MoU for cooperation in the fields of electricity and renewable energy and an MoU between the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Tourism in Bahrain and the Consumer Protection Authority in the field of consumer protection were also signed.

OTaxi offers free rides to vaccination centre

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The popular ride-hailing app OTaxi has started a novel idea in support of the national vaccination drive. People in need of free ride to the vaccination centre in Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre can book one from the OTaxi app from Sept 1.

OTaxi company said, 'In an effort to confront the coronavirus, we are pleased to announce that OTaxi will provide



free trips to the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre to get the vaccine, starting from September 1.'

'To get the free service use the code: VACCINE21.'

"It is a very expensive step for us but we want to make a difference in supporting the ongoing vaccination drive, which will help us in fighting the pandemic," said Harith al Maqbali, CEO of OTaxi.

Earlier in the month, OTaxi became the first company to be granted a licence to offer taxi services in private cars in Musandam governorate.

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology issued a notice

on the decision taken with the objective of improving public transport, stimulating tourism and boosting commercial activities in Musandam.

Maqbali earlier revealed that the company has been permitted to offer its ride-hailing service in private cars in Masirah and Halaniyat Islands, too. "We intend to launch services there in 2022." The company currently has 1,800 active drivers in the sultanate, spread across all major cities.

Ibri Industrial City suited for Saudi investments: Madayn



Muscat - Eng Khalid bin Abdulaziz al Falih, Investment Minister of Saudi Arabia, accompanied by a delegation, visited the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates - Madayn at its headquarters in the Knowledge Oasis Muscat on Monday.

Welcoming the delegation, H E Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Undersecretary for Commerce and Industry in the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and chairman of Madayn's Board of Directors, emphasised on the robust bilateral ties between the sultanate and Saudi Arabia and the significance of economic integration and trade relations.

H E Masan encouraged Saudi investors and businessmen to



set up businesses in Ibri Industrial City, which is strategically located on the road leading to the new border between Oman and Saudi Arabia. "Ibri Industrial City will offer significant opportunities to Saudi industries targeting the Omani market and vice versa, and shall feature a variety of industries, most notably the logistics industry," he said.

Talking about the Madayn, H E Masan said that the cities under its umbrella boast of run-

Ibri Industrial City will offer significant opportunities to Saudi industries targeting the Omani market and vice versa, and shall feature a variety of industries, most notably the logistics industry

H E SALEH BIN SAID MASAN

ning 2,200 projects over a total area of 140mn sqm with a workforce of over 62,000.

"The total investment volume has reached RO6.8bn in the various industrial cities where the manufacturing industries represent the majority of the total investments, as they constitute approximately 83 per cent of the total investments."

Last year's industrial survey on the existing industries within the industrial cities shows that

the value of raw materials used in production exceeded RO1bn and the imported raw materials constituted more than 71 per cent. This shall act as an incentive for the Saudi cluster industries to expand in the sultanate's industrial cities, Madayn said in a statement.

Moreover, the value of products by factories and projects based in the industrial cities exceeded RO3.7bn during 2020, with exports from these amount-

ing to more than 73 per cent.

The high-profile Saudi delegation also got acquainted with Oman's first tech park and Madayn's technology arm - the Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM). The KOM is home to over 190 local, regional and global companies, institutions and organisations ranging from flourishing home-grown SMEs and leading higher education providers to thriving businesses capitalising on the KOM's well-established reputation as a centre of excellence and opportunity.

Eng Falih and the accompanying delegation later visited Areej Vegetable Oils and Derivatives, Oman Fiber Optic, and Oman Cables Industry at Rusayl Industrial City.

Amnesty scheme extended till Sept 30

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) on Monday announced the extension of amnesty scheme for those who wish to exit the country due to their expired work permits until September 30.

In a statement, the MoL said that through the scheme, expatriate workers whose work permits have expired can leave the country without paying any fines.

The scheme was first announced on November 15, 2020, with validity till December 31. That was extended till March 31, 2021, then to June 30 and further to August 31. Finally now, it is extended till September 30.

This period allows all undocumented workers to leave the country without any fine or legal implications. The ministry has urged all who have not exited the country to avail the window of opportunity offered now.

ROP, banks issue alerts against scammers

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) and local banks have further enhanced issuing alerts to citizens and residents to protect themselves from scammers and to refrain from sharing their personal data including bank details.

ROP urged the public to ignore calls or messages claiming to be from a bank or a communication company saying that 'you have won a prize in cash, in kind' or offering a financial help.

'Ignore all social media calls and messages claiming to be from a communication company, a bank or a famous person requesting your personal data, PIN number and telling you that you have won a prize,'

the ROP statement said.

Banks too have been sending warnings to people.

'Dear customer, the bank will never ask you for PIN, OTP, CVV, card number, account details or password over phone, SMS, WhatsApp or through a web link. Never share your banking details with anyone, and do not respond by calling unknown numbers. Whenever required, kindly call only Bank Muscat Contact Centre numbers,' an SMS from Bank Muscat stated.

HSBC Oman has also issued a similar statement. 'Dear customer, please be aware of phishing attacks by phone calls, email or SMS. Be assured that HSBC will never ask for your personal credentials. Avoid disclosing your banking details to anyone.'

I wear a mask for your safety...

“

We are all living in different circumstances from the start of the pandemic. Wearing a mask is becoming a norm nowadays. The more people maintain wearing masks, the fewer cases there will be. I look forward to our previous healthy and productive lifestyle.

Michael Kuhn

Cluster General Manager,
Park Inn by Radisson Muscat and
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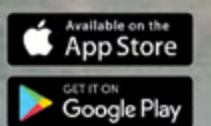
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COVID-19 vaccine QR code to end forgery

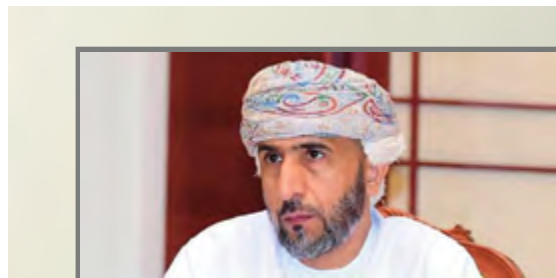
Shaddad al Musalmay
Muscat

Seeking entry to Oman through fake COVID-19 tests or by forging vaccination certificates may become a thing of the past as it is going to get a lot more difficult with the government introducing provisions such as a QR code to verify a certificate.

Starting from September 1, travellers coming to Oman need to carry a vaccination certificate containing a QR code stating that they have received two doses of an approved COVID-19 vaccination.

According to the decision issued by the Supreme Committee for COVID-19, passengers travelling with negative COVID-19 certificates should also have QR codes.

"QR code helps to verify the certificates and help in detecting forgery," said Dr Saif bin Salim al Abri, director general of disease surveillance and control at Ministry of Health.



QR code helps to verify the certificates and in detecting forgery. In the past, many countries detected forgery in the test and certificates

DR SAIF BIN SALIM AL ABRI



istry of Health.

"Many countries have adopted QR code system and the World Tourism Organization has introduced a link for countries to check the tests and certificates verified through the QR. In the past, many countries detected forgery in the test and cer-

tificates," Dr Abri said.

However, experts feel it may not be 100 per cent secure.

"Unless there is a system or platform that can validate not just national vaccine reports or certificates but an international one as well, I doubt it would be 100 per cent safe to confirm if it

is authentic, because creating a fake QR code is not difficult, and the need to have government's support for validating information presented by a traveller is paramount for it to succeed," said Tariq al Barwani, an IT expert in Oman.

"This would require every

government around the world to work with each other to facilitate and provide some kind of central system that stores all these data for validation.

"Unless this information can be validated through a central system that stores all the countries' vaccination reports to-

Airport entries only for vaccinated people: OA

Muscat - Oman Airports (OA) on Monday said that the entry to all airports in the sultanate will be restricted to only vaccinated people starting from September 1.

This is part of the decision of the Supreme Committee to impose mandatory vaccination for both citizens and residents to enter public places including government institu-

tions, shopping malls, and restaurants.

"We would like to inform that the access to Omani airports will be restricted only to the vaccinated people. This decision shall be effective from Wednesday, September 1, 2021, and will include all Oman airport users and strategic stakeholders," Oman Airports said in a statement.

gether, it is not 100 per cent safe," he added.

On how QR code works, Barwani said, "Every traveller's vaccine certificate will contain a QR code which would identify whether they have been vaccinated or not. The QR code will contain information (but not

limited to) items such as name, age, ID number, photo, dosage number, nationality, dates, etc that identifies the person in question."

From September 1, two doses of vaccine will be prerequisite to enter Oman.

✉@shadadm

ITALIAN CHIEF OF DEFENCE ARRIVES IN OMAN



Vice Admiral Abdullah Khamis al Ra'eesi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces, talks with Gen Enzo Vecciarelli, Chief of Defence of the Italian Republic, at Seeb Air Base on Monday. Gen Vecciarelli arrived in Muscat along with a delegation on an official visit earlier in the day (ONA)

Pact signed to establish two fish markets in Bahla, Yanqul



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources signed a contract to establish two fish markets in the wilayats of Yanqul and Bahla with a local company funded by the Petroleum Development Oman (PDO).

The contract, which aims to develop the system of marketing fish products in Oman, was signed by H E Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of

Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, and Eng Mohammed bin Ahmed al Gharibi, director of external affairs and communications at PDO.

The two markets will be established on an area of around 1,300sqm each. They will include 24 fresh fish display tables, 12 fresh fish cutting tables, an ice production unit, a cold storage, stores and administrative offices for market employees, a café, toilets for men and women, a fish loading and unloading platform, among other features.

The establishment of the two markets comes in support of the efforts exerted and the continuous interest of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources to promote and upgrade the fish marketing and investment infrastructure in the sultanate. This is based on the government's keenness on the importance of developing the fisheries sector and bolstering the economy.

PDO will directly supervise the stages of establishing and implementing the two markets.

MoL launches Miran platform to boost online training

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To align with international standards and with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, the Ministry of Labour (MoL) on Monday launched Miran platform for blended learning. The platform will provide people with training material online along with traditional education.

Launched under the patronage of H E Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Ba'owain, Minister of Labour, the event showcased how Miran platform comes with four players - the trainer, the trainee, and the training institution, in addition to the ministry's employees.

The Miran platform promotes blended learning approach through which trainees receive the training material electronically so as to raise the level of productivity of individuals to meet the labour market needs, in addition to traditional education



in the classroom.

H E Sayyid Salim bin Musalam al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Human Resources Development in the Ministry of Labour, delivered a speech in which he said, "With an unrelenting will and determination towards placing our country on par with developed countries, the Ministry of Labour has always been trans-

lating words into actions, and today we are launching the Miran platform, which is the result of tremendous efforts made by our colleagues."

"The Miran platform comes as a wonderful response to our era of speed, uncertainty, permanent change and challenge while responding to the increasing demands of the society. It seeks to

strengthen the Omani knowledge and skills required to perform their jobs, and at the same time enable them to adapt to the rapid changes in the labour market and increase productivity," he added.

H E Busaidi said Oman Vision 2040 represents the dream of the future, as all its pillars are eager to push Oman towards economic diversification and focus on building national capacities, by finding innovative systems and solutions to provide young people with the skills of technical and vocational education and training required for the renewed labour market.

The Miran platform will work in partnership with the private sector in providing training opportunities coupled with employment. It will also receive and review applications, visit institutions and training institutes to ensure quality, and start the procedures for approving training applications.

MoH meeting for assessment of individual performance, institutional proficiency held

Muscat - The Ministry of Health (MoH) in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour (MoL) on Monday held the first briefing on the System for Measuring Individual Performance and Institutional Proficiency.

The event was attended by the Minister of Health, a number of undersecretaries, in addition to the ministry's directors general, and the governorates' sub-teams.

According to an MoH statement, the meeting reviewed the overall System for Measuring Individual Performance and Institutional Proficiency framework and its relation to the Oman Vision 2040. It further outlined the system implementation mecha-



nism, methods of developing individual plans following methodology of objectives and main outcomes.

A simulation of the system was presented by the MoL for training prior to its official launching. The objectives form consists of employee main infor-

mation, objectives, and outcomes.

"It should be noted that the system has been accorded His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's full attention and support as it aims at developing human resources system by building a culture of proficiency in job per-

formance, improving the system for performance appraisals, linking productivity with incentives thus raising employees' performance and productivity," added the statement.

The Ministry of Health is planning to activate the system during January next year.

COVID-19 ebbing; cases down by 25%, deaths decrease by 32%: MoH

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The number of new COVID-19 cases in Oman has remained below 200 for over a fortnight, hinting at the flattening of the COVID-19 curve.

On Monday, the Ministry of Health (MoH) reported 107

new cases, while seven people succumbed to the infection in 24 hours.

According to OmanVS-Covid19 - the official twitter handle for the MoH for countering COVID-19 - the number of cases went down by 25 per cent, while deaths decreased by 32 per cent over a period of

seven days from August 22 to August 28. The number of hospitalisations over the same period came down by 25 per cent, while those in ICU declined by 33 per cent.

With this, recoveries in the week went up 77 per cent. Vaccination also rose five per cent in the week.

With 107 new cases on Monday and seven related deaths, the total number of cases registered in the sultanate has now reached 302,239, including 4,063 deaths.

Eleven patients were admitted to hospitals across the country in the last 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients to

122 including 57 in intensive care units. With the addition of 189 recoveries, the total went up to 291,721, while the current recovery rate is 96.5 per cent, the MoH statement said.

2.5mn vaccinated

The total number of people vaccinated with COVID-19 vac-

cines in Oman till August 29 reached 2,504,214, covering 71 per cent of the target.

Those vaccinated with the first dose reached 1,256,008, representing 36 per cent of the target, while those vaccinated with two doses were 1,248,206, or 35 per cent of the target.

The Ministry of Health

(MoH) is continuing the vaccination campaign for the target groups in all governorates. 'On Monday, immunisation centres all over the sultanate witnessed a large turnout, which confirms the great societal awareness about the importance of immunisation against COVID-19,' the MoH stated.

ODB grants loans worth RO26mn in first half of 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Development Bank (ODB) granted total 2,521 development loans worth RO26mn during the first half of this year, an increase of 45 per cent in the number of loans compared to the same period of last year.

In a statement to Oman News Agency, ODB said it has strengthened lending activity to professional and public services sector as the value of loans granted to this sector exceeded RO11.2mn distributed in 586 development loans.

The bank continued its interest in fisheries sector which ranked second in terms of value of financing that amounts to about RO6mn. Fisheries is the largest sector in terms of the number of loans given during the first half of 2021 with a total 960 development loans.

ODB also funded setting up and developing projects in industrial areas and various governorates across the sultanate. The number of projects funded during the first half of 2021 stood at 473 with a total value of RO3mn.

Although the tourism sector has taken the brunt of the pandemic, ODB continued to finance this sector, especially those existing and profitable projects. The bank approved 114 tourism loans, with a total value of up to RO2.6mn.

ODB also increased its lending activity to the agricultural and livestock sector by providing 315 development loans during the first half of 2021 with a total value of nearly RO2mn.

ODB said it is pressing ahead to support the logistics and mining sectors and other promising economic sectors by offering diverse incentives.

Oman's property market shows strong signs of rebounding

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sales activity in Oman's property market has rebounded strongly this year following the pandemic-induced sluggishness in the previous year.

Latest statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) showed signs of a strong rebound in the sultanate's real-estate market in July.

Total value of traded property in Oman grew 28.8 per cent to RO1.560bn during the January-July period of 2021 from RO1.211bn in the same period of 2020, signalling the sector's resilience amid easing pandemic restrictions. Real-estate transactions this year have rebounded to the pre-pandemic levels.

Of total traded value of property in Oman, traded value of sales contracts surged by more than 55 per cent to RO687mn in the first seven months of 2021 compared with RO442.9mn in the same period a year ago, the NCSI data showed.

Figures revealed that the number of sales contracts jumped by 84 per cent to 49,443 this year from 26,878 in the first seven months of 2020.

With the sharp rise in number of property transactions, mortgage activity in the sultanate also rebounded sharply in recent months.

Traded value of mortgage contracts rose by nearly 20 per cent to RO860.7mn during the January-July period against



NCSI figures reveal that the traded value of property in Oman grew 28.8 per cent to RO1.560bn during the January-July period of 2021 from RO1.211bn in the same period of 2020

RO719.8mn in the corresponding period of last year.

Number of executed mortgage contracts jumped 58.6 per

cent to 10,634 contracts in the first seven months of this year from 6,706 in the same period of last year.

Savills, the leading global real-estate advisory firm, in a latest report highlighted that Oman's real-estate market is in a significantly improved position in comparison to this time last year, but headwinds remain for the sector. It stressed that opportunities for successful development will need to be well considered and clearly focused on evident market gaps, opportunities and needs.

Total number of properties issued in the sultanate reached 144,670 at the end of July 2021, a robust growth of over 55 per

cent from 92,929 properties issued a year ago, according to the NCSI.

Properties issued for the citizens of GCC countries in Oman increased to 386 this year compared to 220 during the January-July period of 2020.

According to a report released by Kamco Investment, residential real-estate prices in the GCC countries may have bottomed and total value of transactions for the year 2021 is on course to eclipse 2019 levels.

In the first half of 2021, total value of real-estate transactions in the GCC reached US\$64.9bn and have approached within 26 per cent and 32 per cent of the full year figures of 2020

(US\$90.5bn) and 2019 (US\$96.5bn), respectively, according to the report.

'The higher transaction activity year-on-year in the first half of 2021 was largely due to opportunistic buying of bargain-priced properties, as property prices reached multi-year lows from the impact of COVID-19 in early 2020,' Kamco Investment said.

Moreover, it said, a higher average value per transaction was achieved in the first half of 2021 for key GCC markets, when compared to pre-pandemic levels of the first half of 2019, pointing towards the investment appetite for attractively priced real estate.

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MSX index edges up amid weak trading

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) was marginally up 0.1 per cent to close at 3,969.91 points on Monday. Trading activity on Monday remained weak compared to the previous session.

While turnover declined 17.34 per cent to RO2.35mn, volumes rose 0.9 per cent to 18.64mn shares.

All sub-indices closed in green territory led by Financial index which rose 0.26 per cent. Industrial index climbed 0.19 per cent and Services index rose 0.1 per cent. The MSX Shariah index closed down by 0.17 per cent at 592.51 points.

Market breadth remained positive as 18 companies closed up, while eight companies closed down. The rest 23 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Top gainers were National Aluminium Products Company (7.63 per cent), Takaful Oman (5.21 per cent), Oman Investment & Finance Co (3.18 per cent), Global Financial Investments Holding



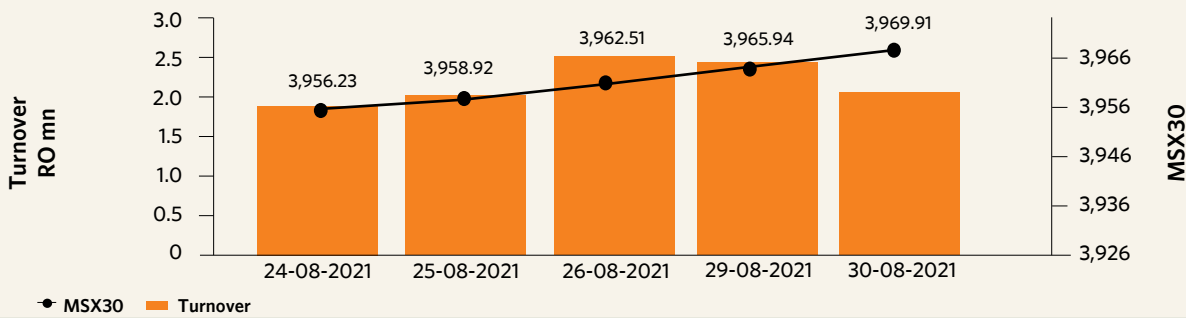
(2.94 per cent) and National Gas (2.86 per cent).

Top losers were Oman Education & Training Investment (-6.62 per cent), Gulf International Chemicals (-6.14 per

cent), Muscat City Desalination Company (-2.38 per cent), Sembcorp Salalah

(-1.22 per cent) and National Life and General Insurance Company (-1.07 per cent).

MSX INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



India's Airtel plans \$2.86bn rights issue

New Delhi, India - India's telecom giant Bharti Airtel said on Sunday it plans to raise ₹210bn (US\$2.86bn) by selling shares to existing shareholders ahead of the rollout of its 5G network.

'The board of directors... comprehensively reviewed the industry scenario, business environment, financial/business strategy of the company and approved the company's plan to raise further capital,' the telco said in a notice to the stock exchange. The shares will be priced at ₹535 each, Bharti Airtel said.

Sunil Mittal, chairman of Bharti Airtel, and other founding members of the company would take part in the issue, the firm said. 'In addition, they will also subscribe to any unsubscribed shares in the issue,' it added.

India's Communications Ministry in May authorised trials of the super-fast 5G wireless technology. The trials are being conducted by Airtel and other telecom service providers Reliance JioInfoComm, Vodafone Idea and MTNL.

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France's COVID relief spending hits €240bn

Paris, France - The French government has extended €240bn in financial aid to businesses hammered by the coronavirus pandemic since March 2020, mainly in the form of state-guaranteed loans, Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire announced on Monday.

President Emmanuel Macron vowed to protect French companies and their employees 'whatever the cost' after many were forced to close during three nationwide lockdowns since the outbreak began.

"The bill for 'whatever the cost' stands at €80bn in subsidies, and €160bn in loans," Le Maire told France Inter radio.

The aid will now be limited to only the hardest-hit sectors such as tourism and leisure, whose representatives were set to meet with Le Maire and other officials later on Monday.

The government expects economic growth to hit 6 per cent



Bruno Le Maire

this year after France and other countries plunged into recession last year.

France's recovery 'is going to continue', Le Maire said, in large part thanks to higher consumer spending that is helping the economy operate 'at 99 per cent of its capacities'.

He added that the number of requests for the state-backed emergency loans fell to just 50,000 in July, compared with 500,000 last May.

Even businesses impacted by the requirement of a 'health pass' for clients that proves COVID-19 vaccination or a recent negative test, such as restaurants, museums and cinemas, saw only a temporary drop in activity, Le Maire said.

Starting this week, companies will have to ensure that all employees in contact with the public also have the health pass, as France tries to encourage vaccine holdouts to get the job.

So far nearly 72 per cent of the population has received at least one dose - one of the highest rates among Western countries - while 43mn people (64 per cent) have been fully vaccinated, according to the Health Ministry.

AFP

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

China Petroleum Pipeline Engineering Company Limited Oman Branch (CPP), as an EPC Contractor, invites companies to participate in the following tender:

Estimated Scope Description	Tender Documents Fee
Road construction, Cable Trench Excavation and Backfilling. It mainly includes 5.1km road construction (width is 4m), 5.1km cable trench (1M*0.5M*0.7M) excavation and backfilling. The approx. quantity of road construction is around 13000m3 cut volume and 11200m3 fill volume. The approx. quantity of cable trench excavation and backfilling is around 3500m3.	Free

Legal entities, domestic Omani and foreign companies who meet the following minimum qualification criteria are eligible to quote in Tender:

- Priority to Oman local companies, or local agent appointed by foreign companies,
- Capability to submit a performance bond of ten percent of total value.
- Complying with the CPP's project execution schedule.
- ISO 14001 and OHSAS18001 in valid period are mandatory.
- Having direct experience of similar jobs in the last five years.
- Agree to complete the further prequalification undertaken by CPP.

All interested bidders shall submit a written application letter printed on Bidder's letter head signed by the Bidder's authorized Person to cppomaned@cppmde.com, contractcppoman@cppe.ae over a period before **7th September, 2021** stating the following details: Full name of Bidder, phone number, e-mail address, contact person, tender name and tender title. Any application received after **7th September, 2021** shall not be entertained.

The ITB documents will be issued via email by CPP later. The bidders shall bear all cost arising from or incidental to the preparation, clarification, finalization and delivery of their bid proposal.

CPP is not obliged to accept the bid with least prices or any other bids. CPP reserves the right to accept or reject any bid, and to annul the bidding process and reject all bids, at any time prior to award of contract, without thereby incurring any liability to the affected bidder or bidders or; any obligations to inform the affected bidder or bidders of the ground for the CPP's action.

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Own new BMW, MINI with Sohar International's offer

Committed to providing customers with offers, products and services that match their lifestyle, Sohar International recently entered into a strategic alliance with Al Jenaibi International Automobiles - the exclusive importer and distributor of the luxury brand BMW, MINI and Rolls Royce.

This partnership enables Sohar International and Al Jenaibi customers to avail competitive auto finance interest rates starting from zero per cent when purchasing their new BMW or MINI vehicle.

The partnership was signed by Khalil Salim al Hedaifi, chief retail banking officer, Sohar International and Rachid Zamani, managing director, Al Jenaibi International Automobiles, at the bank's headquarters located in Shatti al Qurm, bringing together two premium market leaders who echo the same values of customer-centricity and adhere to industry best practices while focusing on superior offerings to customers.

"A bank that is revered for its differentiated product offerings, Sohar International has remained steadfast in its commitment to devising innovative value-added services for customers. Being



able to form strong strategic alliances with market leaders has been a key driver of our success. We also understand that our premium customers need premium products and we are thus delighted to join hands with a market leader like Al Jenaibi International Automobiles," said Khalil Salim al Hedaifi, chief retail banking officer of Sohar International.

"In a collaborative approach

like this, it is vital that both brands not only share similar principles of doing business but also reflect the same underlying goals and values. Unifying our efforts is our unrelenting pursuit of creating unique offers that are a class apart while keeping in mind the best interests of customers.

"At Sohar International, we not only guarantee our customers a range of exclusive product offerings but also focus

on making the entire banking experience a pleasurable one."

Sohar International's new auto financing scheme with Al Jenaibi International Automobiles will also carry with it the same benefits of the bank's existing auto loan facilities.

With minimal paperwork, quick approvals and flexible repayment options, Sohar International customers can now also make the most of its competitive

financing options on all BMW and MINI cars. All of the bank's loan service details are available across its digital banking channels including the new, enhanced mobile app.

Commenting on the partnership, Rachid Zamani, managing director of Al Jenaibi International Automobiles said, "By providing competitive auto finance opportunities to our customers, we want to ensure their journey of procuring their desired BMW or MINI is as convenient, quick and hassle-free as possible. Joining hands with a reputable financial institution that upholds industry best practices and truly understands the norms of catering to an elite clientele will complement our efforts in providing this best-in-class product."

Over the years, Sohar International has created a winning relationship with its customers which has helped the bank acquire a deeper understanding of their requirements.

This understanding, when paired with its inherent perceptiveness and necessary foresight, helps the bank stay abreast of changing market trends, seize opportunities for growth and create meaningful offerings that add value to its customers' lives.

Unlock more data than ever before with Ooredoo

There's nothing better than Internet, apart from More Internet! Ooredoo is giving customers plenty with up to 4 GB of bonus data absolutely free when recharging their More Internet plans for RO2, RO5 or RO10. Valid until September 24, it's just one of many benefits associated with Ooredoo's popular prepaid plans that provide the perfect mix of flexibility, great value, simplicity and most of all, convenience.

Unlocking free data is as easy as recharging. Customers opting for the RO2 recharge will get 1 GB data valid for 10 days and an extra 0.5 GB for five days. Stepping it up a notch, the RO5 recharge comes with 3 GB data for 30 days plus 3 GB free, valid for five days. Or, go all out with



the RO10 recharge, which includes 12 GB of data for 30 days and 4 GB of bonus data for five days.

Ooredoo's monthly prepaid plans offer a fantastic digital experience and a variety of voice, internet and digital add-ons. To subscribe to the offer, log in to the Ooredoo App, visit any Ooredoo store or dealer, or simply dial *115*3* with a recharge card.



Etisalat, GMIS partner for 5G development

The Global Manufacturing and Industrialisation Summit (GMIS) and Etisalat have announced a partnership to accelerate the deployment of the fifth generation of wireless networks (5G) to promote digital transformation both in the United Arab Emirates and globally.

As a strategic partner to the Global Manufacturing and Industrialisation Summit, Etisalat will share best practices from its experience in rolling 5G communication networks and offering advanced technology solutions to businesses and governments. This strategic partnership will benefit from Etisalat's expertise in 5G and accelerating digital transformation in all sectors while enhancing operational efficiency. Etisalat was the first to launch 5G network in the UAE and the region, and contributed to UAE's capital being ranked among the top 3 fastest 5G capitals worldwide.

Dr Ahmed bin Ali, group senior vice president, Corporate Communications, Etisalat, said, "Digital technology and 5G networks generate enormous economic

and social value, and they can digitally transform every aspect of industrial operation - from production to service delivery. Through its strategy of 'Driving the digital future to empower societies', Etisalat is committed to developing cutting-edge digital communication infrastructure to build more resilient societies and sustainable industries with more than four decades of its digital experience across industries. We are proud to partner with an international platform like GMIS and support the expansion of the UAE's fast-growing and diversified industrial landscape."

Badr al Olama, head of the GMIS Organising Committee said, "The industrial world is at the forefront of an unprecedented digital transformation as organisations transition to the next generation of networks and technology systems. Digital solutions and 5G is at the very centre of this transformation. We are delighted to welcome Etisalat as a #GMIS2021 strategic partner and as a leading player in digital transformation providing the latest solutions and services."

Dhofar Wind project achieves power generation record

The Rural Areas Electricity Company 'Tanweer' - a member of Nama Group- announced a new highest generation level at Dhofar Wind project exceeding 30 gigawatt-hours (GWh) in July, the highest since the wind farm commenced commercial operation in November 2019.

The plant, Oman's first wind-based power project and one of the most prominent renewable energy projects, managed to reach this level of power generation at an average wind speed of 12.6 meters per second (m/s).

On this occasion, Ahmed Said al Harthy, Tanweer acting CEO, said, "Tanweer seeks to develop and implement studies to support economic diversification plans, promote sustainable energy, and achieve optimal energy use by focusing on renewable energy projects in the company's concession areas."

"Dhofar Wind Power Plant is part of the electricity transmission grid in the province and supplies customers with more than



190 GWh of clean electricity," he added.

The wind farm has a generation capacity of 50 MW with 13 wind turbines, each turbine with a production capacity of 3.8 MW. The generated electricity is transmitted via high voltage lines (132 kV) connected to the main grid in the Governorate of Dhofar

to supply the customers connected to it.

Harthy added that Dhofar Wind Power Plant is only one component of the greater good Tanweer seeks. The company concentrates on strengthening the electricity system in its concession area in the governorates, in line with its relentless

efforts to develop and safely operate its grid.

Celebrating this achievement comes as an important milestone in achieving the company's vision, which aims to produce at least 20 per cent of electricity from renewable energy sources by 2025, thus supporting the sultanate's efforts to reach 30 per

cent of clean electricity production by 2030.

Tanweer's projects to reach this end include inaugurating a solar power plant in the wilayat of Al Mazyona in the Dhofar governorate in 2015 on 8000sqm and an annual production capacity of 550-MWH. Al Mazyona Solar Power Plant is the first commercial project to produce electricity using renewable energy in Oman. In addition, it promotes the use of clean, renewable energy through its contribution to reducing 433 tons of carbon dioxide emissions annually.

Tanweer is also implementing and overlooking several renewable energy projects in the sultanate, especially schools located in the company's concession areas. Including four solar-powered schools.

The company's efforts did not go unnoticed. Dhofar Wind won the 'Wind Power Project of the Year' award at the Asian Power Awards in 2019.

Expo 2020 Dubai plates up gastronomical journeys with bespoke F&B concepts

From culture-packed cafes to grab-and-go dining and plant-powered cuisine, the eateries at Expo 2020 Dubai's three signature pavilions, Opportunity, Mobility and Sustainability, will give visitors a delicious taste of its subthemes.

Terra - The Sustainability Pavilion, is home a number of plant-based eateries, such as Floozie Cookie, serving up 100 per cent vegan cookies, baked on-site daily and bursting with a variety of plant-powered sauces, such as date caramel, speculoos cream, and dark chocolate ganache.

At Terra, diners will also find Veg'd, an all-day vegan restaurant by celebrity plant-based chef Matthew Kenney. With a vision to create beautiful, sustainable and nutritious plant-based dishes, Kenney employs innovative techniques and creative thinking to prepare minimally processed meals that are vibrant



and wholesome.

XYST, on Terra's first floor, brings Kenney's plant-based approach to Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cuisine, using artistic licence to create vibrant,

playful adaptations of traditional cultural dishes, while Mudra is a beautiful rooftop bar featuring DJs, an exciting cocktail menu and plant-based cuisine, with amazing views over the

Expo site.

Meanwhile, in Mission Possible - The Opportunity Pavilion, the focus is on taste education and interaction between food producers. In line with the sub-



theme of Opportunity's message to unlock the potential within individuals and communities, Canvas by Coffee Culture, co-founded by Stephan Bhoyroo and Abdulla Ibrahim Suhail, is an

Emirati coffee roastery designed to welcome Dubai's ever-evolving creative community who seek a space in which to work, meet, design and create.

The bespoke coffee/co-work-

ing space is filled with a culture programme to enrich the experience of community members, in minimalist industrial surroundings.

In Alif - The Mobility Pavilion, Alif Cafe by farm2table, brought to Expo by Abu Dhabi-based chef Jessica Queitsch, is a casual sit-down eatery that also offers a grab-and-go service.

An ode to movement and connection, its gastronomical options shine a light on the heritage of key ingredients, such as coffee, rice, pasta and spices, showing how they have travelled throughout the silk route, influencing cuisine worldwide.

Food is one of the best ways to discover a different culture, and with a smorgasbord of 200-plus outlets, Expo 2020 is inviting visitors from across the globe to broaden their horizons and join the making of a new world as they explore an array of cultural and artistic attractions.

Nikai launches first WebOS TV in region

Nikai electronics, one of the fastest growing electronic and home appliances brand in the Middle East, Africa and Asia has officially unveiled the first WebOS TV in the UAE, equipped with original licensed version of apps like Amazon, Netflix, YouTube, Shahid apart from tonnes of others that are downloadable from the LG webstore!

This makes Nikai one of the first private label brands in the region to introduce the WebOS TV across the GCC Markets. The new Nikai range of 4K UHD TV comes equipped with the kernel based webOS operating system originally owned by LG.

The LED's have been given a new facelift in terms of design by being more minimalistic and include a ribbon-like customizable launch bar at the bottom of the screen. The system gives view-

ers the access to all apps, settings, and other features of the TV in one go.

Unlike the regular Android TV's, where customers need to close an app and go to the home screen to open another one, the launch bar on Nikai's WebOS TVs can be used to toggle between screens without exiting an app that is already open.

Arun Pal, vice president - Sales at Nikai commented, "We strive to provide our customers with the most advanced technology in order to deliver unrivaled viewing experiences and cutting-edge designs that complement their everyday lives.

"We are pleased to offer an enhanced viewing experience to our customers in the region. In the TV world, consumers have the choice of LED's that are largely dominated by Android



TVs. Adding WebOS TV to our product portfolio provides our customers with a choice of a well-proven TV operating sys-

tems. We are proud to have been one of the first brands to have offered this product in 2021."

Intuitive and simple, the inter-

face of the WebOS is what makes it stand out from the rest. The latest WebOS TV by Nikai comes with 2 remote control de-

vices with the additional one being a magic remote, making navigation much easier with its point and click functionality.

The pointer moves on the screen as you move the remote just like you would use a mouse on a PC. This makes it much easier to type text on Nikai TV.

Chandan Sethi, country head, Oman Nikai said, "The latest launch underlines Nikai's commitment to constant improvement and delivering superiority in terms of latest technologies to new-age users. The brand, since its inception, has continued to innovate operations and surprise customers with superior product offerings that come packed with stunning features at affordable prices."

"This launch will also bolster the brand's leadership stance in the UAE and wider region, while

giving customers more reasons to prefer Nikai over other brands when they think of Smart TV viewing."

The latest LED TV from Nikai comes with frameless design and metal stand and is available in a wide range of sizes starting from 50" UHD Smart, 55" UHD SMART, 58" UHD Smart, 65" UHD Smart, 75" UHD Smart. For maximum viewing experience, the TV boasts of a quad core processor, HDR for that perfect imaging and viewing experience and Dolby Atmos for the exquisite sound apart from offering 1.5 GB RAM and 8 GB ROM.

The latest television will be available at Independent Retail Showrooms and Carrefour & Extra Hypermarkets. The product will also be available through the company's network in KSA and other GCC countries shortly.

UAEREP begins innovative project proposal evaluation

The UAE Research Program for Rain Enhancement Science (UAEREP), managed by the National Center of Meteorology (NCM), announced that it has commenced the evaluation of the shortlisted innovative project proposals received for the program's fourth cycle. The researchers who presented these proposals were invited to prepare and submit their full proposals no later than midnight August 26 Following a month-long evaluation of full proposals, the international technical review committee will virtually convene from October 3 to 4 to select the fourth cycle awardees.

The shortlisted proposals cover various areas of research including cloud microphysics, cloud seeding assessment, new seeding materials, droplet charge measurement, cloud seeding prediction support using artificial intelligence techniques for accurate weather forecasting that supports cloud-seeding operations.

Dr Abdulla al Mandous, director general of NCM and president of the Regional Association II (Asia) of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said, "The evaluation of project proposals received for the programme's fourth cycle marks a key step in NCM's continued efforts to promote scientific collaboration in rain enhancement research in line with the directives of our wise leadership. We are confident that the shortlisted projects for the programme's fourth cycle grant will provide important knowledge and scientific propositions to this vital research area, while delivering a profound impact on the global efforts to address water scarcity."

The shortlist was finalised fol-

lowing a month-long evaluation process that culminated in the meeting of the international technical review committee virtually from May 17 to 19 to reach agreement on the final shortlist of successful applicants.

The selected pre-proposals were drawn from a wide variety of scientific fields relevant to rain enhancement, from 81 total submissions, presented by 378 scientists and researchers affiliated with 159 institutions across 37 countries on five continents. The pre-proposals selected were scored based on four evaluation criteria: research excellence, impact and quality; experience and/or expertise of the proposers, and potential for success; multidisciplinary collaboration across academic, industry and government partners; and the potential to enhance or transform the weather modification research community and industry in the UAE and across the globe.

Alya al Mazroui, director of the UAE Research Program for Rain Enhancement Science (UAEREP), said, "The international technical review committee will proceed with a careful selection process to ensure that the shortlisted proposals add value to the UAE's ambitious efforts to address the most pressing water scarcity challenges in arid and semi-arid regions around the world."

Alya added, "The research proposals shortlisted by the programme's fourth cycle are characterised by their high quality in terms of scientific merit and potential impact. The expertise of the committee members and their efforts to identify the most promising research ideas have allowed us to shortlist projects with significant potential."

OSN appoints Sangeeta as new interim CEO

Faisal al Ayyar, chairman of OSN (Panther Media Group Ltd) announced that Sangeeta Desai has been appointed as interim chief executive officer, effective immediately. Sangeeta has served as a non-executive director on the board for over a year.

Ayyar said, "The board is delighted that Sangeeta has accepted the position of interim CEO, which will increase her involvement with OSN as she works towards the board's vision for the company as a leading entertainment hub in the region. Sangeeta has a proven track record in successfully leading large-scale company transformations, scaling businesses, navigating disruption, and growing global brands. She brings with her a unique combination of strategic, operational, and financial expertise, having led global media businesses for over a decade bolstered by an early career in private equity and invest-



ment banking."

Most recently, Sangeeta was group COO and CEO of Emerging Markets at Fremantle, and prior to that she was COO of Hit Entertainment. She started her career in investment banking at Goldman Sachs and JPMorgan before becoming a private equity investor at Apax Partners. Sangeeta holds a Bachelor of Sci-

ence in Business Administration from the Haas School of Business, UC Berkeley and an MBA from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania.

Sangeeta said, "For over 20 years, OSN has established itself as a household name and market leader in the entertainment sector. As a member of the board, I have been privileged to witness the new heights scaled by OSN in last 12 months. It is an honour to be selected as interim CEO and I look forward to working with the team, as well as continuing to strengthen OSN's position as a premier entertainment provider through the implementation of leading technology, innovation and programming."

Sangeeta succeeds Patrick Tillieux, who is leaving the company for personal reasons. The board wishes to acknowledge Tillieux' achievements in renewing OSN's technology platform and positioning OSN to engage

with its existing and future customers as they wish to be served. The board thanks Tillieux for his contribution and wishes him the very best in all future endeavors.

About OSN

OSN is the region's leading entertainment hub with a history of providing exceptional value for customers with its focus on exclusive and in-demand content, and innovative digital platforms for anywhere, anytime access.

OSN is the exclusive distributor of The Walt Disney Company's new Disney+ Originals in the Middle East region, across both its box and streaming services. OSN's strength is its unbeatable range of exclusive programming and best-in-class entertainment led by its long-term partnerships with studio majors including Disney, HBO, NBC Universal, Fox, Paramount, MGM, and Sony to name a few.

OSN is the home for premium and nowhere-else content in Arabic, English, and Filipino.

OSN broadcasts the latest content at the same minute as in the US, including popular series, blockbuster movies, and the best in kids and lifestyle programming.

In addition, OSN also provides entertainment content for devices such as laptops, tablets and mobile phones via its online and mobile app entertainment platform, offering movies and series on the go.

OSN has been at the forefront of digital technology innovation in the Middle East introducing OSN On Demand, the region's first VOD service.

OSN's ambition is to deliver entertainment everywhere for everyone, which is informed by the company's three key pillars: A customer-first approach, unrivalled exclusive content and unbeatable value.

Indonesian, Jordanian Energy Ministers to speak at Gastech

Gastech, the world's largest exhibition and conference supporting the gas, LNG, hydrogen, and energy industry, has announced that Arifin Tasrif, Minister of Energy & Mineral Resources of Indonesia, will be attending this year's event to speak during the Opening Ceremony Ministerial Panel on the energy transition.

Gastech is taking place in Dubai, from September 21 to 23, and is the world's largest exhibition and conference supporting the gas, LNG, hydrogen, and energy value chain. Gastech is a key global platform with the power to convene world leaders annually in their global mission to provide a carbon neutral, affordable energy future for all by 2050.



Tasrif will be part of an impressive line-up of speakers at Gastech this year and will be speaking on the topic of "Achieving Net Zero: Driving the Global Energy Transition."

The Official Ministerial Wel-

come Address will be delivered by Dr Sultan Ahmed al Jaber, Minister of Industry and Advanced Technology, UAE, & managing director and Group CEO of ADNOC.

The Ministerial Panel will consist of Suhail Mohamed al Mazroui, Minister of Energy, United Arab Emirates; Arifin Tasrif, Minister of Energy & Mineral Resources, Indonesia; and Mohammed Barkindo Sanusi, secretary general at OPEC.

The session will be moderated by John Defferios, former emerging markets editor, CNN and Adjunct Professor, NYU Abu Dhabi.

In this esteemed panel, ministers from the world's leading energy economies will share insights on the role of natural gas

in the energy transition, future directions on how to create a hydrogen economy and what roadmaps are needed to meet the growing demand for energy and cleaner fuels.

Finally, the panel will look ahead to COP26, what to expect from this year's climate meeting and how it will impact energy market dynamics.

Other Energy Ministers speaking this year include Chief Timipre Sylva, Honourable Minister of State - Petroleum Resources, Federal Republic of Nigeria; João Galamba, State Secretary for Energy, Portugal; German Galushchenko, Minister of Energy, Ukraine; Hala Adel Zawati, Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources, Jordan; and Udaya Gammanpila, Minister of

Energy, Sri Lanka.

Amongst the global business leaders participating in the conference are Klaus-Dieter Maubach, CEO, Uniper SE; Lorenzo Simonelli, chief executive officer, Baker Hughes; Klaus-Dieter Maubach, CEO, Uniper SE; Manoj Jain, chairman & managing director, GAIL India; Marcelino Oreja, CEO, Enagás; Fatea al Nuaimi, CEO, ADNOC LNG; Hamed al Numaany, CEO, Oman LNG; and Arnaud Pieton, CEO, Technip Energies.

Gastech 2021 will be held at the Dubai World Trade Centre.

It will be attended by senior decision-makers and energy industry thought leaders who will set the agenda for the global gas, LNG, hydrogen, and energy industry for decades to come.

Mindware, EC-Council sign pact to develop cybersecurity awareness

With digital threats on the rise, Mindware, one of the leading Value-Added Distributors (VADs) in the Middle East and Africa, announced that it had signed a partnership with the International Council of E-Commerce Consultants (EC-Council).

EC-Council is the owner and developer of the world-renowned Certified Ethical Hacker (CEH) program as well as multiple other cybersecurity programs. The institution has trained and certified over 200,000 information security professionals globally, that have

influenced the cyber security mindset of countless organizations worldwide.

As per the agreement, Mindware will leverage the presence of EC-Council to offer cybersecurity certification, education, training, and services in various cybersecurity skills to partners and customers across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The courses are intended to prepare employees, contractors, temporary workers, and any additional representatives who perform authorised functions online, by offering the necessary information to defend

themselves and secure their organization's assets from damage or loss.

"The post-pandemic world has seen the adoption of new technologies for businesses. Adoption of technologies like Cloud, Artificial Intelligence, and Machine Learning is ever-growing. Businesses today need cybersecurity leaders that can make decisions and set industry benchmarks," says Jay Bavisi, CEO and president of EC-Council Group.

"We are delighted to partner with Mindware to encourage innovation and implement robust



cybersecurity training strategies. With this partnership, EC-Council would share its cyber security



training expertise and help cater to the growing demand for a skilled workforce."

Philippe Jarre, CEO at Mindware says, "Most organisations today are embracing digital transformation and leveraging new-age technologies. With every new technology comes new and sophisticated cyber threats. Organisations are finding it difficult to combat these risks, especially with the shortage of security analysts and professionals in the market. The ongoing pandemic has further exacerbated the problem with the 'work from home' trend. A home working environment does not have enterprise cyber security prevention and detection

technologies and policies in place. Additionally, home Wi-Fi networks are much easier to attack. Cyber criminals see the pandemic as an opportunity to step up their criminal activities."

"As part of Mindware's growing security practice, we decided to join hands with EC-Council to help partners and customers overcome cyber security challenges through high-quality training and certification. We believe that this initiative will go a long way in developing overall skills in the region and reducing the number of cyber breaches and incidents," he continues.

Hurricane Ida pummels US state Louisiana

► Ida knocks out power for all of New Orleans ► Rapidly rising waters overtopped 2.3m high levees

New Orleans, US - Powerful Hurricane Ida battered the southern US state of Louisiana, leaving at least one dead and knocking out power for more than a million people, including the whole of New Orleans.

Ida slammed into the Louisiana coast as a Category 4 storm on Sunday, 16 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, but had weakened to a tropical storm early on Monday.

The storm knocked out power for all of New Orleans, with more than a million customers across Louisiana without power, according to outage tracker PowerOutage.US.

'We have now lost power, citywide! This is the time to continue to remain in your safe places. It isn't a time to venture out!!,' New Orleans mayor LaToya Cantrell said on Twitter.

Electricity provider Entergy said it was providing back-up power to New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board, which operates the pumping stations used to control flooding.

The National Weather Service issued warnings of storm surges and flash floods for several areas, including the town of Jean Lafitte, just south of New Orleans, where mayor Tim Kerner said the rapidly rising waters had overtopped the 2.3m high levees.

"Total devastation, catastrophic, our town levees have been overtopped," Kerner told ABC-affiliate WGNO.

"We have anywhere between 75 to 200 people stranded in Barataria," after a barge took out the swing bridge to the island.

"The winds are still too strong, we can't put boats in the water to get to them," he told WGNO.



Damaged vehicles in front of a building collapsed during Hurricane Ida speak volumes about the devastation in New Orleans, Louisiana, on Sunday (AFP)

"This is a very dangerous situation. I've never seen so much water in my life," he said.

Cynthia Lee Sheng, president of Jefferson Parish covering part of the Greater New Orleans area, said people were sheltering in their attics.

"We really believe the calls coming in here to our emergency operations centre, is that people are in attics in Lower Lafitte," she told WGNO.

She said the power was out but rescue teams, including the Louisiana National Guard, were ready to help once they can safely get to the area.

Several residents of LaPlace,

just upstream from New Orleans, posted appeals for help on social media, saying they were trapped by rising flood waters.

President Joe Biden, who described Ida as 'a life-threatening storm', declared a major disaster for Louisiana, which gives it access to federal aid.

One person was killed by a falling tree in Prairieville, about 100km northwest of New Orleans, the Ascension Parish Sheriff's Office said.

Throughout Sunday showers and strong winds swept New Orleans' deserted streets, buffeting boarded-up windows at businesses and homes sur-

rounded by sandbags.

Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards said Ida could be the most powerful storm to hit the state since 1850.

"There is no doubt that the coming days and weeks are going to be extremely difficult," he said at a briefing on Sunday.

'Not sure if I'm prepared'

Most residents had heeded warnings of catastrophic damage and authorities' instructions to flee.

In one neighbourhood in eastern New Orleans, a few residents were completing

preparations just hours before landfall.

"I'm not sure if I'm prepared," said Charles Fields, who was bringing his garden furniture indoors, 'but we just have to ride it'.

"We'll see how it holds up," added the 60 year old, who in 2005 saw Hurricane Katrina flood his house with 3.3m of water.

'Very serious test'

Governor Edwards warned on Sunday that Ida would be 'a very serious test for our levee systems', an extensive network of pumps, gates and earthen and

concrete berms that was expanded after Katrina.

He told CNN that hundreds of thousands of residents were believed to have evacuated.

The storm 'presents some very challenging difficulties for us, with the hospitals being so full of COVID patients', he said.

With a low rate of vaccination, Louisiana is among the states hit hardest by the pandemic, severely stressing hospitals.

Hospitalisations, at 2,700 on Saturday, are near their pandemic high.

The memory of Katrina, which made landfall on August

Total devastation, catastrophic, our town levees have been overtopped. We have anywhere between 75 to 200 people stranded in Barataria. The winds are still too strong, we can't put boats in the water to get to them

TIM KERNER

29, 2005, is still fresh in Louisiana, where it caused some 1,800 deaths and billions of dollars in damage.

Rainfall of 25cm to 46cm is expected in parts of southern Louisiana through Monday, with up to 60cm in some areas.

As of 4.00am on Monday, the storm was packing maximum sustained winds of 97km per hour and was expected to continue weakening as it moves over land, with a predicted track taking it north over the central United States before veering eastward, reaching the mid-Atlantic region by Wednesday.

The White House said on Sunday that federal agencies had deployed more than 2,000 emergency workers to the region - including 13 urban search-and-rescue teams - along with food and water supplies and electric generators.

Scientists have warned of a rise in cyclone activity as the ocean surface warms due to climate change, posing an increasing threat to the world's coastal communities.

AFP

Palestinian President, Israeli Minister hold rare talks

Ramallah, Palestinian Territories - Israel's Defence Minister has met Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas for a rare high-level meeting, but a source close to Prime Minister Naftali Bennett insisted on Monday his government had no plans to reboot peace talks.

Defence Minister Benny Gantz met Abbas in Ramallah for what were reportedly the first direct talks between an Israeli cabinet member and the 86 year old Palestinian leader in several years.

The meeting, which Gantz's office said focused on 'security policy, civilian and economic issues', came just hours after Bennett returned from Washington where he met US President Joe Biden. Biden said he would urge Bennett to find ways 'to advance peace and security and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians'.

According to a Defence Ministry statement, Gantz told Abbas that Israel 'seeks to take measures that will strengthen the PA's economy'.

"They also discussed shaping the security and economic situations in the West Bank and in Gaza," and agreed to 'continue communicating further', it added.

A source close to Bennett said the meeting that he had approved focused on 'issues between the defence establishment and the Palestinian Authority'.

"There is no peace process with the Palestinians nor will there be," under Bennett's leadership, said the source who requested anonymity.

The Gantz-Abbas meeting included the head of the Israeli mil-



File photos of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (left) and Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz (AFP)

itary branch responsible for civil affairs in the Palestinian territories, Ghasan Alyan, senior PA official Hussein al Sheikh and Palestinian intelligence chief Majid Faraj.

Gantz's office said he and Abbas had held 'a one-on-one meeting' after the broader talks.

Sheikh confirmed the meeting on Twitter but the PA was not immediately available to comment on its substance.

Hamas vs Abbas

Bennett (49) took office in June as head of an eclectic coalition in which his hawkish party holds only a handful of seats.

He is a long-standing opponent of Palestinian statehood and the former head of a council that lobbies for Jewish settlers in the West Bank, a territory occupied by Israel since 1967.

Jewish settlements in the West Bank are considered illegal under international law.

But despite Bennett's personal views, his government has sought to warm ties with the PA,

which had effectively collapsed under former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in power from 2009 until June this year.

Netanyahu, also a pro-settlement rightwinger long reviled by Palestinians, further alienated Abbas through his tight embrace of former US president Donald Trump, accused of extreme pro-Israel bias.

Palestinian division

Bennett's government has indicated a desire to boost the PA amid concern over a fresh conflict with Hamas Islamists who control Israeli-blockaded Gaza and are rivals of Abbas' Fatah secular Fatah movement.

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

Hamas condemned the Abbas-Gantz meeting, charging that it 'deepens Palestinian political division'.

AFP

Fear in the cradle of Tunisian revolution

Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia - Many people in Sidi Bouzid, the cradle of Tunisia's 2011 revolution that launched the Arab Spring, see President Kais Saied's power grab as a necessary evil.

But there are also fears that last month's dismissal of parliament, sacking of the prime minister and Saied's assumption of sweeping powers may bring Tunisia one step closer to another dictatorship.

It was in this large town of central Tunisia on December 17, 2010 that Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit and vegetable salesman angered by police harassment, set himself ablaze.

His suicide sparked an unprecedented uprising that left some 300 people dead and toppled long-time dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali.

But more than a decade later, hopes for a better future have given way to anger and disappointment over the North African country's politicians' failure to improve living standards. The chants of 'Dignity!' and 'Work!' that filled the air during the revolution have again sounded at recent demonstrations.

Ahmed Ouni is 36, unemployed and not at all happy with his lot. "These last 11 years have been worse than 23 years under Ben Ali! Parliament and the government smothered us in poverty, so good riddance to them!" he said.

"Because the Tunisians chose Saied, he has their endorsement to lead the country and do what has to be done. We have confidence in him," Ouni said.

Sidi Bouzid's infrastructure has improved and more businesses have opened, but some people



A woman walks past a sculpture of Mohamed Bouazizi's cart (bearing text reading in Arabic 'I do not forgive') in the square named after him in the centre of the town of Sidi Bouzid in central Tunisia on Friday (AFP)

still feel marginalised and look to Saied to make their lives better.

"Go for it," said Ouni. "The people are with you."

'Necessary surgery'

Saied, a retired professor and specialist in constitutional law, was elected president in 2019.

On July 25, the president invoked the constitution as he granted himself full powers, having suspended parliament for an initial 30 days. On August 23, he announced that these measures would continue indefinitely.

"This is necessary surgery to stop the bleeding," said Abdelhalim Hamdi, a 47 year old construction worker with a degree in history who has also organised protests in Sidi Bouzid.

"The politicians in power have stolen our dreams and ambitions," he said, adding that he backed abolishing the constitution because it was 'drafted to serve narrow interests'.

Many believe that suspending or repealing the constitution - hailed internationally on its adoption in 2014 - is inevitable.

"It's a necessary evil to save the country, even if it will probably lead to an authoritarian regime," said Sami Abdeli (38).

He was speaking in central Sidi Bouzid, close to the sculpture of Mohamed Bouazizi's vegetable cart on which is marked the word 'Freedom'.

Self-censorship

Residents of the town are normally quick to engage in conversation about politics, but many appeared reticent to comment on Saied's actions.

"We can see that self-censorship is back," said Mounira Bouazizi, blogger and coordinator at the Sidi Bouzid office of the International Observatory for Media and Human Rights.

"People no longer want to express themselves freely and say

what they really think."

She said that on social networks Saied's supporters 'use violent speech and do not accept any criticism of the president'.

Yossra Abdouni, a 25 year old engineering student, voiced caution. "The idea that one person has all the executive power scares me," she said. Saied 'is vague about his intentions - he hasn't presented any programme'. "Even if the economic and social situation has become worse and the political class is fragmented, at least we had freedom and democracy."

President Saied's move last month was condemned by Ennahdha, the Islamist party that is the largest in parliament, as a coup. Since then, parliamentarians, magistrates and businessmen have been targeted with travel bans and house arrest in an anti-graft purge that has raised fears of a decline in freedoms.

AFP

TALIBAN TAKEOVER

IS claims rocket attack on Kabul airport as US troops pull out

Kabul, Afghanistan - The Islamic State-Khorasan group claimed a rocket attack on Kabul airport on Monday, as US troops raced to complete their withdrawal from Afghanistan and evacuate allies under the threat of further violence.

‘The soldiers of the caliphate targeted Kabul’s international airport with six... rockets,’ the group said in a statement. A Taliban official said the attack was intercepted by the airport’s missile defence systems.

The threat to Kabul airport remains ‘real’ and ‘specific,’ Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

“We’re in a particularly dangerous time right now,” Kirby said. “The threat stream is still real, it’s still active, and in many cases it’s still specific.”

The regional Islamic State-Khorasan group, rivals of the Taliban, pose the biggest threat to the withdrawal, after carrying out a suicide bombing outside the airport late last week that claimed more than 100 lives, including those of 13 US troops.

President Joe Biden has set a deadline of Tuesday to withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan, drawing to a close his nation’s longest military conflict, which began in retaliation for the September 11 attacks.

The return of the Taliban movement, which was toppled in 2001 but took back power a fortnight ago, triggered an exodus of terrified people aboard US-led evacuation flights.

Those flights, which have taken more than 122,000 people out of Kabul airport, will officially end on Tuesday when the last of the thousands of American troops pull out. US forces are



An US Air Force aircraft takes off from the airport in Kabul on Monday (AFP)

now focused chiefly on flying themselves and American diplomats out safely.

‘We can’t sleep’
The White House confirmed

there had been a rocket attack directed at the airport, but said airlift operations there were ‘uninterrupted’.

‘The President... has reconfirmed his order that command-

ers redouble their efforts to prioritise doing whatever is necessary to protect our forces on the ground,’ the White House statement said.
An AFP photographer on

Monday took images of a destroyed car with a launcher system still visible in the back seat.

A Taliban official at the scene said he believed five rockets had been fired.

A suspected US drone strike had hit the car, about 2km from the airport.

While there were no reports of fatalities or airport damage from the rocket attacks, they caused greater anxiety for locals already traumatised by years of war.

“Since the Americans have taken control of the airport, we can’t sleep properly,” Abdullah, who lives near the airport and gave only one name, told AFP.

“It is either gun firing, rockets, sirens or sounds of huge planes that disturb us. And now that they are being directly targeted, it can put our lives in danger.”

‘We’ll hunt down’

Taliban’s spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the hardline Islamist group will crack down on Islamic State attacks and expects them to end once foreign forces leave the country.

“We hope that those Afghans who are influenced by IS... will give up their operations on seeing the formation of an Islamic government in the absence of foreigners,” Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told AFP in a weekend interview.

“If they create a situation for war and continue with their operations, the Islamic government... we will deal with them,” he added.

Retaliatory or pre-emptive strikes by the United States on IS positions over the past few days have angered the movement, however.

“There is no permission for them to do such operations... our independence must be respected,” he said.

Islamic State has been highly critical of the troop withdrawal deal struck between the Taliban and Washington last year, which saw the Taliban offer security guarantees.

One IS commentary published after the fall of Kabul accused the Taliban of betraying the militants with the US withdrawal deal and vowed to continue its fight, according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors militant communications.

During the Taliban’s prison break spree this summer to free its fighters, many battle-hardened IS militants were also released - increasingly looking like a lethal error.

Mujahid reiterated that the new Taliban government will not be announced until after the last US soldier has left.

“It is important to announce the government but this requires a lot of patience. We are holding consultations to form the government responsibly,” Mujahid said.

“We have some technical problems on this issue,” he added.

Banks, government offices and other public institutions remain largely shut with employees prevented from entering offices since the takeover, which sent the Afghani sliding.

The Taliban have promised to improve Afghanistan’s economy, but to do that the new regime will have to rely on foreign aid - and there is no guarantee it will get the funds it needs.
AFP

Russia calls on US to release Afghan reserves

Moscow, Russia - Russia on Monday called on the United States to release Afghan central bank reserves that Washington blocked after the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul earlier this month.

“If our Western colleagues are actually worried about the fate of the Afghan people, then we must not create additional problems for them by freezing gold and foreign exchange reserves,” said the Kremlin’s envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov.

The United States must urgently unfreeze these assets, he said on the state-run Rossiya 24 network, ‘to bolster the rate of the collapsing national currency’.

Kabulov added that without doing so the new Afghan authorities will turn to ‘the trafficking of illegal opiates’ and ‘sell on the black market the weapons’ abandoned by the Afghan army and the United States.

The Afghan central bank’s gross reserves totalled US\$9.4bn at the end of April, according to the IMF.

The majority of these funds are held outside of Afghanistan.

Washington has indicated that the Taliban will not have access to assets held in the United States, without specifying the total amount there.

Afghanistan has long been the world’s largest producer of opium and heroin, with profits from the illicit trade helping fund the Taliban.
AFP

US investigating if civilians killed

Washington, US - The United States is investigating whether civilians may have been killed in an air strike it launched to destroy a car laden with explosives in the Afghan capital Kabul, a spokesman for US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Sunday.

The statement came after CNN reported that nine members of a family, including six children, were killed in Sunday’s air strike in the crowded capital, where thousands of Afghans are still trying to flee the Taliban.

Local media also reported that civilians were killed in the strike.

“We are aware of reports of civilian casualties following our strike on a vehicle in Kabul,” Captain Bill Urban, a CENTCOM spokesman, said in a

statement.

“We are still assessing the results of this strike, which we know disrupted an imminent ISIS-K threat to the airport,” he continued, using an acronym for the Afghan branch of the Islamic State group, which carried out a suicide attack at the airport on Thursday.

“We know that there were substantial and powerful subsequent explosions resulting from the destruction of the vehicle, indicating a large amount of explosive material inside that may have caused additional casualties,” Urban continued. “It is unclear what may have happened, and we are investigating further.”

“We would be deeply saddened by any potential loss of innocent life,” he said.
AFP



Taliban fighters investigate a damaged car after multiple rockets were fired towards Kabul airport on Monday (AFP)

UK blasted over Afghan exit as hundreds left behind

London, UK - The UK government on Sunday faced a torrent of criticism after its hurried withdrawal from Afghanistan ended, leaving hundreds eligible for relocation behind.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson hailed a mission ‘unlike anything we have seen in our lifetimes’ after the UK airlifted over 15,000 people in the last two weeks.

Troops landed back at Brize Norton airbase in southern England on Sunday after Britain was forced to withdraw following the decision of its ally the United States to end its 20-year presence.

Johnson praised the evacua-



A British soldier before departure from Kabul on Saturday (AFP)

tion efforts in ‘harrowing conditions’ and assured the military that decades of deployment ‘were not in vain’ after the Tal-

iban retook control.

But current and former officials slammed government failings, suggesting many more Afghans could have been rescued.

The Observer leftwing broadsheet cited a whistleblower as saying thousands of emails from MPs and charities to the foreign ministry highlighting specific Afghans at risk from the Taliban takeover went unopened.

Foreign Minister Dominic Raab has already been strongly criticised for not immediately leaving a beach holiday when the Taliban took control.

The Observer said it saw evi-

dence that an official email account set up by the Foreign Office to receive such pleas regularly had 5,000 unopened emails last week.

It said these included messages from ministers’ offices and the leader of the opposition Labour party, Keir Starmer.

“They cannot possibly know [how many people have been left behind] because they haven’t even read the emails,” the whistleblower was quoted as saying.

The Foreign Office responded that its crisis team worked 24/7 ‘to triage incoming emails and calls’.

Officials have given varying estimates of how many eligible Afghans did not board evacuation flights, the last of which left on Saturday, with the head of the UK armed forces General Sir Nick Carter putting this ‘in the high hundreds’.

The Sunday Times rightwing broadsheet quoted an unnamed minister as saying, “I suspect we could have taken out 800 to 1,000 more people”.

The same minister slammed Raab, claiming he ‘did nothing’ to build ties with third countries from which Afghans might enter the UK.
AFP

Taliban supreme leader Akhundzada in Kandahar

Kabul, Afghanistan - In the days since taking power in Afghanistan, a wide range of Taliban figures have entered Kabul - hardened commandos, armed madrasa students and greying leaders back from years of exile.

There has been one major exception - the group’s supreme leader.

But Hibatullah Akhundzada may finally make a public appearance - and soon - the Taliban said on Sunday.

“He is present in Kandahar,” Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said.

Akhundzada has shepherded the Taliban as its chief since 2016 when snatched from relative obscurity to oversee a



Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid (AFP)

movement in crisis.

After taking the insurgency’s reins, the cleric was tasked with the mammoth challenge of unifying a movement that briefly fractured during a bitter power struggle.

The infighting came as the group was hit with successive blows - the assassination of Akhundzada’s predecessor and the revelation that its leaders had hidden the death of Taliban founder Mullah Omar.

Little is still known about Akhundzada’s day-to-day role, with his public profile largely limited to the release of annual messages during Islamic holidays.

The Taliban have released just one photograph of the leader.

The announcement that Akhundzada will soon appear in public comes as the heads of the group’s various factions openly preached in Kabul’s mosques, met with opposition figures, and even chatted with Afghan cricket officials in recent days.

The Taliban have a long history of keeping their top leader in the shadows.

The group’s enigmatic founder was notorious for his

hermit ways and rarely travelled to Kabul when the Taliban were in power in the 1990s.

Omar remained largely out of sight, reluctant to even meet visiting delegations. He stayed in his compound in Kandahar, the birthplace of the movement.

Still, Omar’s word was rule and no singular figure has emerged to command the movement with the same respect.

The announcement of a looming appearance follows rumours about Akhundzada’s health that have been circulating for years, with chatter in Pakistan and Afghanistan suggesting he had contracted COVID or been killed in a bombing.
AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Ukraine pins hopes on Gulf visitors for pandemic-hit tourism

Lviv, Ukraine - Saudi tourists ride horse-drawn carriages, pose for portraits by street artists and play chess on benches with locals in Lviv, a city in Ukraine more accustomed to hosting European guests.

But with strict COVID-19 travel restrictions still in place across Europe, travellers from the Middle East - especially Saudi Arabia - now rank among the top visitors to the ex-Soviet state.

The trend has given hope to the country's pandemic-hit tourism industry.

"We need to seize the moment," says Bogdan Gets, a tour guide on a sightseeing train that ferries tourists along cobbled streets in central Lviv, a city in western Ukraine known for its Renaissance architecture.

For Gets and his colleagues at 'Chudo Tour' (Wonder Tour), the unexpected influx of tourists from the Middle East is a chance to recover after a string of lock-



This file photo shows Middle Eastern tourists enjoying in a street café in Lviv, Ukraine on August 15 (AFP)

downs that put pressure on Ukraine's struggling economy.

In the first half of 2021, the number of Saudi tourists alone visiting Ukraine skyrocketed to 14,000 compared to just 350 in the same period last year, ac-

cording to the country's state tourism agency.

This new cohort are attracted by a visa-free regime enacted in August last year and cheap direct flights.

In previous years, the city

was mostly visited by Poles, Belarusians, Turks, Germans and Britons.

"Last year put the tourism industry in extreme conditions", the agency said, and 'radically changed' how tourists decide

which countries to visit.

Before the pandemic 32 year old Asma, a tourist from Saudi Arabia, travelled with her husband and two sons to various European destinations every year, but never considered Ukraine.

After exploring Lviv and the capital Kiev this summer, the family was pleasantly surprised.

"The bars, the food and the coffee - all things here in Ukraine are amazing," Asma told AFP outside the iconic Lviv Opera.

Rain is 'magic'

Anna Nayda, the head of the Kredens Café chain, admitted that the local tourism industry experienced some initial difficulties when catering for their new customers.

"At first it was very difficult to find a common language," she told AFP.

But now her cafés are printing menus in Arabic and ensuring that they have halal options.

Several souvenir shops in the city have started making signs in Arabic while 'Chudo Tour' said they are translating their pre-recorded audio guides.

"This is a push for change," Nayda said, adding that during the pandemic businesses struggled to pay rent and salaries.

"Of course in these conditions you think about how to survive. We decided to make changes and everything turned out great," she said.

Tourism to Ukraine is picking back up, but the climb is slow.

After the number of tourists in 2020 was just a quarter of the level of the previous year in 2020, it was up 9 per cent in the first half of this year compared to the second half of last year.

The number of visitors from the Gulf - mainly Saudi Arabia and Bahrain - gradually increased throughout the summer, said Khrystyna Kaguy, a manager at the Reikartz hotel group.

Hassan, a 64 year old businessman from Saudi Arabia, opted for a family holiday in Ukraine on the recommendation of a friend.

Compared to Germany or Switzerland, he described the country as 'more energetic, more dynamic' and where the locals 'are family oriented'.

"We'll definitely come back," he told AFP on a café terrace with his wife in Kiev.

For tourists coming from arid conditions, trees and rain are a big draw.

"The rooms that even slightly overlook the trees or the park are a big preference," Kaguy said.

Gets, meanwhile, said he had never seen an adult so happy to see rain. "This is a thrill for them. They say that they came to Lviv on purpose, they are only interested in rain."

According to Asma, the rain is like 'magic'.

AFP

World passes threshold of 4.5mn COVID-19 deaths as Delta erupts

Paris, France - The world has passed the grim threshold of 4.5mn COVID-19 deaths, according to an AFP tally on Monday, as the virulent Delta variant wreaks havoc globally.

Since the outbreak emerged in China in December 2019, the virus has killed a total of 4,500,620 people, the tally of official sources revealed.

Some 10,000 deaths are reported every day in the world, a much lower figure than the highs of January when an average of 14,800 people were being killed daily.

But the figure is much higher than at the start of July when some 7,800 daily deaths were registered.

With an average of 1,290 deaths per day over the past week, the United States has once again become the country with the most new fatalities in the world.

Back in January, it had registered as many as 3,380 deaths per day, a figure that had dropped to just 200 by early summer.



Relatives of the composer and singer-songwriter Macario Mejia mourn their loss during the funeral of Mejia, victim of the COVID-19 virus, in Tegucigalpa, Honduras on Sunday (AFP)

But it is now facing a wave of the virulent Delta variant, which has spread to the vast majority of countries around the world since it was identified in India in April.

The pandemic has already

claimed more deaths in 2021 than in 2020, with more than 2.6mn fatalities officially reported since January against just under 1.9mn over the whole of last year.

Countries around the world

are hoping the vaccines will ease the spread of the virus, but there are huge disparities between rich and poor nations.

Just seven doses were administered per 100 people in Africa, against 99 in Europe and

With an average of 1,290 deaths per day over the past week, the United States has once again become the country with the most new fatalities in the world

111 in the United States.

The vaccines are also thought to be less effective against the Delta variant.

According to a study published last week by US health authorities, the efficacy of the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna jabs against infection has dropped from 91 to 66 per cent since the strain became dominant in the United States.

The vaccines remain very effective in preventing severe forms of illness, however.

AFP



A woman tries to protect herself from tear gas as people protest against the government's plan for mandatory vaccination for health workers in Athens, the capital of Greece on Friday (AFP)

WHO fears 236,000 more deaths in Europe by Dec 1

Copenhagen, Denmark - The World Health Organization warned on Monday that another 236,000 people could die from COVID in Europe by December 1, sounding the alarm over rising infections and stagnating vaccine rates on the continent.

Infections rates are ticking up globally again, as the highly transmissible Delta variant takes hold - especially among the unvaccinated - preying on populations where anti-virus measures have been relaxed.

The head of WHO Europe said on Monday that infections and deaths were on the rise again in Europe, particularly in poorer nations in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

"Last week, there was an 11 per cent increase in the number of deaths in the region - one reliable projection is expecting 236,000 deaths in Europe, by December 1," WHO Europe director Hans Kluge said on Monday.

Europe has already registered around 1.3mn COVID deaths to date.

Of the WHO Europe's 53 member states, 33 have registered an incidence rate greater than ten per cent in the past two weeks, Kluge said, mostly in poorer countries.

High transmission rates across the continent were 'deeply worrying, particularly in the light of low vaccination uptake in priority populations in a number of countries'.

Kluge said the Delta variant was partly to blame, along with an 'exaggerated easing' of restrictions and measures and a

surge in summer travel.

While around half of people in the WHO's Europe region are fully vaccinated, uptake in the region has slowed.

"In the past six weeks, it has fallen by 14 per cent, influenced by a lack of access to vaccines in some countries and a lack of vaccine acceptance in others."

Only six per cent of people in lower and lower-middle income countries in Europe are fully vaccinated, and some countries have only managed to vaccinate one in ten health professionals.

"The stagnation in vaccine uptake in our region is of serious concern," Kluge said, urging countries to 'increase production, share doses and improve access'.

Vaccines for teachers

Kluge stressed that since public health and social measures were being relaxed in many places, 'the public's vaccination acceptance is crucial'.

"Vaccine scepticism and science denial is holding us back from stabilising this crisis. It serves no purpose, and is good for no one."

The warning comes as the WHO and UNICEF urged European countries earlier on Monday to make teachers a priority group for vaccinations so schools can stay open.

As schools reopen after the summer holidays, the agencies said it was 'vital that classroom-based learning continue uninterrupted', despite the spread of the Delta variant.

AFP

US grapples with bus driver shortage as schools reopen

Washington, US - It's back to school time in America after a year of remote learning, but forget about the iconic yellow school bus: Because of COVID, there is a shortage of drivers.

The problem - among other issues - is that some drivers oppose mask-wearing mandates, and others, who are older and do this kind work after retiring from other jobs, are worried about catching the virus while driving kids around, education officials said.

The Minneapolis area of Minnesota, for instance, has warned that school bus service this year will be sporadic because of what it called a driver shortage being faced by school districts around the country.

"Minneapolis Public Schools is encouraging families who can transport their students to school on their own to do so," the local school district said.

And one private school in Wilmington, Delaware, the home town of President Joe Biden, is offering parents



People dressed as Marvel Avengers characters pose in Times Square as the SOMOS Community Care launches a back-to-school vaccination information campaign, in New York City on August 25 (AFP)

US\$700 a year to drive their kids to school.

Back to school day is not uniform across the country; some kids resumed class in late July and others will not do so until September.

Because of the transportation problem some districts, like the schools in Pittsburgh, have given

kids two weeks of extra vacation while they try to sort out the bus issue. There, officials still need to find bus seats for 5,000 children.

Mask mandate scares some away

School bus drivers have been in short supply for some time in the

United States, but the pandemic has made things worse.

Greg Jackson, director of transportation for Jeffco school district in Colorado, said his area has a lot of retirement-age drivers who are particularly vulnerable to the virus and thus worried about returning to work.

Others oppose the district's

policy of having drivers wear masks, he said, "so they didn't come back."

"We lost a few folks just recently because of that," Jackson said.

Across the country school officials are bending over backwards to get kids back to school with their classmates and teachers after all these months of trying to study and learn at home.

School office workers are being recruited to drive buses, for instance, bus routes are being extended to get more kids aboard and bus stops are being reorganised.

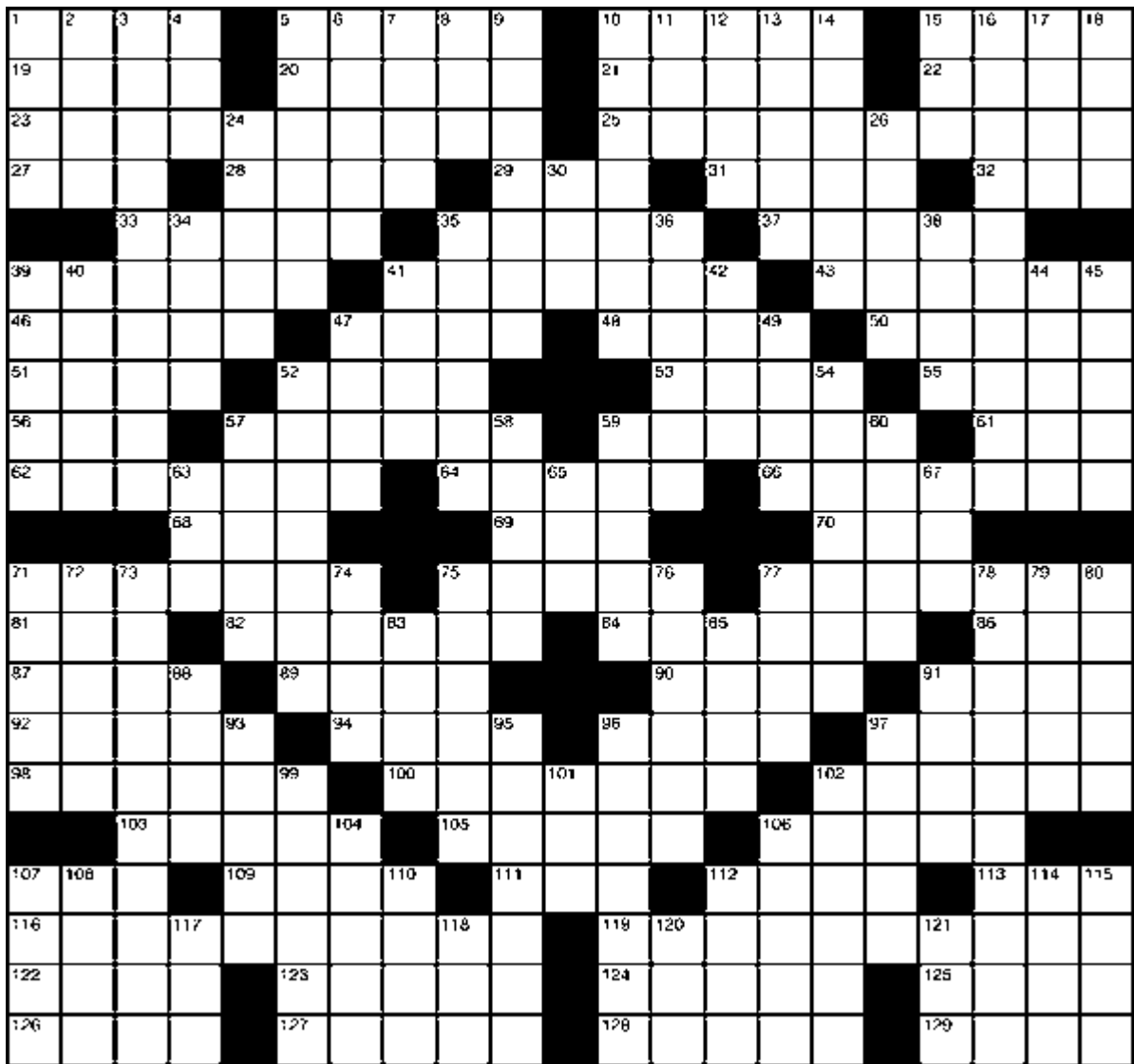
Waiting lists for bus service are now sometimes very long.

To lure people to work as bus drivers, salaries are being raised and signing bonuses of up to US\$4,000 are being offered.

Since the start of the pandemic the bus driver workforce has dwindled by one-quarter, the Bureau of Labor Statistics says.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



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- ACROSS**
1 One of a pair
5 Greek god of the underworld
10 Betrayer of Jesus
15 Blemish
19 Persia, now
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29 An article?
31 Charles Lamb
32 Metal origin
33 Painter's aid
35 Petitioning
37 Rower
39 Four-wheeled carriage
41 Tall marsh plant
43 Observe
46 Pseudonym
47 Auction, e.g.
48 Den
50 Of birth
51 Optical glass
52 Its capital is Lima
53 A brad
55 Fiber fuzz
56 Uncle: Middle Eng.
57 Wrenches forcibly
59 Undue pressure
61 WWII theater, for short
62 Noted 19th cent..
French chemist
64 Roof overhang: pl.
66 Two-time
Secretary of War
68 Unmatched
69 ATM code
70 A performer must?
71 Hauled
75 Thicket of small trees
77 An assumed proposition
81 Norse goddess
82 Captivate
84 Make beloved
86 Seize roughly
87 Delicate fabric
89 Very: Fr.
90 Transaction
91 Pencil end
92 Miss Merman
94 Et ____; and others
96 Flat-bottomed boat
97 Fragment
98 Mariner
100 Fast food chicken
102 Excluded
103 Novices
105 Put aside
106 Temples: arch.
107 Scottish explorer
109 Bit of news
111 Bitter vetch
112 Brief remark
- 113 Chinese ism
116 Indictment
119 Overburdening
122 Skills
123 Packs tightly
124 A relative
125 Genus of maples
126 Office equipment
127 "Fur ____": Beethoven
128 Jewish home festival
129 French head
- DOWN**
1 The blind trio
2 Sandarac tree
3 Juicy fruits
4 Conclude
5 English astronomer
6 Benefit
7 An obligation
8 Blunder
9 Law
10 Roman poet/satirist
11 One: Fr., fem.
12 Take dinner
13 Defect of structure: prefix
14 Native of Damascus
15 Stupified bloke
16 Orders of importance
17 Scent
18 Vocal quality
24 S-shaped curves
26 Brother of Moses
30 Smite
34 Macaws
35 Military greeting
36 Like Atlas and Goliath
38 And others: abbr.
39 Dried orchid tubers
40 Body of Muslim scholars
41 Freeway followers
42 Jim Carrey movie, doubled
44 Long poem's division
45 Sir ____ John
47 Prophet
49 Narrow inlets
52 Frugal
54 Word for word
57 Five-faced solid
58 Taste property as bitterness
59 Sixth ____
60 W. Africa river
63 To dress
65 Eminent dignity: abbr.
67 Tatoo favorite?
71 Removes from typeset
72 Lariat
73 Building designers
74 Olympic swimmer
75 Teapot covers
76 Withstand
77 Turf fuel
78 A crevice
79 Culinary dressing
80 Receded
83 Sandwich, sometime
85 TV rooms
88 Slippery
91 Father
93 A lemur
95 Deep
96 Individuals
97 Himalayan mammal
99 Turn on axis
101 "Le Coq ____"
102 To trade
104 Of a bristle
106 To compel
107 Electric catfish
108 Land measure
110 Puccini opera heroine
112 Undesired plant
114 Dill seed
115 Mythical monster
117 Welsh river
118 Goddess of harvests
120 Compete
121 Indian memorial post

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
Every now and then, everything just falls into place with only the slimmest effort on your part. See what happens when you go with the flow, rather than trying to force things to happen exactly the way you want them to. If you go for it immediately, you bypass all the pleasurable anticipation. Since victory is already pretty much a foregone conclusion, you should let it linger.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
Something (or someone) has lit a metaphorical fire under you, and you're back to feeling like your old self. Now that your energy is back where it should be, it's time to cross off a few of those lingering items from your to-do list. If the load seems like it might be too much, don't hesitate to call on trusted friends, allies and colleagues to help you take care of it all.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
It's time for you to do some serious cleaning. If you've got too much junk cluttering up your available space, you can't add anything new. Clean out your closet, desk, car and -- most importantly -- your brain. You need to be rid of any outdated, useless or just plain silly ideas you've been lugging around. It's even more vital to toss out any opinions that belong to others.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
You need to feel connected to something bigger than yourself in order to maintain your sense of perspective when they're most needed. It might be through art, spirituality, community service or nature. Take some time to nourish your spirit and celebrate where you are. A lot of luck (and love) have gone into making you, so be sure to appreciate everything around you.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
If you keep saying yes when you mean no, you might just end up driving yourself crazy -- not to mention the people you love! Don't try to just give people what they want all the time -- you need to think about what you want now. How about a little extra peace and quiet? Maybe you want to bow out of your cousin's wedding reception? Try to give yourself everything.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Gossip is like fast food: It seems delicious before and during, but later on you just end up feeling disgusted with yourself. If coworkers or friends insist on swapping other people's secrets and want you to join in, just find a way to discreetly move away. There's no need to pass judgment or call them out -- it's just not your way to indulge in pointless chit-chat.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
Let everything within you rise -- your spirits, your secret desires, your kindness and your compassion. It's time for you to be the best possible human being that you can be! You need to explore what it is you really want to do -- just thinking about it all should help you explore what it is, exactly, that the universe has brought you here to do.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
Some say that insanity is simply repeating the same action and hoping for different results. Right now, there's a situation or relationship in your life feels like you're banging your head against a wall and hurting yourself endlessly -- so what are you waiting for? You can figure it all out with a little soul-searching. Take some time for yourself and get to it!

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
The universe works in mysterious ways, so don't dismiss something or someone that's come into your life for no apparent reason. They might bring an important lesson. If you choose to avoid it now, it will almost certainly reappear in a much more abrupt and confrontational form! It's much easier to go along for the ride and get all you can out of these freaky circumstances.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
Are you challenging authority again? You've almost certainly been tweaking the rules and playing devil's advocate at every opportunity, and why not? The good news is that you have an appreciative audience for all of your wacky hijinks. The somewhat less-good news is that you may have also earned the ire of someone who thinks they're in charge. Tone it down.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
The heart is a funny thing -- like all the other muscles, it needs a regular workout, but it needs constant spiritual aerobics as well. Get out there and share your heart's energy with all kinds of people: family, your mate, coworkers, friends and complete strangers. Volunteer in the community or find meaning in politics. Even the smallest bit of nurturing can make heart grow.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
Projecting certain traits onto others can be fun, but why not leave that to Hollywood for now? Let's face it -- assuming pretty much anything about anyone real just leads to more hassle than anything else. Before you start imagining that everyone else has a perfectly fulfilled life, just remember that they're only human, just like you, with equal problems.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. '.INI' extension refers usually to what kind of file?

a. Image file
b. System file
c. Hypertext related file
d. Image Color Matching Profile file

2. The sampling rate, (how many samples per second are stored) for a CD is...?

a. 48.4 kHz
b. 22,050 Hz
c. 44.1 kHz
d. 48 kHz

3. Who created Pretty Good Privacy (PGP)?

a. Phil Zimmermann
b. Tim Berners-Lee
c. Marc Andreessen
d. Ken Thompson

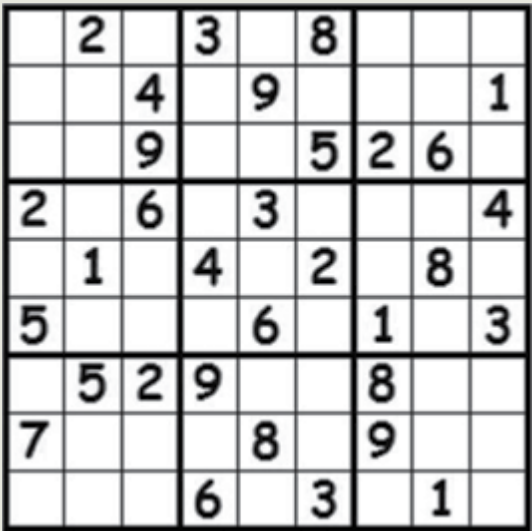
Answers: 1.b 2.c 3.a

KIDS COLOURING

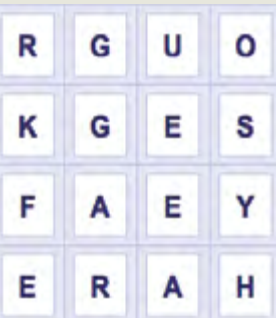


DO YOU SUDOKU?

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



BOGGLER



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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER



DAILY CROSSWORD ANSWERS (AUGUST 30)



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



YELLOW OUTFITS

Sunshine in your wardrobe

If it's summer, there should be a generous splash of yellow in your wardrobe. This bright hue brings the sunshine, not just into your wardrobe but also in your mood

Move the whites and the blues to the side, shift the reds and the greens further on, you must make room for some yellow. Hello...it's summer!

They say, what is summer without the sunshine being reflected in your attire. And so, every wardrobe must have a place of pride for yellow in summer. After all, it's going to be around for sometime before you begin to romance your greys and maroons as winter sets in.

If it's summer, there's got to be a splash of yellow in your wardrobe and it needn't be restricted to your dresses. You can complement your (non-yellow) attire with yellow accessories - shoes, stols, bags, bracelets, et al. Just be sure you do not appear too loud when you walk out. So, it does call for some discretion.

A shade feared by many, because the wearer tends to stand out from the crowd, yellow does attract attention. However, this colour in its varied hues also has a unique way of uplifting your mood as well as putting others around in a joyful mood, too.

Whether you go for a soft buttery pastel or a punchy zesty lemon hue, they all get the seal of approval as long as they're yellow. And no one should think 'yellow is not for me' as there's a shade that'll suit every skin tone and an apt attire that would suit every style.

Happy hue, happy you

The psychology behind the colour yellow describes it as optimistic, uplifting and a 'happy' shade. Yellow is known to stimulate cheerfulness, enthusiasm and confidence. It also boosts analytical thinking and logical reasoning, meaning it can help with decision-making.

US colour specialist and behaviour guru, Chris Brazel, says the colour yellow symbolises happiness, new beginnings and clarity. "It's a great intellectual colour that gives you an awakening and awareness of the energies and people around you. It's great to use for clear thinking on any problem," she says, pointing out that wearing the colour yellow can help boost self-esteem and improve low moods.

For the bold and the daring, yellow is an ideal statement colour. It offers something different to the norm. If you're someone who typically wears a lot of neutrals or blacks then yellow is a great way to step out of your comfort zone and embrace something bright.

For those new to wearing yellow, one can make a slow beginning by using the colour as an accent or in accessories before going for yellow outfits. A yellow handbag or sandals to begin with, and a yellow scarf or stol to start embracing it into your attire will make you ready to sport a bright daffodil dress someday.

Yellow has, indeed, been making its presence felt in fashion across fall/winter 2021 runways and presentations alike. New trends on display are offering yellow in a more celebrated manner for the seasons ahead. And with worldwide vaccine rollouts (to contain the pandemic) now underway, designers seem to be getting set for a normal autumn and are ready to introduce more sunny attire on the ramp to lift universal sentiments and usher in a greater dose of positivity.



What goes well with yellow

Several colour combinations work well with yellow. It looks great when paired with black, light blue, grey, and even lavender. You can combine shades through colour-blocking or mixed patterns. Remember:

- ▶ For those with warmer skin tones, a mustard or dark yellow suits best. But if you have lighter to fair skin, a light lemony yellow will be apt. Pastel yellow, however, suits light as well as darker skin tones.
- ▶ You can wear yellow in a foundational piece of an outfit (trousers, skirts) or as an accent (socks/stols). But note that yellow is a 'one and done' colour. So, wear only one piece of yellow at a time.
- ▶ For the office - In a formal setting, incorporate yellow in your accessories for a subtle hint of colour without going overboard.
- ▶ For weekend wear - A nice printed yellow shirt pairs well with army green chinos or a bright pleated yellow skirt can be combined with a crepe white top.

Track thriller in Tokyo

German sprinter Felix Streng unseats Britain's Peacock in T64 100m

Tokyo, Japan - German sprinter Felix Streng stormed his way to Paralympic gold in the T64 100m in Tokyo on Monday, dethroning British rival Jonnie Peacock who ended up sharing the bronze after a photo finish.

The track thriller saw Streng finish in 10.76secs, short of the Paralympic record he set just a day earlier in heats, but ahead of Costa Rica's Sherman Isidro Guity Guity, who took silver.

After several tense minutes, the decision came back: a shared bronze, with both Peacock and Germany's Johannes Flores coming in at 10.78s.

The pair beamed as they received their flags to join the other medalists. "It felt amazing," Streng said afterwards of his win. "I'm so happy that I could execute a race and win in such a competitive field."

The race was one of the last on the sixth day of competition in Tokyo, with records again tumbling from the track to the pool.

At Tokyo's Aquatics Centre, 16-year-old Jiang Yuyan won her first Paralympic gold in the S6 50m butterfly final, after smashing her own world record in the heats. "This is my first Paralympic experience and in terms of my personal goals, it's a self-confidence boost," the teenager said afterwards.

Jiang was nearly killed when she was run over by a truck as a three-year-old, but by 14 she was breaking world records and had earned the nickname 'Flying Fish'. She is the youngest member of China's Paralympic team, which continues to top the medal table - as it has at every Games since Athens 2004.

Monday also saw the medal



Germany's Felix Streng celebrates his victory in the men's 100m (T64) final during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games at the Olympic Stadium on Monday (AFP)



India's Avani Lekhara is all smiles after winning the women's 10m air rifle standing SH1 event at the Asaka Shooting Range in Tokyo on Monday (AFP)

ceremony for the winners of the women's swimming 4x100m - 34 points, which was delayed from Sunday after the US team lodged a protest over their disqualification.

The team thought they had come away with the silver, but the second spot was instead handed to Australia after judges disqualified the US side for an illegal changeover.

Their protest was denied by a referee and an appeal to a jury was also rejected.

Also stepping onto the

podium on Monday was Francisca Mardones Sepulveda, who became the first Chilean woman ever to win a Paralympic medal in any sport. The 43-year-old shot putter won the F54 event and broke her own world record with a throw of 8.33m.

The Chilean competed at the London and Rio Games in wheelchair tennis, but later switched to athletics, and is competing in shot put, discus and javelin in Tokyo. "I want to be an inspiration for other girls that will start approaching the sport to become

I'm so happy that I could execute a race and win in such a competitive field

FELIX STRENG
T64 100M WINNER

enthusiastic for it," she said.

Shooter Avani Lekhara on Monday became the first Indian woman to win a gold medal in the Paralympic Games. The 19-year-old bagged gold, India's first at Tokyo 2020, in women's 10m air rifle SH1 with a world record score of 249.6 in the final on Monday.

Double Paralympic Games gold medallist Devendra Jhajaria's hopes of extending his legacy by winning the third gold did not materialise as the Indian had to be satisfied with a silver medal in the men's javelin throw F46 category while Sundar Singh Gurjar, a two-time world championship gold medallist, took bronze with a best throw of 64.01m.

Discus thrower Yogesh Kathuniya clinched a silver medal in the men's F56 event but it was Sumit Antil who broke his own record not once but thrice and went on to win gold in the men's javelin throw - F64 final, second for the day as India finished the day with a historic five-medal high.

Agencies



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton on the podium in Spa on Sunday (AFP)

Hamilton blasts two-lap Belgian GP race as 'farce'

FORMULA ONE

Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium - World champion Lewis Hamilton described Sunday's rain-lashed Belgian Grand Prix as 'a farce' and said 'money talks' after title rival Max Verstappen was declared the winner at the end of just two laps.

In the shortest race in history - just 14km - and all behind the safety car, the grand prix started three and a half hours late.

But after two laps, and with the spray flying, the race was abandoned with conditions deemed too dangerous at the Ardennes track where Formula Two driver Anthoine Hubert lost his life in 2019.

"Money talks. It was only two laps for the race to start - it's all a money scenario," said Hamilton who was third behind Verstappen and George Russell in the Williams.

"So since everyone gets their money back, I think the fans should get theirs too because unfortunately they couldn't see what they came for and paid for.

"I love racing in the rain, but today was different. You really couldn't see the car in front of you. There was aquaplaning. It was unfortunately just a disaster on the track. You couldn't really see five metres in front of you, the car in front was disappearing."

Hamilton, whose lead over Verstappen in the title race is now just three points, continued his criticism later.

"Today was a farce," the 36-year-old wrote on Instagram.

"The only people to lose out are the fans. We were sent out for one reason and one reason only."

"We should have just called it quits, not risked the drivers and most importantly refunded the fans who are at the heart of all of our sport."

In a statement, the FIA and Formula One said they were 'disappointed for all the fans at the track and at home that today's race could not go to full distance, but the safety of the drivers, marshals and spectators must always be the priority'.

AFP

Cantlay edges DeChambeau in playoff to lift title

US PGA TOUR
BMW CHAMPIONSHIP

Washington, US - American Patrick Cantlay drained a 17-foot birdie putt at the sixth playoff hole on Sunday to deny fellow countrymate Bryson DeChambeau and win the US PGA Tour BMW Championship.

Cantlay secured his fifth Tour title - and his third of the year - when DeChambeau was unable to get his own eight-foot birdie attempt to drop, an agonising defeat for a player who had looks at potential tournament-winning

putts at the 72nd hole and first three playoff holes.

"I'm as focused as I can be on every single shot, and I try not to let my mind get past the moment that I'm in," Cantlay said.

"Then I kind of let the chips fall where they do. I try not to get caught up in being out-driven 45 yards or whatever it is. I just try and lock in and do my absolute best in that moment, and my best is pretty good."

The last-group playing partners started the day tied for the lead and carded six-under

par 66s to finish on 27-under 261 - four strokes in front of South Korean Im Sung-jae.

The victory in the second of three PGA Tour playoff events sends Cantlay into the concluding Tour Championship atop the playoff standings and in pole position to claim the FedEx Cup top prize of US\$15mn.

Cantlay rolled in a 21-foot birdie putt at the 72nd hole to pull even, piling the pressure on DeChambeau who couldn't get his 12-foot birdie attempt for the win to drop.

Patrick Cantlay celebrates with the trophies at Caves Valley Golf Club in Maryland, US, on Sunday (AFP)



I just try and lock in and do my absolute best in that moment, and my best is pretty good

PATRICK CANTLAY

DeChambeau had taken a one-shot lead with a birdie at the par-five 16th, and appeared to be in full control when Cantlay hit

his tee shot into the water at the par-three 17th.

But both players ended up with bogey there, Cantlay making a clutch eight-footer to limit the damage as DeChambeau's poor chip from the greenside rough left him a ten-footer for par that he missed.

The two had been neck-and-neck all day, DeChambeau using his long-hitting aggressive style and Cantlay a more methodical approach. "My game feels really good," Cantlay said.

AFP

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FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Senegal will be wary against Togo

2022 FIFA WORLD CUP
AFRICAN QUALIFIERS

Johannesburg, South Africa - Sadio Mane-inspired Senegal hope history does not repeat itself when they host unfancied Togo on Wednesday as the group phase of 2022 World Cup qualifying in Africa kicks off.

The last time the Senegalese Teranga Lions attempted to make successive appearances at the global football showcase they were upstaged as the Togolese Sparrowhawks went to the 2006 tournament instead.

Senegal had to wait until 2018 to grace the World Cup stage again and suffered a heart-breaking first-round exit, losing out to Japan on fair-play points.

The west African nation begin Group H, which also includes Congo Brazzaville and Namibia, as hot favourites to win the six-round mini-league and secure a place in the final qualifying round.

It is easy to see why as Mane is one of many stars coach Aliou Cisse can call on for the clash with Togo in Thies, a city 70 km (44 miles) east of the capital, Dakar.

The Senegal 'spine' consists of Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy, Napoli centre-back Kalidou Koulibaly, Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Idrissa Gueye and Liverpool forward Mane.



A file photo of Senegal and Liverpool's striker Sadio Mane

But France-born Claude le Roy, known as the 'godfather' of African coaches having spent four decades working in the continent, had a warning for the star-stacked squad.

"Senegal are clear favourites to win the group, but favourites were created to be beaten," the former Togo coach told reporters. "Across six rounds, you can have shocks."

Le Roy was replaced this year by Paulo Duarte, one of three Portuguese coaches handling teams in the group phase, who previously guided Burkina Faso twice and Gabon.

Algeria record

Senegal are among ten top seeds who have home advantage against bottom seeds in the opening matchday, which spans three days.

WEDNESDAY'S FIXTURES

At Douala, Cameroon:
Central African Republic vs Cape Verde
At Nouakchott, Mauritania:
Guinea-Bissau vs Guinea
At Thies, Senegal:
Senegal vs Togo

At Agadir, Morocco:
Mali vs Rwanda
At Benghazi, Libya:
Libya vs Gabon
(Note: Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau and Mali playing at neutral venues because they lack international-standard stadiums)

Algeria, who created an African record 27-match unbeaten run with a friendly win in Tunisia two months ago, host Djibouti in a match between nations 152 places apart in the world rankings.

While many observers fear the Riyad Mahrez-captained African champions could bury the minnows under a goal avalanche in Group A, France-born Djibouti coach Julien Mette is upbeat.

"I believed before the draw there was a good chance we would get Algeria. It is a beautiful story for us, the ultimate minnows, to face the champions of Africa," he says.

Seeking a fourth straight World Cup appearance, Nigeria will look to English Premier League forwards Kelechi Iheanacho of Leicester City and Alex Iwobi of Everton for Group C goals against Liberia in Lagos.

This section is completed by the Central African Republic and Cape Verde, who get the group phase under way on Wednesday afternoon.

Cameroon were the unluckiest top seeds, being paired with equally powerful Ivory Coast in Group D, which is completed by modest southern Africa sides Mozambique and Malawi.

But Cameroon coach Antonio 'Toni' Conceicao is fully focused on Malawi, who they face in Yaounde on Friday, saying the visitors are 'coming to cause us problems'.

"Malawi are physically strong and will fight from the first whistle to the last," said the Portuguese. "Nowadays, there are no easy matches in Africa."

"We have to be creative, find space in what will probably be a crowded Malawi half of the pitch, and shoot at goal whenever the possibility arises." AFP

Mo Salah unavailable for Egypt

London, UK - Liverpool star Mohamed Salah will be a notable absentee for Egypt due to coronavirus travel restrictions. Salah plays for Egypt, who are on the United Kingdom travel 'red list', and he

would have to quarantine for ten days when he returns from his homeland, sidelining him for four fixtures. Both FIFA and CAF have pleaded, without success, for British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to exempt African foot-

ballers on World Cup duty. Stars in other European countries could also be affected as the pandemic continues to wreak havoc with an African group schedule that has already been delayed three times.



Mohamed Salah

Spanish League loses appeal over release of South American players

Madrid, Spain - Barcelona's match against Sevilla next month is one of two games that have been postponed by Spanish League (La Liga) in Spain after it lost an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) over the release of players for upcoming South American World Cup qualifiers.

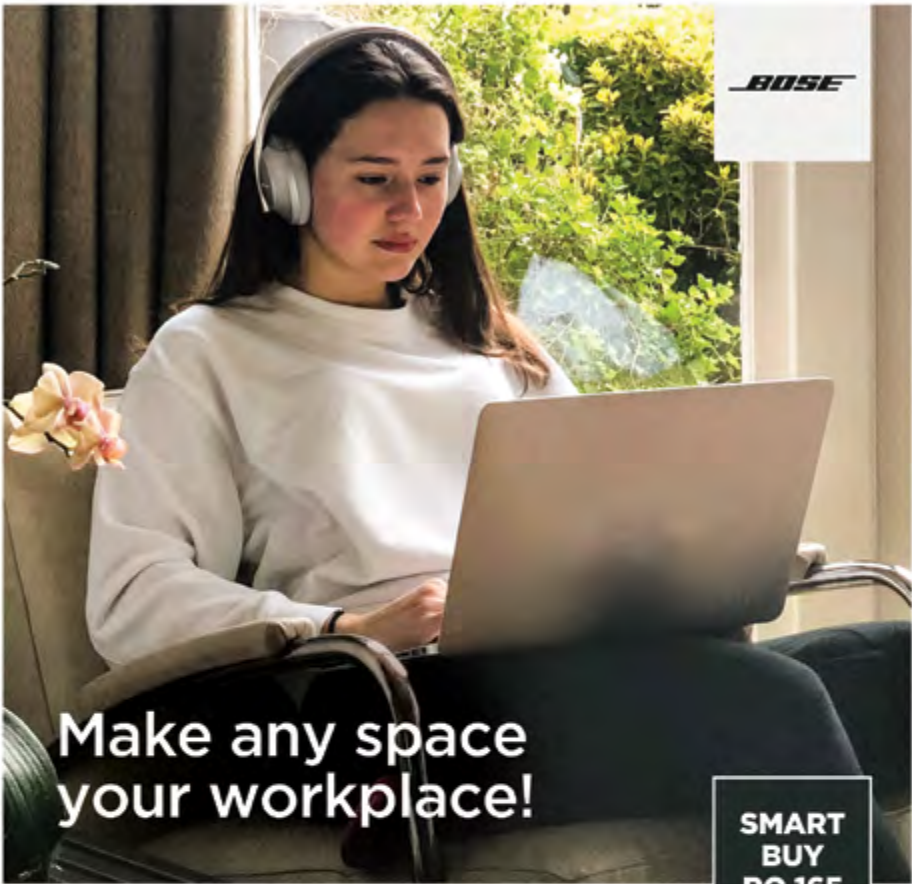
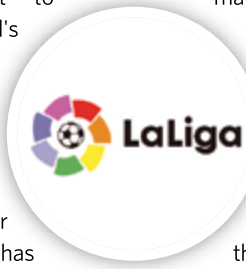
Barcelona's visit to Seville and Villarreal's home game with Alaves were both due to be played on September 11. However, they will now go ahead at a later date, while La Liga has also decided to shake up the remaining fixtures for that weekend after the failure of its appeal.

La Liga had contested FIFA's insistence that players be released for duty with their countries, with South American national teams each playing three World Cup qualifiers between September 2 and 9.

It had complained that FIFA had unilaterally extended the September international window by two days to allow the South American confederation, to organise the matches. It means that Spain-based players may not return to their clubs until September 10, leaving them next to no time to prepare for matches that weekend.

"It is obvious that they would not be in a condition to compete properly for their clubs," La Liga said in a statement, adding that it went to the CAS to 'defend the integrity of the competition and the rights of the clubs affected'.

Among the players called up by South American nations for the qualifiers are Real Madrid's Brazilians Eder Militao, Casemiro and Vinicius Jr, and nine Argentinians, including Rodrigo and Angel Correa of Atletico Madrid. AFP



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New Zealand's players attend a practice session at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka on Monday ahead of their T20I match against Bangladesh (AFP)

NZ brace for Bangladesh spin onslaught in T20Is

BANGLADESH VS NEW ZEALAND

Dhaka, Bangladesh - Bangladesh will be looking for a famous new scalp when they take on a weakened New Zealand side in a Twenty20 international series starting on Wednesday. Bangladesh beat Australia 4-1 in a T20I series this month on the back of strong bowling performances, and New Zealand are expecting the home side's spin and slow seam lineup to be on the offensive once again. Another series win would be a big boost for Bangladesh ahead of the T20 World Cup in Oman and the UAE, starting in less than

two months. New Zealand are ranked third in the world and Bangladesh tenth in T20s. The home side have never beaten their opponents in a T20I in ten attempts. New Zealand won the only one of those games played on Bangladesh territory, by 15 runs in 2013. But since then, Bangladesh have become a tough proposition at home. An injury-hit Australia found out just how difficult Bangladesh's slow bowlers can be when they crashed to defeat in a series against them for the first time this month. New Zealand, who do not

have any members of their T20 World Cup squad taking part, are ready for a similar strategy. "We have a perception of how we think they will play based on having a look at it, and the recent Australia series," said stand-in coach Glenn Pocknall. "We are probably preparing for a slow and low wicket like the Australia series. We are not used to that. But if it has a bit more pace and bounce, we will be quite happy with that." Bangladesh, however, said they are not taking victory for granted. Batting coach Ashwell Prince

said New Zealand would also use the Australia series to prepare their counter-tactics. "They are a street-wise team who would plan meticulously against every batsmen, bowlers and pitches," he said. "They will use every bit of information to help them." Bangladesh have been bolstered by the return of Mushfiqur Rahim and Liton Das, who missed the Australia series due to strict COVID-19 protocol. The matches will be held behind closed doors on September 1, 3, 5, 8 and 10 at the Sher-

e-Bangla National Stadium in Dhaka. Bangladesh play the first round of the T20 World Cup in Oman and are grouped along with the hosts, Papua New Guinea and Scotland. The top-two teams from the group will advance to the Super12s, which will be played in the UAE. **SQUADS** **Bangladesh:** Mahmudullah Riyad, (capt), Shakib al Hasan, Mushfiqur Rahim, Soumya Sarkar, Liton Das, Mosaddek Hossain, Afif Hossain, Naim Sheikh, Nurul

Hasan Sohan, Shamim Hossain, Rubel Hossain, Mustafizur Rahman, Taskin Ahmed, Mohammad Saifuddin, Shoriful Islam, Taijul Islam, Mahedi Hasan, Aminul Islam Biplob, Nasum Ahmed. **New Zealand:** Tom Latham (capt), Hamish Bennett, Tom Blundell, Doug Bracewell, Colin de Grandhomme, Jacob Duffy, Matt Henry, Scott Kuggeleijn, Cole McConchie, Henry Nicholls, Ajaz Patel, Rachin Ravindra, Ben Sears, Blair Tickner, Will Young. AFP



Vasu Paranjape

Paranjape, mentor to greats like Gavaskar, dies at 82

Mumbai, India - One of the unsung heroes of Indian cricket, Vasudeo Paranjape, passed away at his residence in Mumbai on Monday after a prolonged illness. Paranjape, popularly known as Vasu, was three months short of turning 83. He is survived by his wife, two daughters and a son Jatin, a former Mumbai batter, who also played four ODIs and recently co-authored a book about his father titled *Cricket Drona*. While Paranjape's playing career was short - 29 first-class matches for Mumbai and Baroda - he became a household name by mentoring the likes of Sunil Gavaskar, Dilip Vengsarkar, Sanjay Manjrekar and Rohit Sharma, helping them reach impressive heights in all forms of cricket. Paranjape's gift was such that even a few overseas players like former England batter Ed Smith would come to him for advice. Paranjape would also be remembered for giving Gavaskar the global nickname 'Sunny'. Cricinfo

Kusal back in Sri Lanka squad against S Africa

SRI LANKA VS SOUTH AFRICA

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Kusal Perera makes his return to the Sri Lanka limited-overs squad for South Africa's tour of the island, following a bout with COVID-19. According to medical staff, it seems unlikely that he will be available for the ODI leg of the tour, as he builds up his fitness after recovering from the disease. But as cardiac and pulmonary screenings have cleared him to play, it is hoped that he will be available for the T20I series. Meanwhile, veteran seamer Nuwan Pradeep, and experienced batter Dinesh Chandimal return as well, on the back of good performances in the recently-concluded domestic T20 tournament. Younger players also found places in the squad thanks to their form in



Kusal Perera

SLC's Invitational T20 League. Leg-spinner Pulina Tharanga, who was joint-highest wicket-taker, and Kamindu Mendis, who was the second-highest scorer in the league are in. Off-spinner Maheesh Theekshana, and seam bowler Lahiru Madushanka did not quite

impress to the same extent, but have found places nonetheless. Omitted from the squad are the likes of left-arm wrist-spinner Lakshan Sandakan, seam bowler Kasun Rajitha, and middle order batter Ashen Bandara, each of whom had modest outings in the limited overs series against India,

Omitted from the squad are spinner Lakshan Sandakan, pacer Kasun Rajitha, and batter Ashen Bandara

in July. Pradeep, meanwhile, had been left out for that India tour, but comes back in. Chandimal had been captain of the SLC Reds team that made the final of that tournament, and had hit 183 runs in six innings. He has played only three T20Is since 2019. Sri Lanka's captain, Dasun Shanaka, comes into the series with excellent domestic form as well, having easily been the top-scorer in the Invitational

League, thumping 258 runs at a strike rate of 184. The tour will comprise three ODIs and three T20Is, all to be played at Khettarama, in Colombo. The first ODI is set to be played on September 2. **Sri Lanka squad:** Dasun Shanaka (capt), Dhananjaya de Silva, Kusal Perera, Dinesh Chandimal, Avishka Fernando, Bhanuka Rajapaksa, Pathum Nissanka, Charith Asalanka, Wanindu Hasaranga, Kamindu Mendis, Minod Bhanuka, Ramesh Mendis, Chamika Karunaratne, Nuwan Pradeep, Binura Fernando, Dushmantha Chameera, Akila Dananjaya, Praveen Jayawickrema, Lahiru Kumara, Lahiru Madushanka, Pulina Tharanga, Maheesh Theekshana. AFP



Washington Sundar

Bangalore's Sundar ruled out of IPL

IPL 2021

Bengaluru, India - Royal Challengers Bangalore allrounder Washington Sundar has been ruled out of the second half of the IPL 2021 due to a finger injury. Bengal medium pacer Akash Deep, who is also a net bowler with the franchise, has been named as his replacement. Washington picked up three wickets in six matches at an average of 32.11 in the first half of IPL 2021. The off-spinner has accumulated 19 wickets in 32 matches for the Virat Kohli-led team since joining the franchise in 2018. Deep was the second-highest wicket-taker for Bengal with seven scalps from five matches at an average of 19.28 in the 2021 Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy. The 24-year old has taken 21 wickets at an average of 16.85 in 15 T20s. Deep has also been a regular for the state side across formats in the last two domestic seasons. "The move reiterates the focus RCB has on grooming and

nurturing young players as the team continues to develop exceptional talents and create a pathway for young talents to find their way into IPL and Indian cricket," the Royal Challengers' management said in a statement. This is the franchise's fifth replacement of the season. Earlier, they named Sri Lanka's Wanindu Hasaranga as Australian leg-spinner Adam Zampa's replacement and brought in Australia's Singapore-born Tim David as a replacement for New Zealander Finn Allen, while Australia quicks Daniel Sams and Kane Richardson were replaced by Dushmantha Chameera and George Garton. That apart, they also saw a change in the backroom personnel ahead of the season with Mike Hesson, the team's director of cricket operations, taking over the position of head coach from Simon Katich, who stepped down due to personal reasons. Cricinfo

Stuart Binny retires from all cricket

Mumbai, India - Stuart Binny, the former India allrounder who boasts the country's best bowling figures in ODIs, has announced his retirement from all forms of cricket with immediate effect. "It has given me tremendous joy to have represented my country at the highest international level," Binny, son of 1983 World Cup-winning allrounder Roger Binny and a two-time Ranji Trophy winner, said in a statement. "I would like to acknowledge the huge role the BCCI has played in my cricketing journey. Their support and faith over the years have been invaluable. My

cricketing journey would not even have started had it not been for Karnataka state and their support. It has been an honour to captain and win trophies with my state. Binny, 37, represented India across 23 matches - six Tests, 14 ODIs and three T20Is. His first-class career spanned nearly 17 years, and he played the bulk of those 95 matches for his home state Karnataka; his standout domestic season was in 2013-14 when he scored 443 runs at 43.22 and took 14 wickets at 32.64, playing a key role in Karnataka's run to the Ranji Trophy title. Overall, he ended his first-class career with



Stuart Binny

4796 runs and 146 wickets. However, Binny's finest hour arguably came in India colours. After being selected for a tour of Bangladesh in 2014, Binny returned six for four - the best

ever by an Indian in the format - in the second ODI in Mirpur. Binny was a surprise inclusion in the squad for the five-Test series in England in 2014, and with India looking for an extra bowling option, he made his debut in the first Test at Trent Bridge. There was little help for him on an uncharacteristically dry and slow track, and he finished wicketless in the ten overs he bowled, but he played a crucial role with the bat in India's second innings, calming their nerves after a mini-collapse on the final day and helping save the Test with an innings of 78. Binny remained a regular in

India's ODI squads, though his playing opportunities were limited. He went to the 2015 World Cup, but didn't get to play a match. He last played an international match in 2016, a T20I against West Indies. Binny began his IPL career with Mumbai Indians in 2010. He was a regular member of the Rajasthan Royals line-up from 2011 to 2015, and, following the team's suspension ahead of the 2016 season, was signed up by his home franchise Royal Challengers Bangalore. Binny, who is a certified NCA Level-2 coach, said that he will now foray into the world of coaching. Cricinfo

FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Messi makes PSG debut as Mbappe steals the show

FRENCH LEAGUE

Paris, France - Lionel Messi came on as a substitute to make his Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) debut on Sunday but Kylian Mbappe stole the show by scoring both goals in a 2-0 win against Reims in Ligue 1.

Messi, wearing the No 30 jersey, came off the bench in the 66th minute to replace Neymar at the Stade Auguste-Delaune, where fans in the sell-out 21,000 crowd had earlier chanted his name as he emerged to warm up.

The Argentine had not played since arriving in Paris from Barcelona almost three weeks ago, his last appearance in any game dating back to the Copa America final on July 11, when he led his country to victory against Brazil.

The six-time Ballon d'Or winner will have to wait for his first goal with his new club, and his first start, which could come when PSG host Clermont in their next match on September 11.

"I'm very happy that he made his debut. It was very important for him," PSG coach Mauricio Pochettino told broadcaster Amazon Prime after Messi's low-key first appearance in a PSG shirt.

"He is still far away from his best form but he has been training well and he will be fit in the next two weeks, after the international break and, yes, we are waiting for the best from him."

The week leading up to this game had been dominated not by Messi but by talk of Mbappe's future, with Real Madrid reportedly having two offers for the France World Cup-winning striker rejected. The lat-

He is still far away from his best form but he has been training well and he will be fit in the next two weeks, after the international break and, yes, we are waiting for the best from him

MAURICIO POCHETTINO, PSG COACH

est of these offers was understood to be worth US\$212mn, an astronomical amount for a player whose contract expires at the end of the season and who will be free to negotiate a deal with a new club in January without PSG being able to get a transfer fee.

That amount is also equal to what PSG paid Monaco in 2017 to sign Mbappe, who was clearly eager to go out on a high if this was to be his final appearance for the club.



PSG's forward Kylian Mbappe (C) plays the ball in front of his teammate Lionel Messi (R) during the French League match against Reims in Reims, France, on Sunday night (AFP)



Atletico Madrid's Luis Suarez celebrates his goal against Villarreal on Sunday night (AFP)

Own-goal howler rescues point for Atletico

SPANISH LEAGUE

Madrid, Spain - Champions Atletico Madrid missed the chance to go clear at the top in Spain on Sunday but came from behind twice to draw 2-2 with Villarreal thanks to a howler of a late own goal.

In the fifth minute of injury time, an horrific back-pass from Villarreal's Aissa Mandi left his 'keeper stranded and the ball rolled agonisingly into the goal to give Atletico a point. Luis Suarez was on target for the first equaliser for Atletico.

Manu Triguera and then Arnaut Danjuma put the visitors ahead twice before the late blunder left Atletico on seven points from three games.

"That's the joy of not losing a match that was heading in that direction," Atletico coach Diego Simeone said.

Real Madrid top the early Liga standings but Sevilla, Valencia, Barcelona, Mallorca and now Atletico also have seven.

Triguera opened for the visitors shooting into the top corner on 52 minutes, but Suarez pounced inside the box to bring it level four minutes later.

Dutch new signing Danjuma then ran into space to score his first goal for Villarreal and make it 2-1 on 74 minutes.

Atletico piled on the pressure until the own goal allowed the champions a point for their endeavours.

OTHER RESULTS

Cadiz 2 Osasuna 3, Rayo Vallecano 4 Granada 0. AFP

Giroud, Abraham get off the mark in Italy

ITALIAN LEAGUE

Milan, Italy - Olivier Giroud and Tammy Abraham both got off the mark in Serie A on Sunday as the former Chelsea men helped their new teams AC Milan and Roma to comfortable victories which gave them two wins from the season's opening two fixtures.

France forward Giroud bagged a brace in a 4-1 win over Cagliari at the San Siro while Abraham scored in a 4-0 rout at promoted Salernitana.

Both strikers left European champions Chelsea this summer in the search of more regular football and have got off to quick starts in Italy.

Giroud has been given the No 9 jersey at Milan and scored the third and fourth in an easy victory at the San Siro.

His name was sung by a large portion of the 31,000 Milan fans present, who watched their team run riot in a highly entertaining first half which won the match for Stefano Pioli's team.



AC Milan's Olivier Giroud celebrates after scoring against Cagliari (AFP)

"I am very proud to play for Milan and to play in the San Siro stadium. It is a great emotion," Giroud said.

Sandro Tonali gave Milan a 12th minute lead with a stunning free-kick which was also his first Milan goal, and Rafael Leao claimed the second after Alessandro Deiola's surprise header levelled the scores.

Giroud then artfully guided

minute at Salernitana as a flurry of second half goals gave Jose Mourinho's team a comprehensive win in the Italian south.

Roma struggled to break down the hosts in the opening period but a double from Lorenzo Pellegrini and a third goal in two games from Jordan Veretout gave the capital club a deserved win.

"I was perfectly calm right from the start. The team played really well... Again tonight, we dominated the match," said Mourinho.

Both teams sit in a pack of five on a perfect six points, which also includes leaders Lazio, Inter Milan and Napoli, who earlier got a hard-fought 2-1 win at Genoa thanks to Andrea Petagna's late header.

Sassuolo and Sampdoria played out a goalless draw in the other early match, with Emil Audero putting in a great performance in the Samp goal to escape with a point.

AFP

Abraham on target

Abraham meanwhile crashed home the third in the 69th

Halep and Muguruza among early winners



Romania's Simona Halep in action during her first-round match against Italy's Camila Giorgi on Monday

New York, US - Two-time Grand Slam champion Simona Halep, battling back from injury, advanced to the second round of the US Open on Monday as the hardcourts showdown began before full-capacity crowds. The 29-year-old Romanian 12th seed defeated Italy's Camila Giorgi 6-4, 7-6 (7/3) to book a second-round match against Slovakian lucky loser Kristina Kucova, who beat American Ann Li 7-5, 6-1.

Halep, the 2018 French Open and 2019 Wimbledon champion, tore a left calf muscle at the Italian Open, missed the French Open and Wimbledon, then suffered a right thigh injury at Cincinnati, but made a solid New York start.

Halep fired six aces and won

83% of her first serve points, hitting 14 winners against 16 unforced errors while taking advantage of 31 unforced errors by Giorgi, ranked 36th in the world and winner of the Canadian Open this month.

Also advancing to the second round was ninth seed Garbiñe Muguruza. The Spanish survived a gruelling first-round battle against Croatian Donna Vekic before winning 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/5) at the Louis Armstrong Stadium.

Muguruza, a two-time Grand Slam winner, had struggled to string together victories in the

leadup to the US Open, going 1-2 through the US Open Series after reaching the quarterfinals at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Defending champion Naomi Osaka, seeking her third US Open crown in four years, was set for the feature night match at Arthur Ashe Stadium against 87th-ranked Czech Marie Bouzkova.

Also on Monday, Australian Open runner-up Jennifer Brady withdrew from the US Open because of an injury. Brady, a semifinalist last year in Flushing Meadows, has not played competitively since being forced to retire from her

second-round match against Jelena Ostapenko in Cincinnati. Ostapenko, the 2017 French Open champion, also pulled out Monday for medical reasons.

On the men's side, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga also withdrew. The 2008 Australian Open finalist has a right leg injury.

Pliskova to miss coach

Karolina Pliskova will miss her German coach during her quest for a maiden Grand Slam title at the US Open after he failed to get a US visa, her team said on Monday. "Sascha Bajin sought to get the US visa for a long time, but he failed," Pliskova's manager and husband Michal Hrdlicka said on her website.

Agencies

