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OMRAN, AL RAID GROUP IN FORBES' LIST
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Oman reaffirms support for progress of GCC march



Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, led Oman's delegation at the 42nd session of the GCC Supreme Council, in

Riyadh on Tuesday.

On behalf of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, Crown Prince,

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of Saudi Arabia, chaired the meeting of the session.

In a statement upon his arrival, Sayyid Fahd said he was ho-

noured to convey the greetings and best wishes of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to his brethren, the GCC leaders.

"Since its foundation, the GCC has accomplished much in differ-

ent fields. This reflects the member states' conviction in the importance of cooperation and collaboration to meet the aspirations of the GCC peoples.

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(Calligraphy by Saleh al Shukairi)

Arabic calligraphy on Unesco Intangible Cultural Heritage list

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman, represented by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, through a joint Arab nomination file, succeeded in registering Arabic calligraphy in Unesco's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The declaration came during the meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which is currently being held in Paris and continues till December 18.

The joint file was submitted under the supervision of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, with the participation of 16 Arab countries, and was presented at the beginning of 2020 to Unesco for consideration.

It met all the criteria for inclusion of cultural elements in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The 16 Arab countries are Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Saudi

Arabic calligraphy is spread throughout all territories of the 16 nominating states

Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Arabic calligraphy is spread throughout all territories of the nominating states. Although it is associated with the Arabic language, there are regions and areas within these states in which it is used where the mother language of the local communities is not Arabic, for example Nubia in Egypt and Sudan, Amazigh regions in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Mauritania, Circassian neighbourhoods in Amman - Jordan, Kurdish and Turkmen areas in Iraq and Lebanon.

In all nominating states, the bearers and practitioners of Arabic calligraphy are mostly members of urban communities, where it is practised in daily life.

Arabic calligraphers include individuals of both genders belonging to different religious groups and ethnic communities using Arabic script.

Pfizer jabs give 70% protection against Omicron

Johannesburg, South Africa - Two shots of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine offers around 70 per cent protection against severe disease from Omicron, according to results of a study published Tuesday in South Africa.

The emergence of the highly mutated variant, first detected in South Africa last month, sparked

fears that it could cause severe disease, be more contagious or could evade vaccines.

Early indicators suggest that it could be more transmissible, but promising data so far has suggested that vaccines still offer protection against Omicron.

The latest research out of South Africa suggested that two

doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine still offered protection against serious illness.

"The double dose of Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine showing 70 per cent effectiveness in reducing risk of hospitalisation," said Ryan Noach, head of South Africa's leading private health insurance company, Discovery, which co-

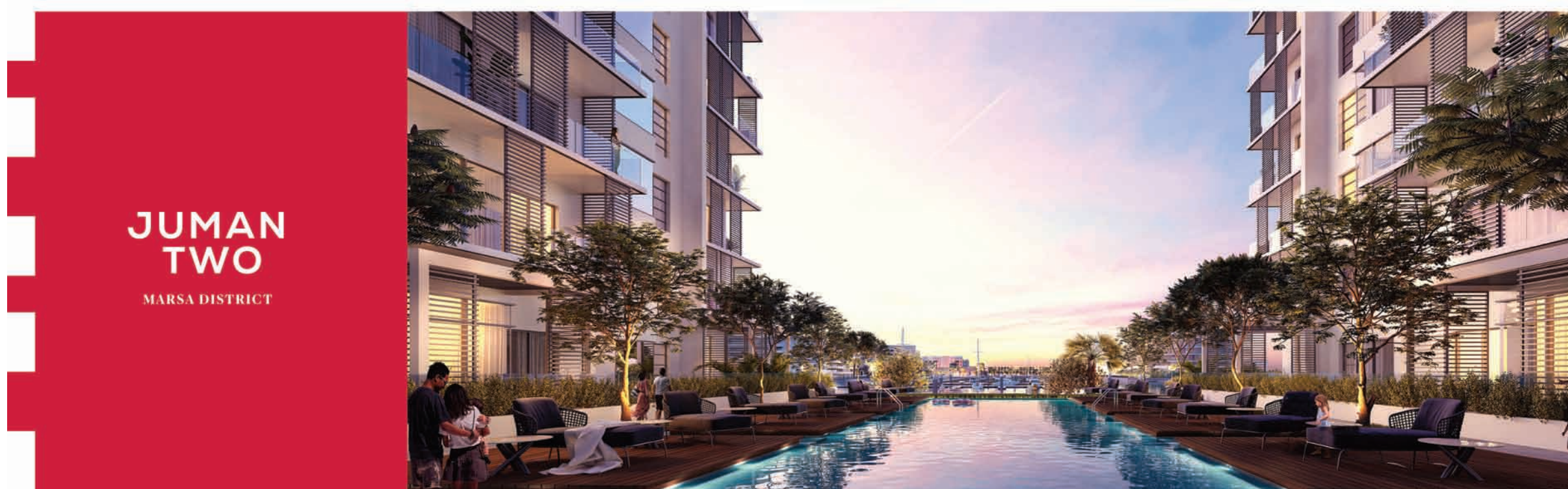
led the study. Two doses of the vaccine offered 93 per cent protection against earlier variants, according to the companies.

The study was based on the results of 78,000 PCR tests taken in South Africa between November 15 and December 7 and was conducted by Discovery along with the South African

Medical Research Council. "We are extremely encouraged by the results," said the council's head Glenda Gray.

But Noach warned that despite the protection offered by two doses, hospitals could still be overrun since Omicron is spreading rapidly in South Africa.

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'Oman's contribution to stability in Middle East deserves praise'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Ukraine considers Oman one of the major players in the Middle East and attaches great importance to development of bilateral relations, people-to-people ties, and cooperation with international organisations, according to Dmytro Senik, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.

Senik, who was in Oman last week, said, "Ukraine follows the developments in the Gulf and the entire Middle East region. In this context, Oman's contribution to strengthening peace and stability in the region, as well as its proactive role as a mediator, deserve the highest praise."

According to the minister, Ukraine and Oman share the same values. "We have the same goals of promoting bilateral ties, and boosting B2B and people-to-people contacts. I remain personally committed to the further expansion of cooperation between our two countries in all spheres of common interest. We should continue our efforts aimed at developing contacts between our nations, in particular through visits of high-ranking government representatives," he added.

During his visit, Senik meet H E Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali bin Issa al Harthi, Undersecretary for



(Supplied photo)

An indicator of the potential our countries have in trade is the fact that over the last ten months our bilateral trade turnover has grown 78 per cent compared to last year

DMYTRIO SENIK

Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry. "We discussed various aspects of bilateral relations, outlined priorities in our political agenda, trade and investment cooperation for further development, as well as collaboration with international organisations," he informed.

On the trade and economic

front, Senik said Ukraine regards the sultanate as a promising trade partner in the Gulf region. "We are keen to develop economic cooperation with Oman. Despite the negative economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, our bilateral trade turnover increased 21 per cent. It is a positive trend but our real

potential is yet to be explored. An indicator of the immense potential our countries have in trade is the fact that over the last ten months our bilateral trade turnover has grown 78 per cent compared to last year."

He noted that this is the reason for Ukraine's particular emphasis on promoting business-to-business contacts. "We have good cooperation with Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In the last three years, we've had a number of fruitful business events - in Muscat in 2018 and Kyiv in 2019 - with participants from Ukraine and Oman Chamber of Com-

merce and Industry from Sharqiyah North and Buraimi governorates."

Senik also noted that tourism has prospective for the two countries, which will contribute to further strengthening of bilateral relations.

Ukraine has waived visas for citizens of Oman and other Gulf states due to which the country witnesses a significant increase in tourists from the region during summers. "Taking this opportunity, I would like to invite everyone to visit Ukraine during the winter season to see our country from a completely different perspective," he said.



Over RO24mn to develop Muscat, Salalah airports

Our Correspondent
Muscat

With the aim of adding new facilities in the cargo buildings and aircraft hangars at Muscat and Salalah airports, the Tender Board has approved funds worth over RO24mn.

The approval of RO24,589,420 to develop Muscat and Salalah airports came during the board's seventh meeting, which was held recently under the chairmanship of H E Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy and chairman of the Tender Board.

The project aims to complete the implementation of electromechanical works and equipment related to the facilities of the cargo buildings and

hangars in the two airports and carry out repair works. The funds will also be used to train staff in the latest technology.

2.8mn passengers

The number of passengers who travelled through Oman's airports this year till the end of September dropped 26.5 per cent compared to the same period in 2020.

A statement issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information said, "The number of passengers travelling through the airports of Oman (Muscat International Airport, Salalah Airport, Sohar Airport and Duqm Airport) in 2021 till the end of September was 2,870,810, compared to 3,908,289 in the same period in 2020."

Oman reaffirms support for progress of GCC march

Continued from Page 01

"Developments in the regional and international arenas have had repercussions on the region's countries. This requires the member states to exert more efforts and coordinate their stands to address the ensuing challenges and implications, so that they can focus on domestic development in a climate of security and stability," he said.

Sayyid Fahd added that Oman reaffirms its constant support for the advancement of the GCC march. "Oman also expresses its appreciation for the efforts exerted by Saudi Arabia."

He expressed his gratitude and appreciation to Prince Mohammed for the great role and effort he is exerting in the interest of the GCC countries.

Earlier in the evening, Prince Mohammad received Sayyid

Fahd upon his arrival at King Khalid International Airport.

Sayyid Fahd is accompanied by an official delegation comprising Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, Dr Abdullah bin Mohammed al Saidi, Minister of Justice and Legal Affairs, Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, Ambassador of Oman to Saudi Arabia, and others.

17 new cases of COVID-19: MoH

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) announced 17 new cases of COVID-19 on Tuesday, taking the total number of positive cases to 304,741 in Oman. No new related deaths were reported.

The total number of deaths stands at 4,113, the MoH said, adding that eight new cases have



recovered, accounting for a total of 300,111 recoveries. Nine COVID-19 patients are in health institutions, including three in intensive care units.

No side effects

MoH also stated that no side effects or severe complications have been recorded as a result of receiving COVID-19 vaccines in the sultanate.

'Oman has not recorded any side effects or severe complications as a result of receiving COVID-19 vaccine of any type approved in the sultanate since the commencement of the nationwide vaccination campaign.'

It called on all to complete the prescribed vaccine doses.

'Vaccination will protect you and your community,' MoH stated.

OPINION

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

The notion of time varies with age. When you are a child, waiting half an hour before cake is ready seems like ages. When you grow slightly older, waiting for the summer vacation or Christmas seems like an eternal wait. Later in life, you wish you had more time.

With age, the perception of the duration of time changes. Later in life, it seems that hours, days, weeks, months and years pass by at increasing speed. The children you saw born, suddenly are married, have children and you wonder when all this happened. How come you did not realise the passing of time?

We spend our lives not realising that the value and significance of things are at that right moment, not yesterday, nor tomorrow.

In the Middle East, people live either in memory of a glorious and simpler life or in a future unlikely to happen, like in most of the poems of the region's poets. The Western world lives in today's time; talking about future, or selecting what to remember from the past. We see, for example, in some countries, statues of celebrities are removed after 50 or 100 years, because some

have revealed that these personalities were involved in some negative things, or had some activities which are condemnable in today's views. Some other countries, like China or India, have a future vision which forces their people to share future views, even if the goals seem very far away, and unfortunately forgetting the present time.



CARPE DIEM

In ancient times, the Romans had an expression - 'Carpe Diem'.

The phrase carpe diem was used by the Roman poet Horace to express the idea that one should enjoy life while one can. What is the meaning of carpe diem? Carpe diem is a Latin phrase that can be translated literally as 'pluck the day', though it is more widely trans-

lated as 'seize the day'.

In most GCC countries, the political vision given to the people talk about the bright future of tomorrow. But what about today? When the younger generation understands that the future is today and it depends on what we do today, the real world becomes available to them. Often, at later stages of life, we regret not having spent enough time studying, travelling, taking care of our bodies, etc. But then we realise that it is too late. The opportunities are there today and probably not there tomorrow.

Planning our future starts from today not tomorrow. In Oman, which has a vast majority of youth, preparing for the future must start from today. People have to realise that their future is built by them and not by governments.

Mother Teresa said, 'Yesterday is gone, tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin!'

Technology is taking over our lives, because we are not there observing its rapid progress while we are dreaming of an imaginary future. When we realise reality, it appears to be too late. Time is an illusion.

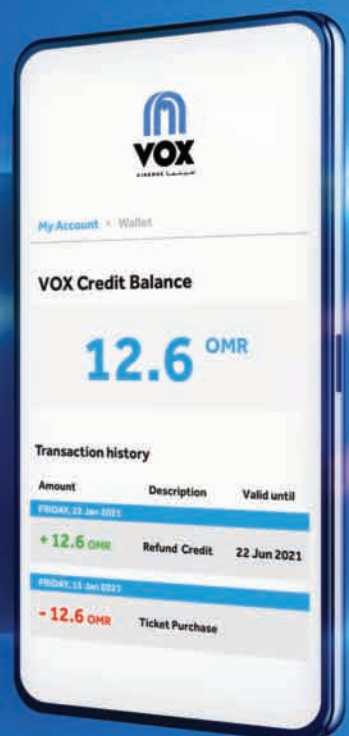
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TOP 50 REAL ESTATE DEVELOPERS IN MENA 2021

2 Omani firms in Forbes' list of developers

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Two companies from Oman have been included in *Forbes Middle East's* Top 50 Real Estate Developers in MENA 2021 list. It features firms that have delivered some of the most significant projects in the region this year.

Omran Group, the executive arm of the sultanate for tourism development, is ranked 35th and Al Raid Group, which has delivered more than 20 projects across Oman with over 1.3mn sqm of projects, is placed 48th.

Dubai-based Emaar Properties tops the list with total assets valued at US\$34bn as at the end of September 2021. Abu Dhabi's Aldar Properties is placed sec-

Omran Group is ranked 35th and Al Raid Group, which has delivered more than 20 projects across Oman with over 1.3mn sqm of projects, is placed 48th

ond, with US\$11.3bn, followed by UAE's wasl Asset Management Group, which comprises three subsidiaries.

The developers featured on the list represent nine countries in the region. The UAE leads with 17 companies on the list, four of



which are in the top five. Eleven are headquartered in Saudi Arabia, followed by seven in Egypt, six in Kuwait, three in Qatar, two

each in Oman and Morocco, and one each in Bahrain and Jordan.

'The real estate market is the cornerstone of any economy –

the way it moves has a rippling effect across swathes of people. In the last couple of years, the global pandemic has caused sig-

nificant disruption to the real estate sector in most countries, with owners and renters having to make necessary adjustments

to business operations in response to restrictions on capacity and mobility,' the magazine stated.

Across the region, megaprojects are being developed by governments as well as private and semi-government developers, especially in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE. These projects are giving a huge boost to the regional construction sector, which also has a positive outlook over the next few years according to forecasts.

For the Top Real Estate Developers in MENA 2021 ranking, the magazine only looked at developers who have delivered their projects. 'We have not included some large developers across the region whose megaprojects are not yet functional,' it said.

Mwasalat launches smart transport app



Our Correspondent
Muscat

With an aim to improve the efficiency of the public transport network in the sultanate, Mwasalat launched a smart transport system on Tuesday.

On the occasion, a ceremony was held at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre under the patronage of H E Khamis Mohammed al Shamakhi, Undersecretary for Transport in the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

An official at Mwasalat said that the smart transport system aims to improve the efficiency of the public transport network, develop it using modern technologies and provide smart services to all segments of society.

"The system is considered the first of its kind in the Gulf region," he said.

Bader Mohammed Hamood al Nadabi, acting CEO of Mwasalat, said, "The smart

transport system will play a pivotal role in improving and developing the lines of the public transport network in the sultanate. The system, supported by artificial intelligence, will issue daily data and statistics on the movement of public transport users and their actual locations."

Nadabi said the Mwasalat app plays a key role in facilitating the transportation of community members via public buses through electronic purchase of tickets using smart phones.

"The app also aims to provide complete details of transportation routes and main bus routes, and identifies the most prominent tourist attractions, commercial sites and government headquarters that are linked by public transport lines."

He added that the app also provides all the necessary information about buses, and sends alerts of any dangers or obstacles on the roads.

"It will help drivers to communicate with the control centre

and report any emergency situation to be addressed immediately."

760,000 passengers

In August, Mwasalat announced that it transported 760,000 passengers in its bus services and 115,000 passengers in its ferry services in the first six months of 2021, ensuring commitment to COVID-19 precautionary measures for the safety of passengers.

'The number of Omani employees has reached 1,412 - an Omanisation rate of 90 per cent,' it said.

Mwasalat also stated that it introduced a number of initiatives during the pandemic, such as increasing the frequency of trips and reducing ticket prices.

The company also said it organised 17 training opportunities for jobseekers in some of its departments such as information technology, environmental health and safety, and human resources.

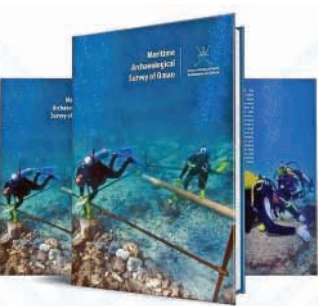
Ministry launches book showcasing Oman's underwater cultural heritage

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) launched a book titled *Maritime Archaeological Survey of Oman* on Tuesday.

A statement issued by MHT said that it launched the book in association with University of Southampton, England, and Western Australian Museum.

'The book includes a study of Omani coastal sites and samples collected from the archaeological sites surveyed. It has seven chapters, including details on an-



cient trade relations with countries like India, Portugal, China and Britain, and several bibliographic references, maps and geophysical surveys of underwater cultural heritage sites,'

it stated.

Launching the book, H E Ibrahim Said al Kharusi, Undersecretary for Heritage in the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, said, "The ministry established a scientific programme to study underwater antiquities in the sultanate in 2012.

"This culminated in developing the programme into an independent department concerned with underwater antiquities. This department is the first specialised unit in the field of underwater antiquities in the Arabian Gulf region."



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MOH/HQ-182/2021	Providing of Catering Services for Local Hospitals at North Al Sharqiyah Governorate	16/December /2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 12/January/2022	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-184/2021	Providing of Catering Services for Local Hospitals at North Al Sharqiyah Governorate	23/December/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 12/January /2022	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-187/2021	Supply of Surgical Consumables Items	23/December/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 12/January /2022	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-188/2021	Replacement of Main Water Purification Unit Reverse Osmosis (RO) at Haima Hospital, Governorate of Al Wusta.	20/December/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 12/January /2022	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-189/2021	Replacement of Sewage Treatment Plant in Wadi Al Tayeen Hospital at North Sharqiyah Governorate	20/December/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 19/January /2022	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-190/2021	Provision of Outsourcing Laundry and Ironing Services for Hospitals at Muscat Governorate	20/December/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 19/January /2022	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 50,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-191/2021	Provision of Extra Corporeal Photopheresis Treatment to patients referred by Ministry of Health	23/December/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 19/January /2022	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 26,600 Per set
MOH/HQ-192/2021	Supply of Laboratory Items (Covied-19)	16/December/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 22/December /2021	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-194/2021	Replacement of Treadmill Exercise System for Various Health Facilities	23/December/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 12/ January /2021	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-195/2021	Provision of Learning and Training Management System for Ministry of Health Employee	23/December/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 9/ January /2021	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	R.O 25,000 Per set
MOH/HQ-196/2021	Provision of Maintenance and Operation of Equipment at in Ibri Hospital and its Affiliated Healt Units at Al Dhahira Governorate	23/December/2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 19/ January /2021	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in Grade of Excellent	R.O 270,100 Per set

- All Specialized and interested Companies registered with Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board on the above mentioned Grade may obtain Tender documents from the E. Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- Tenders should be submitted on line on the given website signed and sealed. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee or a certified Cheque issued by a Local bank for not less than One percent (1%) for the Tender value validity for (90) days from the Tender Submission date, addressed to The Chairman of the Tender Committee before one day of date submission.
- The Original Bank Guarantee should be submitted to the office of Director of Purchase and Tenders one day before the submission date for all Tenders.
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.

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*Rates as on December 14
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

German Cabinet agrees €60bn climate investment plan

The new German government approved a €60bn climate investment plan in a Cabinet meeting on Monday, laying the first stone towards achieving its ambitious environmental targets.

The agreement was announced by Finance Minister Christian Lindner, who celebrated a 'booster' for Europe's top economy and 'the beginning of a climate-neutral and digital future for Germany'.

The investment in the new government's 'Climate and Transformation Fund', first announced on Friday, comes from unused debts intended to tackle the coronavirus.

The government had gained the approval from the German parliament to borrow €240.2bn this year to finance measures to lessen the impact of the pandemic on businesses but will now only need €180bn.

The fund, which builds on a previous 'Climate and Energy Fund', will hold 'around €76.2bn' after the supplementary budget measures are passed, Lindner said.

Islamic banking market share crosses 15% mark in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The market share of Oman's Islamic banking sector has crossed the 15 per cent threshold this year, thanks to the robust growth achieved by Islamic banks and windows over the past eight years.

With the achievement of this major milestone, Oman's Islamic banking sector has become systemically important in the sultanate, the Central Bank of Oman announced on Tuesday.

'Islamic Financial Services Board (IFSB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) consider a jurisdiction with 15 per cent market share as a systemically important Islamic banking system. As per IFSB Stability Report 2021, Oman has become 15th country in the world that has achieved this market share,' the CBO said in a statement.

Since the licensing of the first Islamic bank in Oman in December 2012, this landmark market share has been achieved in eight and half years with the active participation of two Islamic banks and five Islamic banking windows of conventional banks. Currently, Islamic banking entities are operating a total of 94 branches covering most geographical areas of the sultanate.

H E Tahir Salim al Amri, executive president of the CBO, said, "I am glad that Islamic banking sector in Oman has continued to expand its outreach and exhibited consistent growth since its



Central Bank of Oman is preparing a new strategy to ensure sustained growth of Islamic banking sector and its optimum contribution to the sultanate's economy

introduction eight years ago. Backed by robust legal, regulatory and Sharia'a governance framework for Islamic banking sector promulgated by the CBO, this sector has offered an additional option to the public for meeting their saving and financial needs, which has enhanced financial inclusion and boosted national saving and investment in Oman."

He said Islamic banking has helped corporates and busi-

nesses to raise, manage, invest and grow their capital and diversify their funding sources. He added that the introduction of Islamic banking has advanced entrepreneurship, competitiveness and diversification of Oman's economy.

"Similarly, the licensing of new players has expanded the sophistication and range of products in the financial sector, leading to more efficiency through better service quality,

product innovation and digitisation," H E Amri added.

Over 30% average yearly growth

Oman's Islamic banking sector has witnessed consistent and rapid growth since its introduction, with a combined average annual growth rate of 30.3 per cent between 2013 and 2020.

In order to ensure sustained growth and optimum contribution of Islamic banking sector to the Omani economy as well as the banking sector, CBO is preparing a new strategy for Islamic banking sector development.

'The main pillars of this strategy outline initiatives that focus on improving the existing regu-

latory infrastructure and consumer protection frameworks, augmenting product range offered by this sector and strengthening stakeholder coordination,' the CBO said.

The central bank said that the initiatives are also being envisaged to expand the outreach, nurturing Omani talent and boosting the awareness about the value proposition of Islamic finance products and services.

As of June 2021, Islamic banking assets have reached RO5.679bn (equivalent over US\$14.7bn), with a market share of 15.13 per cent. Similarly, market share of Islamic banking in gross financing and total deposits reached 16.9 per cent and 16.8 per cent, respectively.

This robust growth has been backed by high asset-quality with a low non-performance financing ratio of 1.93 per cent as of December 2020, CBO data showed.

Moreover, other stability indicators of Islamic banking sector all exceeded regulatory requirements with average capital adequacy ratio at 15.61 per cent against CBO requirement of 12.25 per cent as well as liquidity coverage ratio and net stable funding ratio of 116 per cent and 119 per cent against 100 per cent requirement.

Within the Islamic banking sector, two full-fledged Islamic banks contributed 41.3 per cent of assets as of June 2021 which was only 27.2 per cent in December 2015.

CBO issues RO47mn treasury bills

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A tender of the government treasury bills (issue number 552) was announced by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) this week.

The total value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO47mn, for a maturity period of 91 days, from December 15, 2021 until March 16, 2022. Average accepted price reached RO99.820 for every RO100 bill, while minimum accepted price also arrived at RO99.820.

Average discount rate and average yield reached 0.72027 per cent and 0.72157 per cent, respectively. Interest rate on the repo operations with the CBO is 0.5 per cent while the discount rate on the treasury bills discounting facility with the central bank is 0.75 per cent.

The treasury bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of Finance. These instruments provide licensed commercial banks an opportunity to invest their surplus funds. The Central Bank of Oman acts as the issue manager and provides added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (repo).

Furthermore, the treasury bills promote the local money market by creating a benchmark yield curve for short-term interest rates. The government may also resort to this instrument whenever felt necessary for financing its recurrent expenditures.

IEA sees 'more comfortable' year for global oil market in 2022

Paris, France - The Omicron coronavirus variant will slow the recovery in global demand for oil but the market will be 'more comfortable' in 2022, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said on Tuesday.

The oil market 'appears to stand on a better footing than it has for some time', the IEA wrote in its latest monthly report.

The emergence of Omicron at the end of November 'sparked a steep sell-off in oil, but initial pessimism has now given way to a more measured response', it said.

'The surge in new COVID-19 cases is expected to temporarily slow, but not upend, the recovery in oil demand,' the IEA wrote.

It said, "New containment measures put in place to halt the spread of the virus are likely to have a more muted impact on the economy versus previous COVID-19 waves, not least because of widespread vaccination campaigns."

The IEA said it had revised downwards its forecast for global



oil demand by an average 100,000 barrels per day (bpd) for both this year and next year due to new restrictions on international travel.

The agency said it is now pencilling in an increase in global oil demand of 5.4mn bpd in 2021 and by 3.3mn bpd in 2022, when it will return to pre-pandemic levels at 99.5mn bpd.

On the output side, global oil production was poised to outpace demand from December,

the IEA predicted, driven by higher production in the United States and the countries that make up the so-called OPEC+ group of oil producers.

Earlier this month, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and their allies agreed to stick to planned increases in output in January, despite the economic uncertainties linked to Omicron.

'As the upward supply trend extends into 2022, the US,

Canada and Brazil are set to pump at their highest-ever annual levels,' IEA said.

'Saudi Arabia and Russia could also set records, if remaining OPEC+ cuts are fully unwound.' This could lead to surplus supply of 1.7mn bpd in the first quarter of 2022 and 2mn bpd in the second quarter.

'If that were to happen, 2022 could indeed shape up to be more comfortable,' the IEA said. AFP

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CCED and partners renew their collaboration with MoE

Building on its legacy of giving back, CC Energy Development (CCED), along with its partners in Blocks 3 & 4, Mitsui E&P Middle East B V and Tethys Oil Block 3 & 4 Limited, have renewed their collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE) which started in the academic year 2019/2020 and continues in the academic year 2021/2022.

The programme 'For the country positive interaction and a sense of responsibility' aims to involve students from 44 government schools, who will be tasked with devising projects that address socio-economic challenges in their communities.

Dr Badriah Hamad al Masharfiya, head of Citizenship Studies, Department of Citizenship at the Ministry of Education said, "In alignment with Oman's Vision 2040, we are working to educate young people in a way that incorporates Oman's values and is consistent with the contemporary requirements of sustainable development and future skills.

"The private sector is key to helping us achieve this and we are pleased to be partnering once again with CCED and its partners for our latest initiative, which will usher new paths of development and encourage students to broaden their horizons and awareness of current issues."

Badar al Sariri, HR and external affairs director at CCED said, "We believe we have a responsi-



bility to share the economic and social benefits of our operations with the community around us. But more than that, we want to empower young people so they can have an active role in the future of their communities and their country.

"We are glad to be partnering once again with the Ministry of Education and engaging 44

schools in the academic year 2021/2022 to see a real impact of the initiative on Oman and hopefully, bring value for generations to come." Since the beginning of its operations in 2007, CCED and its partners have been focused on community and people development under its 'think global, act local' motto. Among its initiatives with the Ministry of

Education, CCED recently celebrated the successful completion of the Ministry of Education's book, along with many other initiatives across the fields of education, business development, as well as community and wellness.

CCED and its partners in Blocks 3 & 4, Mitsui E&P Middle East B V and Tethys Oil Block 3 & 4 Limited recently pledged

support for two youth-development organisations, Outward Bound Oman and Youth Vision.

That collaboration, which offers different kinds of skill-building courses, is part of CCED's CSR programme that is committed to empowering young, talented Omanis and creating long-term economic and social value for Oman.

NBO holds event on changes to compliance regulations

National Bank of Oman (NBO) recently conducted its latest series of sessions to raise awareness on security and anti-money laundering regulations. The 'Know your Customer' and 'Anti Money Laundering' workshops have become a key component in the bank's fight against fraud, educating corporate and government customers about topics such as identification requirements and their responsibilities under NBO's comprehensive transaction monitoring framework.

Hassan Abdul Amir Shaban, NBO's chief government and alliance officer, said, "At NBO we ensure we are always operating to the highest standards. In order to continuing to serve our customers as well as we possibly can, and in line with recent developments in the financial and regulatory environment, we invited them to learn about how we are keeping them safe and their responsibilities in adhering to current regulations.

"Meanwhile, we continue to act with transparency and in our customers' best interest, implementing the latest security methods, introducing new technologies, and supporting a secure, digital-based



financial sector."

NBO's identity verification tools and transactional approvals operate within Oman's regulatory guidelines, while contributing to an intuitive, personalised service for its customers. Its commitment to the highest security standards is in line with the bank's drive to set the benchmark for best-in-class banking experiences, as it continues to help its clients maintain due diligence and keep up to date with the ever-evolving rules and regulations.

In 2019, the bank also hosted the Anti Money Laundering Summit for the banking community, which included attendees from Central Bank of Oman, the Capital Market Authority, governmental authorities and NCFI.

OBG launches ESG CEO survey

A survey carried out by global research and advisory company Oxford Business Group (OBG) assesses the observations of international C-suite executives on a broad range of issues related to environmental, social and governance (ESG) principles, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their decision-making.

Titled 'Renewed focus: How the COVID-19 pandemic shaped priorities around ESG principles', this marks the first time the landmark survey has focused on ESG. Results comprise more than 350 respondents from across the regions covered by OBG, with questions concerning their current approach to ESG and incumbent challenges to growth.

The results of the survey can be viewed in full at <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/blog/oliver-cornock/obg-ceo-surveys/esg-ceo-survey-board-room-getting-greener>

In its research, OBG surveyed executives based across the economic sectors, with financial serv-



ices and energy highest in terms of representation. The findings are supported by in-depth analysis from OBG's editor-in-chief Oliver Cornock and the firm's four regional editors, who explore the specific characteristics of the markets they cover and track their ESG journeys.

Significantly, more than 60 per cent of global respondents said the pandemic had moderately or significantly impacted their understanding and/or appetite for ESG, in a sign that the health crisis had spotlighted vul-

nerabilities in supply chains and other areas, and encouraged companies to put sustainability at the heart of new strategies.

In his contribution, Patrick Cooke, OBG's regional editor for the Middle East, said that the governments of all six Gulf Cooperation Council members have, to varying degrees, formulated their long-term strategies to diversify their economies, reduce public subsidies and stimulate the creation of productive and attractive job opportunities in the private sector.

Infiniti QX80 Black Edition recognised as 'Powerhouse Luxury SUV of the Year'

Recognising it for its excellence and impeccable performance, Infiniti QX80 Black Edition, has been honoured with 'Powerhouse Luxury SUV of the Year' award at The Luxury 100 ceremony held recently.

With an amped up performance quotient and innovative new technologies, the QX80 Black Edition is the perfect package that merges elegance and performance to an already commanding presence. Truly bespoke, it brings hand-crafted luxury, convenience, and refinement for all its passengers.

The Luxury 100, a unique initiative from *Signature* magazine that marks Oman's and the region's only list of iconic luxury products of the year, is a superlative compilation or a consolidated "List of Lists" that embodies the spirit of luxury. Created after months of study and research, the editors of UMS, renowned luxury special-



ists, lifestyle journalists and a select mix of readers and industry experts weigh in to create this list and each featured product has proven its luxury credentials with its popularity.

A spokesperson for Infiniti Oman said, "We are honoured to be recognised at The Luxury 100 Awards ceremony. It is one of the most prestigious and respected awards in the luxury market. Infiniti QX80 Black Edi-

tion brings hand-crafted luxury, convenience, and refinement for up to eight passengers. We appreciate the added validation from *Signature* magazine."

Infiniti QX80 Black Edition

Featuring innovative new technologies and stylish features, Infiniti QX80 Black Edition has been designed keeping in mind the unique tastes and preferences of customers in Oman. With its unique dark chrome wheels and accents, the QX80 Black Edition adds a layer that merges elegance and performance to an already commanding presence. With the black front grille mesh, dark chrome accents and black side mirrors, the QX80 applies universal design principles for a classic look. The 22-inch aluminium-alloy wheels with unique dark finishing give your QX80 a more enhanced stature on the road.

The new 'Black Edition' grade features dark chrome and black exterior accents highlight the front grill and fascia, side fender vents, door mirror caps and rear tailgate strip. The commanding stance is heightened with the addition of dark chrome 22-inch forged alloy wheels. Three stylish interior trim colours are also available; including 'Graphite', 'Saddle Brown' and 'Wheat' with a revised Charcoal Ash Wood accent trim.

Engine

The Infiniti QX80 comes with a potent 5.6lt V8 engine. With 400hp and 560nm of torque, it gives a smooth, heady performance that really comes into its own when carrying cargo.

With Infiniti QX80 drivers can focus on the journey while the 7-speed automatic transmission's Adaptive Shift Control responds with performance exactly when they need it.

Six Omani startups selected to join Omantel's Innovation Labs

Omantel, the leading telecommunications company in Oman, announced that six innovative Omani startups have successfully joined the Omantel Innovation Labs as part of the first cohort of the Omantel Accelerator.

The Omantel Accelerator, delivered in partnership with Brinc, is tailored to the needs of each of the participating startups to support them to refine the technical feasibility, market desirability, and financial viability of their products and operations.

Only six startups were selected after a rigorous selection process led by Oman Technology Fund, which included online applications, a three-day bootcamp and interviews with subject-matter experts from

Omantel, OTF and Brinc.

Six companies are:

- Autoplant an AI and IoT solutions for the farming industry to improve agricultural decision making
- Lamma, Oman's first super app, a unified communication platform with payment integration
- Mamun, an embedded credit, payments & insurance platform
- Mubader, an IoT and AI tool providing data to support in the management and care for livestock,
- Pixel Tech, a subscription-based tool that allows sellers in the GCC to easily set up digital stores and sell their products online
- Remedy.om, a platform that



connects patients with clinics and therapists

The selected startups will have access to local, regional and global networks of mentors, technology, perks, guidance for

successful geographical expansion, and potential investment opportunities offered by Omantel, OTF, and Brinc. Startups will also receive a free working space at the Omantel Innovation Labs

located in the Omantel headquarters in Muscat.

In addition to the accelerator, Omantel Innovation Labs will organise, participate in, and host multiple activities to support Omantel's internal innovation agenda by providing systematic spaces, approaches, events and activities that can accelerate product conceptualisation, prototyping, testing and deployment of solutions to Oman and Omantel-centric challenges.

Commenting on this, H H Al Sayyida Ghada Jaifar al Said, Senior Manager Omantel Innovation Labs said, "The Omantel Innovation Labs aim to put Omantel at the heart of Oman's technology start-up ecosystem and to apply our resources to boost entrepreneurial growth,

knowledge sharing, collaboration and economic development. We want to support and tap into new ideas and technologies, stay ahead of the curve and drive local innovation.

"Our ambition is to leverage Omantel's expertise, partnerships, reach, and access to technology to contribute to Oman's Vision 2040 and promote innovation and entrepreneurship in new and emerging technology."

The key focus of the program is to cultivate entrepreneurial skills among the youth and accelerate the growth of relevant Oman-based technology startups across five technological verticals: 5G, Internet of Things, Cybersecurity, Customer Experience Technology, and Big Data.

CDO & MP of Brinc MENA, Yasin Aboudaoud, stated, "We are always on the path of empowering Game-Changers venture, especially during these uncertain times.

"We believe that global economics now recognises the role and the value of innovation, technology, and connectivity to secure business continuity and economic growth.

"We will enable Omani Game Changers to flourish by providing extensive guidance to de-risk their ventures and ensure that they play an active role in solving local, regional, and global challenges. We are thrilled to collaborate with Omantel to transform the region into one of the leading tech telecommunication startup hubs."

New Maserati Levante Hybrid arrives in Oman

Alfardan Motors, the official importer of Maserati in the sultanate, has announced the arrival of the new Maserati Levante Hybrid in Oman.

With the brand's first electric SUV, Maserati takes a major step forward in its strategy for electrification, which began last year with the Ghibli Hybrid.

Levante Hybrid is faster than a diesel, more sustainable than diesel or gasoline, and unique in its specific characteristics.

Levante Hybrid combines the 4 cylinder, 2lt engine with a 48 volt Hybrid system to recover energy during deceleration and braking.

With a maximum power output of 330 hp and torque of 450 Nm delivered from just 2,250 rpm, the performance data of the new Levante Hybrid, only available with all-wheel drive, is impressive: a top speed of over 240 km/h and acceleration from 0 to 100 km/h in 6 seconds.

On the exterior, blue charac-



terises the air ducts and coloured brake calipers.

The blue colour was chosen

by Maserati to identify hybrid cars and it is already used on the Ghibli Hybrid.

The Levante Hybrid is on display at the Maserati Oman Showroom, located in Azaiba.

Bank Muscat fosters savings habits among children

In line with its vision 'To serve you better, everyday' and commitment to fostering healthy savings habits among children, Bank Muscat's Children's Savings Account is designed to promote financial inclusion and help the younger generation learn how to manage their money and prepare for the future. The bank launched this account and developed it further after studying in great detail the needs of this age group.

Special incentives in the form of an assurance of a financially secure future encourage children and their parents to learn about the importance of savings.

Speaking about the importance of the bank's Children's Accounts, Abdullah Tamman al Maashani, deputy general manager - Institutional Sales & Product Development, said, "Bank Muscat is very keen to provide products and benefits in line with the needs of its customers and as a translation of its customer-centric vision. The bank is continuously working to develop different banking products and



solutions for its customers based on their unique needs. In particular, the bank's Children's Account has several features that allow children to learn how to save and manage their money for the future."

All children under the age of 14 are entitled to open a Children's Account. To open the account, parents / legal guardians should visit their preferred Bank Muscat branch to submit their

applications along with copies of the required documents. These include a copy of the ID card or passport (for Omanis), passport with the visa page (for residents) and a birth certificate. The parent or authorised guardian should sign the account opening form on behalf of the child.

All customers maintaining a minimum balance of RO50 in their account are eligible for free insurance coverage.

Ahlibank to hold Q4 draw of Wafra prize scheme soon

Ahlibank has announced that the fourth quarter draw of its popular 2021 Wafra prize scheme will be conducted in the last week of December. The highly awaited draw will pick 20 lucky winners, with one of them winning the generous 'Salary for Life' prize, which carries a grand sum of RO250,000, disbursed equally over 250 months.

This will be the final draw of 2021 Wafra scheme, which was launched early this year in a brand new format to encourage a culture of savings among its customers and introduce attractive avenues for financial growth for all account holders. With cash prizes worth over RO2mn, awarded through various draws held across the bank's network of branches, the scheme has proven to be a major milestone in the bank's customer first approach to banking.

Muneer al Balushi, AGM - Head of Retail Distribution at Ahlibank, said, "2021 has proven to be a lucky year for more than a thousand account holders who savored the joys of financial abundance that we promised through our prize scheme Wafra. Our 'Salary for life' prize, in particular, has been a game-changer



in every sense of the word. The fourth quarter draw of Wafra will further augment chances for more winners, ending the year on a winning note, despite the initial economic slowdown from the pandemic.

"Our intent was, and is to target a wider customer base; we have accomplished the set objectives by adding more categories - with weekly, monthly, quarterly and special event draws - as part of the prize scheme. While this manifests our agenda to engage with our customers on a regular basis, it also amplifies our objective of instilling financial stability and inspiring a culture of saving to secure ones future. Our effort to enrich more lives with financial incentives and expand our cus-

tomer base with structured growth plan has shown results, making this a win-win year for both our customers and us. Our portfolio of innovative products and services has demonstrated our intent to rise, and stay above the expected."

The last quarter draw will add a fourth winner to the 'Salary for life' prize, which saw three lucky customers - in the months of March, June and September - walk home with a windfall of RO250,000 each. In addition, the bank had also allocated special quarterly draws to award five lucky winners with cash prize of RO5,000 each, a prize of RO25,000 for an exclusive and premium customer, and one winner of the upper mass category of RO10,000, in each quarter.

NCSI and ODP sign technical partnership

The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) and Oman Data Park Company (ODP), signed a partnership and cooperation contract in the technical field including cloud services.

The partnership will contribute to enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the work of the government entities and ensuring the business progress in general.

Dr Khalifa bin Abdullah bin Hamad al Barwani, CEO of National Centre for Statistics and Information, stated, "The global technical development has raised an urgent need to utilise the cloud services' capabilities and its advantages. In particular, it contributes to reducing the entities' financial and operational costs, and ensuring the uninterrupted business continuity, as well as enhancing the flexibility of accessing the NCIS's various IT infrastructure, information systems and applications from any geographical location."

"The cloud services also provide the flexibility of controlling the technical resources of the main servers and enhance the servers compatibility and conformity with the standards and controls imposed by the set standards of the e-government



and digital transformation applications," Barwani added.

Eng Maqbool bin Salem al Wahaibi, CEO of Oman Data Park Company, said, "This cooperation is considered as an important step that reflexes the confidence of the government and private agencies in the capabilities of Oman Data Park. It also enables organisations to gain the various benefits of the cloud services, its high cybersecurity protection systems, and its technical support service around the clock, seven days a week."

He added that Oman Data Park provides homogeneous data solutions with international standards, in addition to the top quality of its Cyber Security Park services, including the Security Operations Centre services (SOC) and Network Operations Centre services (NOC) around the clock, seven days a week.

Wahaibi expressed his expectations that "several entities and companies to follow the example of this partnership between NCTI and ODP in order to achieve the same goals that we

aspire to, while Oman Data Park is always capable to provide its specialised professional services to the various administrative units of government agencies in the sultanate in the cloud services fields and security assessment services for these agencies through conducting penetration tests". They aim at identifying, evaluating technical weaknesses and setting preventive measures to protect them from external and internal electronic threats related to information technology, he said.

Khan steals limelight at ISC Annual Tennis Tournament

ISC Annual Tennis Tournament concluded in style at the ISC courts recently. Suhail Khan stole the limelight of the tournament winning all the events he participated in which included Men's Singles, Veteran's singles, Veteran's doubles and runner-up in ISC Men's doubles.

The coach Sivan G along with the organising team comprising of Mohan Kannan, Sanjit K, Suhail Khan, Girish KK and Arudra took all initiatives to conduct the event in a systematic and professional manner. The tournament saw various nationalities including Omanis participating in the three week-long event.

The awarding and closing ceremony was held right after the Open Men's doubles final, making a perfect end to the ISC Annual Tennis Tournament 2021. Sports secretary Saji Abraham thanked all the officials, tournament committee, staff, coach and parents for their support and dedication in conducting the



tournament successfully.

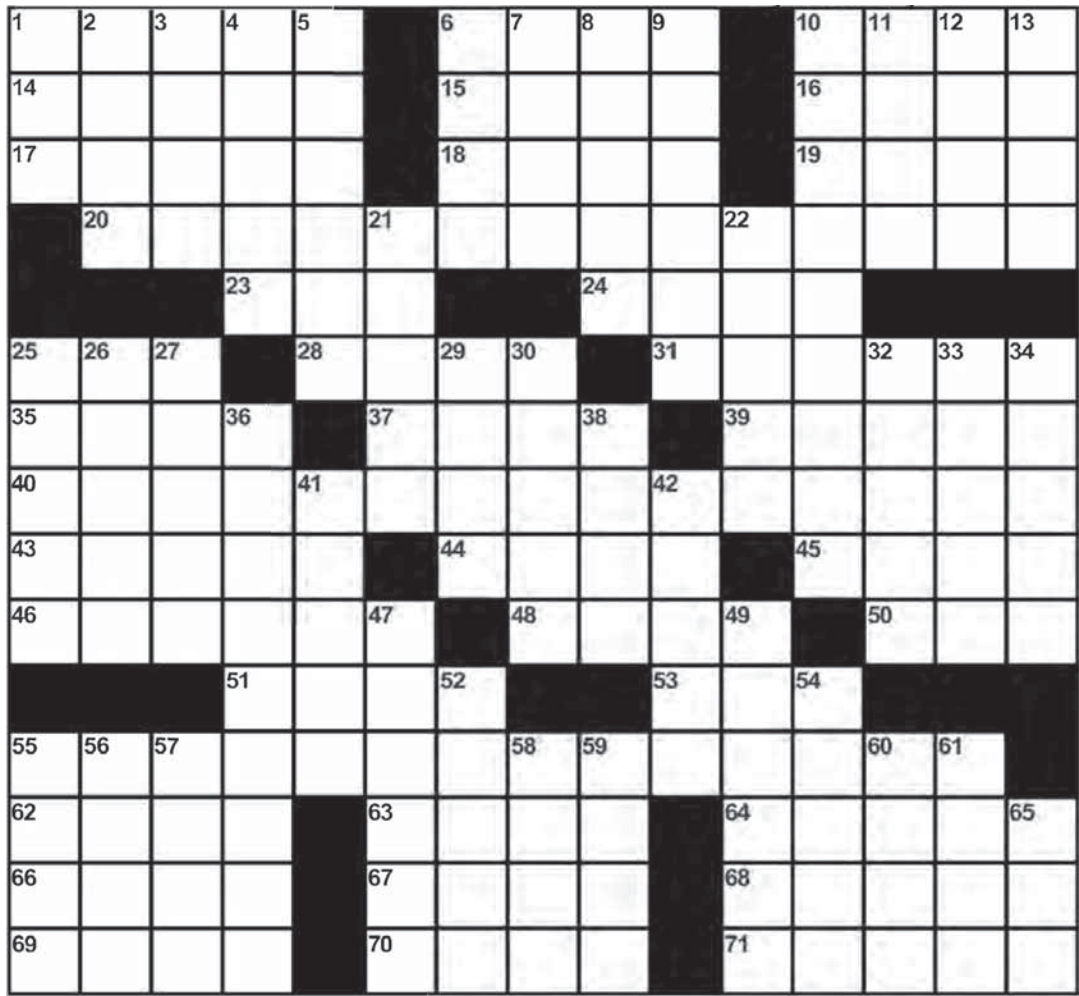
ISC chairman Dr Sathish Nambiar while addressing the gathering, emphasised the importance of sports events and expressed his happiness to see the tennis court open for the members after the closure for almost two years due to pandemic.

He appreciated the efforts of the organising committee and extended all the support to forthcoming Junior Open Doubles tournament which will be held in February 2022.

Mohan Kannan congratulated all the winners and appreciated the efforts of ISC under the leadership of Dr Nambiar in handling the distress during the pandemic period.

Dr Nambiar along with Karanjeet Singh, vice chairman, distributed the trophies and certificates to the winners. Executive committee members Shakeel KM, Sanjit and Faigee were also present during the ceremony.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Easy out
- 6) Pitt with roles
- 10) "Ha!" spot on Broad-way?
- 14) NBA milieu
- 15) Part ofMYOB
- 16) "How can I_ thank you?"
- 17) Beef-filled
- 18) Guy behind Michael Jackson, once
- 19) Lady of Lisbon
- 20) Three birds
- 23) Yale student
- 24) Banana peel mishap
- 25) S&L convenience
- 28) State with confi-dence
- 31) Emotional tension
- 35) They support fe-males?
- 37) Certain sword
- 39) Like the old "Night Gallery" TV show
- 40) Three birds
- 43) Advertiser's promo-tion
- 44) Certain
- 45) Like, likes
- 46) Awful smell

- 48) "Sight" or "over" ender
 - 50) Word between a married lady's surnames
 - 51) Pirate's potato
 - 53) "Dear old" guy
 - 55) Three birds
 - 62) Brightly colored aquarium
 - 63) Bar in the fridge
 - 64) Court event
 - 66) Football great Gra-ham
 - 67) "Hold it right there!"
 - 68) Bride's pathway
 - 69) Sound that gets at-tention
 - 70) Capital of Norway
 - 71) In the altogether
- DOWN
- 1) Legendary actress
 - Grier
 - 2) Popular chocolate
 - cookie
 - 3) Anjou, e.g.
 - 4) Loosen laces
 - 5) Disk-jockey bribe
 - 6) Character in comput-erville

- 7) Muddy up
- 8) Jammed idlers?
- 9) Salivates
- 10) Sheet cover
- 11) Claim to be true
- 12) HBO's Dunham
- 13) Persia, now
- 21) "Chopped" meat
- 22) TNT ingredient
- 25) Helps out in a crimi-nal act
- 26) Curly hair or color blindness, e.g.
- 27) "Dirty Dingus_" (1970 film)
- 29) Grand-scale poetry
- 30) Picture puzzle
- 32) Senator of Water-gate fame
- 33) Relentless attack
- 34) Have a premonition of
- 36) Goliath killer
- 38) Ireland, on coins
- 41) French pen filler
- 42) Requires
- 47) Santa's phrase
- 49) Wicker material
- 52) Splashy parties
- 54) Andrea_ (ill-fated liner)

- 55) Gunk
- 56) Decides on (with "for")
- 57) Stable food
- 58) Groundwater source

- 59) 13-stringed Japan-ese zither
- 60) Board game
- 61) Cabbage relative
- 65) Took charge



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
You know that you really want to change, but are you sure about it or thinking it because you're bored or wanting to impress someone? Examine your motives more closely. You know things aren't working as they should yet, but you might be confused about how to change. Think about what you get out of this situation, then explore what you want that's more than this. A mental shift is all you need to get rolling.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
Has your search for love (or a renewed spark) come up empty? It's time to stop looking and try to really figure out what you want from your relationships. Personal, romantic, and professional relationships could all be causing too much fuss right now, so it's time to figure out what's making them all tick, what you need from them, and what you should put into them. Clear motives help resolve the tension.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
Routine tasks are almost never your cup of tea since practical things can bore you to tears. Try to put off those day-to-day tasks until a little later, or you may find that you lose track of what you're doing halfway through. Fortunately, your creative and psychic energies are enhanced, which makes you a bottomless well of ideas and information just when you need it most. Listen to what your soul is telling you.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
You may not be quite as in touch with reality as you'd like. While it fires up your creative side in a big way, and may inspire you to find a solution to an old problem, it's not the best time to take risks when it comes to love or money. No matter how certain some plan or person may seem, jumping in thoughtlessly is a sure route to regret. Try to err on the side of caution!



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
You need to look over your possibilities and figure out a new way to deal with a recurring situation that has popped up once again. Your energy is pushing you hard to take a new look at old patterns and the ways in which they don't work and needlessly complicate your life! It may take practice, but it will be worth it when all is said and done.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Nobody realises just how adventurous you really are since you're so dependable every day. Surprise the world by shifting gears and throwing yourself into some bold, new creative pursuit. Not all artists are flaky, you know, and not all reliable people lack imagination. You may be at a crossroads, unsure of which way to turn. Follow your gut. It might seem scary at first, but it should lead to more satisfaction.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
You need to be more realistic about your relationships. While it might not be time to make waves when it comes to your personal life, some deep insights are coming your way that confirm your suspicion that you can't let anyone but you call the shots. Don't limit yourself by letting a fear of rejection dominate your thinking. Hone your patience so you're better able to unleash the real you and you should see your impact on the world grow quite a bit.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
Someone close doesn't come through for you in quite the way you had hoped, and you're almost certainly feeling let down. If you're unhappy with their words or deeds or feel that they were out of line, now is the time to change the way you deal with them. You don't need to confront them right now, but don't just sit on your feelings either. It's better for everyone to set boundaries that you can both learn to respect.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
One of your most admirable qualities is your amazing tenacity even in the toughest circumstances. Get ready for the big payoff to all your efforts, when your great energy lifts you up to a pinnacle of professional and romantic satisfaction. Enjoy all the praise coming your way and celebrations that may erupt in your honour. It really doesn't get much better than this!



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
Your enthusiasm is fierce today, but make sure you save some of it for later when you need to deal with a relationship that is way more complicated than it seems. It's time to work through thorny problems and deal with freaky workplace issues, so make sure you bring that optimistic attitude wherever you go. Your sparkly personality might just rope some new pals (and interesting opportunities) into your life.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
You need to stop analysing, because it's time to act. You're a creative phenomenon with talent to spare and the ability to inspire. You can galvanise even the most lackadaisical into participating in your wild schemes with enthusiasm. Your people can see how awesome you are, so isn't it time you saw it yourself? Big changes are on the way, and you can see that things are sure to improve.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
If you've been at the mercy of extreme highs and lows lately, it could feel like you've got emotional whiplash. Don't ignore your moods. Listen to what they're telling you. These big emotions point toward a deep inner truth that you've been trying to avoid for too long. Events are forcing you to pay attention whether you like it or not! Go easy on yourself and make the big decision before the universe makes it for you.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- 1. The lower limit of perpetual snow in mountains such as the Himalayas is termed as the
 - a. tree line
 - b. timber line
 - c. snow line
 - d. boundary line
- 2. The instrument used to measure electric current is
 - a. ammeter
 - b. electrometer
 - c. galvanometer
 - d. spectrometer
- 3. The headquarter of a few agencies related to the UN are located in Vienna, which is in
 - a. Austria
 - b. Belgium
 - c. Denmark
 - d. Sweden

Answers: 1. c 2. a 3. a

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

A	U	K	T
A	C	C	M
O	R	B	A
E	M	A	R

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Iran losing 'precious time' with nuclear stance: European diplomats

Paris, France - Iran's positions in talks over its nuclear development programme are 'inconsistent' with the terms of the deal to limit it, diplomats from the western European countries negotiating with Tehran, said on Monday.

After a five-month pause, talks resumed on salvaging the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in Vienna on November 29.

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

Diplomats from Iran, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, the signatory countries to the 2015 agreement, are attending the current talks.

'We have had many hours of engagement, and all delegations have pressed Iran to be reasonable,' said the diplomats, from Britain, France and Germany.

'As of this moment, we still have not been able to get down to real negotiations,' they added. 'We are losing precious time



This file photo shows members of the EU (left) and Iranian delegation attending a meeting of the joint commission on negotiations aimed at reviving the Iran nuclear deal, in the Austrian capital of Vienna, on December 9 (AFP)

dealing with new Iranian positions inconsistent with the JCPOA or that go beyond it.'

Donald Trump pulled the US out of the accord in 2018 and US President Joe Biden wants to negotiate Washington's return, with US diplomats participating at one remove from the main

talks. Iran wants Washington to lift a raft of sanctions, and is asking as well for guarantees.

Iran sees progress

On Sunday, Iran's chief negotiator at the talks, Ali Bagheri, reported progress on drawing up an agenda.

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

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

the issues to negotiate."

Iranian officials maintain they are serious about committing to the talks.

But the Western countries have accused Tehran of having backtracked on the position it held earlier this year.

AFP

US preparing 'alternatives' in case talks fail: Blinken

Jakarta, Indonesia - The United States is preparing 'alternatives' in case efforts to revive a deal to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions collapse, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"We continue in this hour, on this day, to pursue diplomacy because it remains at this moment the best option, but we are actively engaging with allies and partners on alternatives," he said.

Biden also recently said the US was preparing 'additional measures' against Iran.

"Unless there's swift progress... the Iran nuclear agreement will become an empty shell," Blinken said.

AFP

Six Afghan migrants killed in Iran crash

Tehran, Iran - Six irregular migrants from Afghanistan were killed and five injured in a head-on collision between a car and a truck in central Iran, state media reported on Tuesday.

The accident occurred on a bypass near the central city of Yazd late Monday, Ahmad Dehghan, head of Yazd province's emergency services, told Mehr news agency.

A woman was among those killed in the car, he said, adding that all the injured were in serious condition. There were no casualties in the truck.

Afghan refugees are frequently involved in road accidents in the central Iranian provinces of Kerman and Yazd.

After crossing the border into the desert region of Sistan-Baluchistan, they travel along treacherous roads at high speed to evade security forces.

The United Nations said in 2020 that there were more than 3.4mn Afghans in Iran, including nearly 2mn irregular migrants and 800,000 refugees.

AFP

Armed groups clash in south Libya

Tripoli, Libya - Gunmen linked to eastern Libya-based military chief Khalifa Haftar exchanged artillery and small arms fire overnight with forces in the main southern city of Sebha, authorities and Libyan media said on Tuesday.

The clashes come a week before the war-torn North African country is due to hold a presidential election that observers fear could trigger a return to conflict after a year-long ceasefire.

'A militia armed with heavy weaponry and armoured vehicles... stole 11 four-wheel-drive vehicles from Sebha in an armed robbery,' Sebha's police force said.

It identified the attackers as members of a group commanded by Mabruk Sahban and affiliated with Haftar, who is a candidate in the December 24 polls and whose forces control much of Libya's south.

The stolen vehicles had been sent to Sabha by the Interior Ministry in Tripoli to help secure the election, the police statement said.

Sahban's forces had attacked a police convoy and forced officers to drive the vehicles to Brak



Workers walk by an electoral billboard in Arabic reading 'register and vote before missing your chance' - ahead of the next week's presidential elections, in Libya's capital Tripoli on Tuesday (AFP)

airbase, south of Sebha, it added.

Sebha security forces and pro-Haftar gunmen later clashed in central Sabha, local media reported.

Footage online apparently showed night-time clashes with small arms in the city centre.

There was no immediate report of casualties.

The Sebha police department said the attack aimed to destabilise the country's southern

provinces.

Haftar had in 2019 seized much of southern Libya including oil infrastructure, military sites and the southwestern city of Sebha, before launching a blistering assault on capital Tripoli, 650km to the north.

Western Libyan forces pushed him back to his eastern stronghold a year later, but he retained an armed presence in the south.

A ceasefire formally signed in October 2020 paved the way for a UN-led political process to bring in an interim unity government tasked with leading Libya until the elections - in which Haftar is a candidate.

Libya has been attempting to extract itself from a decade of conflict since the 2011 revolt that toppled and killed dictator Moammar Gadhafi.

AFP

Tunisia opposition condemns extension of parliament freeze

Tunis, Tunisia - Opponents of Tunisian President Kais Saied on Tuesday slammed his decision to extend a months-long suspension of parliament, accusing him of dealing another blow to the country's nascent democracy.

Saied had on Monday evening ruled out walking back his move in the summer to sack the government, freeze the legislature and seize wide-ranging executive powers. Speaking on television, he announced an 11-week 'popular consultation' with the Tunisian people to produce 'draft constitutional and other reforms' to be put to referendum on July 25 next year.

That will mark a year since his power grab, which came as the North African country wallowed in political and economic crises compounded by the coronavirus pandemic.

The President said on Monday that parliament would remain suspended until new elections on December 17 next year, the anniversary of the start of the revolution that chased dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from power.



Tunisian President Kais Saied attends a Cabinet meeting on Monday (AFP)

That effectively dissolved the current assembly dominated by his nemesis, the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party which had played a central role in Tunisian politics since Ben Ali's fall.

On Tuesday, opponents lashed out at Saied, accusing him of seeking to extend his one-man rule and remake the political system without involving other actors.

Former MP Hichem Ajbouni wrote on Facebook that Saied's speech boiled down to: 'I am the state, I am the president, I am the government, I am the parliament, I am the judiciary - and

everyone who opposes me is either hungry for power, a liar, a traitor, a thief, an agent, or ignorant.'

Saied had announced a nationwide consultation on constitutional reforms would be launched on January 1, via electronic platforms created for the purpose.

Former Ennahdha MP Samir Dilou said the idea would 'make Tunisia an object of ridicule'.

"Saied's speech reflects the state of denial in which he lives and his refusal to listen to anyone, neither his supporters nor his opponents," he added.

AFP

Syrian refugees stranded in Gaza 'prison' for a decade with no way out

Gaza City, Palestinian Territories - Nearly ten years after Imad al-Hisso fled the civil war in Syria, he remains trapped in Gaza, a place he calls 'a prison', with no clear path to return home.

Gaza may seem an unlikely destination for those fleeing conflict.

The coastal Palestinian territory has been blockaded by Israel since 2007 when Hamas Islamists took power, and access to the enclave is tightly controlled by the Jewish state and Egypt.

But after being advised by a friend that he could live safely in the strip, Hisso along with dozens of other Syrians slipped into Gaza through tunnels dug under Egyptian land.

"After the events began in Syria, I fled to Gaza in the hope of a better life," he said, adding

that he believed he would be able to retrace his steps when the time came to leave.

He now lives in Rafah, southern Gaza, in a small house without a kitchen or furniture and with expired Syrian identity papers that he cannot renew.

To get new documents he would have to return to war-torn Syria, but he can't get out of Gaza the same way he arrived.

The Egyptian army began destroying some underground tunnels in 2012, then demolished many more the following year.

Israel says Hamas uses tunnels to smuggle weapons and other materials to attack Israelis, and that the blockade is essential to contain threats.

Since Hisso left Egypt illegally, he said the authorities there would probably block him from entering and might arrest him should he attempt to leave Gaza



Syrian refugees Lina Moustafa Hassoun and her son Nawras Deeb pose with their expired Syrian passports in Gaza City on December 5 (AFP)

using the Rafah crossing.

Gaza's other entry and exit points are controlled by Israel which is officially at war with Syria and only lets Gazans transit its territory under strict con-

ditions, such as in grave medical cases. So Hisso finds himself trapped with no way to leave a territory wracked by poverty and unemployment.

"There is no work and no

money, no access to health care or education", said Hisso, who sometimes works laying tiles to support his five children, who also have no papers.

"I was surprised to find that the situation in Gaza was worse than in Syria," he said.

"Gaza is the biggest prison in the world. If you go into Gaza, you can't get out."

'Really miserable'

More than half of Gaza's roughly 2mn population are descended from Palestinian refugees who fled their homes when Israel was created in 1948, and who today depend on United Nations aid.

The UN agency serving Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, does not consider Syrian refugees to be their responsibility and only partly helps them, Syrians said.

"UNRWA does not recognise my children, they always tell me

'you are Syrian refugees and we are taking care of Palestinian refugees'," said Donia al-Minyarawi, Hassou's wife.

"When we arrived in Gaza, we thought it was a livable place. What we saw in Gaza is beyond imaginable. The situation is really miserable," she said, adding that she suffered from several medical conditions she could not afford to treat.

Lina Moustafa Hassoun (52) also arrived illegally in Gaza via a tunnel at the end of 2012 with her son Nawras (24).

A Palestinian who formerly lived in Syria, Hassoun said she came to visit her sister and intended to stay for a month.

But mother and son were stranded when the tunnel they came through was closed. Their travel documents have also since expired.

"Life in Gaza is very difficult,

it is impossible to travel and work. There is no stability there (in Syria) or here," she said.

Nawras films videos for another Syrian refugee, Warif Qassem, a chef who gives cooking lessons via his channel on YouTube.

Together with other Syrian refugees in Gaza, Qassem (41) founded an association to advocate with Palestinian authorities and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Last year, UNHCR extricated nine Syrian families from Gaza through the Israeli airport in Tel Aviv.

Qassem said he was grateful for Gazans' hospitality and appreciated their cuisine, but said their situation was complicated.

"We do our best to get around the challenges," he said.

AFP

No US troops to be punished over Kabul strike

If there is any regard for human rights, then it’s their responsibility to punish the culprits: Taliban

Washington, US - The Pentagon said on Monday that no US troops or officials would face disciplinary action for a drone strike in Kabul in August that killed ten Afghan civilians, including seven children.

Spokesman John Kirby said Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin had received a high-level review of the strike that made no recommendation of accountability.

“There was not a strong enough case to be made for personal accountability,” Kirby said. Aimal Ahmadi (32) who lost his three-year-old daughter, his brother and six nephews and nieces in the strike, expressed anger at the decision on Tuesday.

“What if the US had lost a child? What would the reaction have been?” Ahmadi questioned.

The Taliban urged Washington to reverse the decision, with a spokesman saying the US should punish the culprits and compensate the victims.

“If there is any justice and regard for human rights and respect for human dignity, then



A poster depicting the photos of Aimal Ahmadi’s relatives, who lost their lives following a wrongly directed US drone strike on August 29, is put up in front of his house in Kabul on Tuesday (AFP)

it’s their responsibility to punish the culprits and compensate the victims,” said spokesman Bilal Karimi.

The August 29 drone strike took place in the final days of

the US-led evacuation of Kabul after the Taliban seized control of the country.

US officials said they had intelligence of a possible Islamic State attack on the evacuation

operations at Kabul airport, and launched a missile from a drone at a target that was thought to be a car laden with munitions.

In fact, they struck a family that included an Afghan man

who worked for a US aid group and seven children.

In early November, an initial report carried out by the US Air Force inspector general, Lieutenant General Sami Said, called

the strike tragic, but ‘an honest mistake’.

The review by Central Command head General Kenneth McKenzie Jr and Special Operations Command chief General Richard Clarke made use of Said’s report and detailed recommendations on procedures for future drone strikes.

But it made no call for anyone to be punished for the mistake.

“What we saw here was a breakdown in process, in execution and procedural events, not the result of negligence, not the result of misconduct, not the result of poor leadership,” said Kirby.

If Austin ‘believed... that accountability was warranted, he would certainly support those kinds of efforts’, Kirby added.

Compensation payments

The strike killed Zemari Ahmadi, an employee of US-based Nutrition and Education International (NEI), and nine members of his family.

Last month, NEI founder and president Steve Kwon called the Pentagon’s investigation into

the incident ‘deeply disappointing and inadequate’.

The Pentagon promised to pay compensation and also to help relocate family members and Afghans working for NEI overseas, but that remains stuck on determining just who qualifies, according to officials.

Kirby said they are still discussing arrangements with Kwon. “We are working very hard with him and his organisation to effect the relocation of the family members,” Kirby said. “We want to make sure we do it in the most safe and responsible way, so that we know it’s getting to the right people and only to the right people.”

Kirby refused to comment on a *New York Times* story on Monday that detailed a secret US military unit that launched drone strikes on Islamic State targets in Syria and had a callous attitude toward civilian deaths.

“We take issues of civilian harm very seriously,” Kirby said.

“And when we don’t get it right, we want those mistakes investigated.”

AFP



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken delivers remarks on the Indo-Pacific strategy at the Universitas Indonesia in Jakarta on Tuesday (AFP)

Antony Blinken urges China to end ‘aggressive actions’ in Asia-Pacific

Jakarta, Indonesia - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday urged China to cease ‘aggressive actions’ in the Asia-Pacific, speaking during a visit to the region, as Washington seeks to bolster alliances against Beijing.

President Joe Biden’s administration is trying to reset relations and reassert its influence in Asia after the turbulence and unpredictability of the Donald Trump era.

Blinken’s comments came in Indonesia, the first leg of a Southeast Asian tour, the latest visit to the region by a senior US official in recent months.

In a speech outlining the US approach to what it terms the Indo-Pacific, Blinken said Washington would work with allies and partners to ‘defend the rules-based order’ and that countries should have the right to ‘choose their own path’.

“That’s why there is so much concern - from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia and from the Mekong River to the Pacific Islands - about Beijing’s aggressive actions.”

“Claiming open seas as their own. Distorting open markets through subsidies to its state-run companies. Denying the exports or revoking deals for countries whose policies it does not agree with.”

“Countries across the region want this behaviour to change - we do too,” he said during the speech at the University of In-

donesia.

Blinken added that Washington was ‘determined to ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea’, and said Beijing’s actions there threaten the movement of more than US\$3trn worth of commerce every year.

But he also stressed that “it’s not about a contest between a US-centric region or a China-centric region - the Indo-Pacific is its own region”, and said Washington wanted to avoid conflict there.

China claims almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea, with competing claims from four Southeast Asian states as well as Taiwan.

Beijing has been accused of deploying a range of military hardware including anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles there, and has ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that declared its historical claim over most of the waters to be without basis.

Blinken also said Washington wants to ensure ‘peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait’.

US-China tensions have soared over self-ruled, democratic Taiwan, which China claims as its territory and has vowed to retake one day, by force if necessary.

Washington is developing a ‘comprehensive Indo-Pacific economic framework’, and is also seeking to bolster military alliances in the region, the top US diplomat added.

AFP

Belarus sentences opposition leader Sergei Tikhanovsky to 18 years in jail

Moscow, Russia - A court in Belarus on Tuesday sentenced opposition leader Sergei Tikhanovsky to nearly two decades behind bars after he galvanised an unprecedented protest movement against strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko last year.

Tikhanovsky, a charismatic 43-year-old YouTube blogger, last spring launched a presidential campaign against Lukashenko, who has ruled the ex-Soviet country of around 9.5mn people with an iron grip since 1994.

While Belarusian authorities stopped Tikhanovsky’s campaign short - arresting him on charges of violating public order ahead of the August 2020 vote and keeping him in detention since - the protest movement he triggered eventually swelled to tens of thousands of people.

On Tuesday, following a months-long trial behind closed doors, a court found Tikhanovsky guilty of organising riots, inciting social hatred and other charges and sentenced him to 18 years in prison, state newspaper *Sovetskaya Belarus* reported.

His wife Svetlana



This file photo shows Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya holding a photo of her husband, Sergei Tikhanovsky, during her speech at the Czech parliament, in Prague on June 9 (AFP)

Tikhanovskaya, who became opposition leader in his stead, denounced the verdict from self-exile in neighbouring EU member Lithuania.

‘The dictator publicly takes revenge on his strongest opponents,’ she wrote on Twitter after her husband was handed the sentence.

‘While hiding the political prisoners in closed trials, he hopes to continue repressions in silence. But the whole world

watches. We won’t stop,’ she added in English.

Tikhanovskaya, who was a political novice and stay-at-home mother of two at the time of her husband’s arrest, took his place on the ballot and is widely believed to have won the August 2020 vote, claimed by Lukashenko as a victory.

But she was forced to flee the country soon after, when Lukashenko launched a vicious crackdown on the post-vote

protests against his rule that saw hundreds of people jailed and many more leave the country.

Tikhanovsky, who coined the nickname ‘cockroach’ for Lukashenko and whose supporters waved slippers - often used to kill the insects - at rallies, was handed the longest prison sentence of any opposition leader so far.

“Eighteen years. I won’t live that long,” his mother Sofia Tikhanovskaya told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFERL). “I’ll never see my son again.”

He was tried alongside five co-defendants, including veteran politician Mikola Statkevich (65), who was sentenced to 14 years.

The four other co-defendants in the case, bloggers Igor Losik and Vladimir Tsyganovich and two activists linked to Tikhanovsky, Artyom Sakov and Russian citizen Dmitry Popov, received between 15 and 16 years in prison.

Tikhanovskaya has won recognition from Western governments as Belarus’s top opposition leader and has been lobbying for change in the country ever since.

AFP

At least 50 killed in Haiti tanker explosion

Port-au-Prince, Haiti - At least 50 people were killed when a gas tanker exploded in the Haitian city of Cap-Haitien on Tuesday morning, according to a local official, with overwhelmed local medics saying the toll was feared to rise.

Deputy Mayor Patrick Almonor, who visited the site of the blast, said he had seen more than 50 badly burned bodies, while Prime Minister Ariel Henry had estimated the death toll at around 40 in an earlier tweet.

Almonor said the victims he saw had been ‘burnt alive’, adding, “It is impossible to identify them.”

According to Almonor, the tanker is believed to have flipped over after the driver lost control while swerving to avoid a motorcycle taxi. Fuel spilled onto the road and pedestrians apparently rushed to collect the tanker’s gas.

The Haitian prime minister decreed a period of national mourning following the explosion he said left ‘around 40 people’ dead and dozens injured.

AFP

Brother fears Assange may not survive US prosecution

New York, US - Julian Assange’s brother said on Monday he feared the WikiLeaks publisher would not survive the United States’ attempts to prosecute him after his fiancée revealed he had suffered a mini-stroke.

Gabriel Shipton was among about 30 people, including Pink Floyd’s Roger Waters and actress Susan Sarandon, to rally in support of Assange outside the British consulate in New York.

The protest came a day after Assange’s fiancée Stella Moris said Assange had suffered a mini-stroke in late October, on the first day of a US government appeal against a ruling blocking his removal.

The demonstrators were protesting against a decision on Friday by British appeals judges to overturn the ruling after accepting US government assurances Assange would receive



Supporters of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange attend a protest against a high court ruling allowing his extradition to the US, outside the British consulate in New York on Monday (AFP)

appropriate treatment and not be held in punishing isolation in custody.

“Very worried about it,” Shipton said. “This hanging over Ju-

lian’s head just increases the pressure on him now.”

“So we live in fear that he won’t make it through this or that he will die basically, during this

process,” he added.

The US wants to put Assange on trial for WikiLeaks’ 2010 publication of thousands of top-secret military documents about

the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Assange’s lawyers have previously raised concerns about the effects of his lengthy incarceration on his physical and mental health in a bid to halt the extradition.

Assange spent seven years in Ecuador’s London Embassy until 2019, after jumping bail in connection with sexual assault allegations in Sweden.

He was then jailed for 50 weeks for breaching bail in that case, which was later dropped, but detained ever since on the grounds he was a flight risk.

Sarandon told Assange supporters that ‘no matter what you think of Julian Assange’, his case was about ‘journalism that just isn’t about entertainment’. “[It] has to do with having an informed public because once this goes, we’re really dead,” she said.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Australia moots easing plans despite rise in number of cases

Sydney, Australia - Australia will push ahead with plans to ease COVID-19 restrictions before Christmas, officials said on Tuesday, even as new coronavirus cases in the country's most populous state reached a 10-week high.

After a string of infections linked to festive season parties in and around Sydney, New South Wales state recorded more than 800 new COVID-19 cases on Tuesday - its highest total since October 2.

There were seven related deaths reported nationwide.

Authorities said the new cases would not deter them from dropping most public mask-wearing requirements from Wednesday or lifting a ban on unvaccinated citizens entering restaurants, bars and major events.

"We have decided as a country to live with this virus," said Prime Minister Scott Morrison, touting high vaccination rates as a guarantee of a virtually restriction-free festive period.

"This Christmas, we're about to have is a gift Australians have given to themselves, by the way they've worked together with the settings we've put in place,"



Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison (second right) and Victorian Deputy Premier James Merlino (left) tour The Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity in Melbourne on Tuesday (AFP)

he said.

After a glacial initial vaccine rollout, more than 89 per cent of Australians aged over 16 are now double-dose vaccinated and 93 per cent have received their first jab.

The gap required before a third-dose booster can be administered has been shortened from six months after the second jab to five months to provide better resistance.

After a glacial initial vaccine rollout, more than 89 per cent of Australians aged over 16 are now double-dose vaccinated and 93 per cent have received their first jab.

Many Western countries have begun to reintroduce restrictions as they try to roll out boosters and case numbers rise.

New South Wales health minister Brad Hazzard said he was 'very concerned' not enough people were getting a booster shot, but pledged not to introduce any snap lockdowns.

"My concern is that once the unvaccinated are mixing in with the vaccinated, you'd have to expect the numbers will increase even further and that's worrying because that puts pressure on our doctors and our nurses and our frontline health

system," Hazzard said.

Adding to the pressure, Australia is ploughing ahead with reopening domestic and international borders, welcoming back vaccinated skilled migrants and students from Wednesday.

And after lengthy closures that separated families and friends for months, tropical Queensland state opened its borders to hotspot areas Monday while the island state of Tasmania will follow suit on Wednesday.

Only Western Australia - a vast, mineral-rich region with a stubborn independent streak - will remain locked off over the holidays, with its border to remain closed until February 5.

Announcing plans to build a Moderna mRNA vaccine-manufacturing facility in Melbourne, Morrison insisted Australia is 'better prepared than almost any other country in the world to deal with this and continue to stare this virus in the face and live with it'.

Australia has recorded more than 230,000 cases of COVID-19 and 2,113 related deaths in a population of 25mn since the pandemic began.

Norway has registered record numbers of cases and hospital admissions in recent days, detecting 958 Omicron infections on Monday, of which 472 were in the capital Oslo.

The gap between second and third COVID-19 jabs for over-45s and health workers will be reduced to four-and-a-half months, with booster shots by mid-January.

Bars and restaurants will not be able to serve alcohol, and remote working will be compulsory where possible.

AFP

California restores mask in indoor public spaces

Los Angeles, US - Authorities in California said on Monday they were reinstating mask mandates in all indoor public spaces to try to curb the resurgence of COVID-19 in recent weeks.

The mask mandate, which will come into force Wednesday, applies to all individuals, whether vaccinated or not.

Los Angeles, San Francisco and other counties in California reintroduced the mask-wearing rule locally several months ago.

But other counties, such as Orange and San Diego, had stuck with state-wide rules that masks only needed to be worn in certain public spaces such as airports, hospitals or schools but not in shops, restaurants or cinemas.

California's Health Secretary Mark Ghaly said the rapid rise in cases had led to the new rule. There has been a 47 per cent increase in cases since the Thanksgiving holiday November.

AFP

Norway tightens curbs amid Omicron surge

Oslo, Norway - Norway on Monday announced new COVID-19 curbs less than a week after tightening restrictions amid the spread of the Omicron variant and soaring case numbers and hospital admissions.

The move came after Norway's health authority warned the country could record between 90,000 and 300,000 daily cases and up to 200 hospital admissions per day in three weeks without more measures.

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AFP

Brazil makes vaccination certificate must for arriving travellers

Brasília, Brazil - Brazil on Monday began requiring a COVID-19 vaccination certificate for foreign travellers arriving in the country, a move initially blocked by President Jair Bolsonaro's government.

A Supreme Court justice ruled on Saturday that proof of vaccination would be mandatory to enter Brazil, in an effort to slow the spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant.

The national health regulator



The boarding area at the Galeao International airport in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, amid the coronavirus pandemic (AFP)

Anvisa said it had 'notified this Monday the border posts, especially at airports, about the immediate compliance with the decision of the Supreme Federal Court that determines the requirement of the vaccination certificate for travelers entering the country'.

The nine other high court justices must confirm the ruling between Wednesday and Thursday, but Anvisa said the decision had already gone into

effect on Monday.

'The decision has immediate effect... and, therefore, requires the agency to carry out timely assessments, especially in relation to passengers who were already moving or in transit at the time the decision was issued,' Anvisa said in its statement.

Brazil last week had initially ruled out requiring a vaccination certificate, despite a recommendation from Anvisa in the face of recorded Omicron cases

in the country.

The move came after far-right president Bolsonaro compared such a mandate to a 'leash' for animals.

Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga said Brazil would instead require a five-day quarantine for unvaccinated travelers, a measure also recommended by the health regulator.

The quarantine rule will go into effect on December 18.

The debate over vaccination

certificates has been growing between the Brazilian government, scientists and local authorities, as the country has recorded at least 11 cases of the Omicron strain and expects higher rates of tourists during the winter holidays.

Brazil has recorded more than 616,000 COVID-19 deaths since the start of the pandemic, second only to the United States in absolute numbers.

AFP

Taliban behind at least 72 killings: UN

Geneva, Switzerland - The UN decried on Tuesday credible allegations of more than 100 extrajudicial killings in Afghanistan since the Taliban took power in August, with most carried out by the Taliban themselves.

United Nations deputy rights chief Nada al Nashif said she was deeply alarmed by continuing reports of such killings, despite a general amnesty announced by the new Taliban rulers after August 15.

"Between August and November, we received credible allegations of more than 100 killings of former Afghan national security forces and others associated with the former government," she told the UN Human Rights Council.

"At least 72 of these killings," she said, were "attributed to the Taliban".

"In several cases, the bodies were publicly displayed. This has exacerbated fear among this sizeable category of the population," she said.

'Brutal methods'

Nashif, who presented Tuesday's update to the council on behalf of UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet, said many members of the Islamic State-Khorasan group - a main Taliban enemy - had also met with the same fate.

"In Nangarhar province alone, there ... appears to be a pattern of at least 50 extrajudicial killings



A Taliban fighter stands guard on a roadside in Jalalabad on Sunday (AFP)

of individuals suspected to be members of the ISIL-KP," she said, pointing to reports of "brutal methods of killings, including hanging, beheadings, and public display of corpses".

Her comments came after the US and other countries harshly condemned the Taliban following a Human Rights Watch report earlier this month documenting 47 summary executions.

Those killings were of former members of the Afghan National Security Forces, other military personnel, police and intelligence agents "who had surrendered to or were apprehended by Taliban forces" from mid-August

through October, it said.

The Taliban spokesman Qari Sayed Khosti flatly rejected the HRW report and other claims about extrajudicial killings as 'not based on evidences'.

He said there were some cases of former members of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces who had been killed, but that was "because of personal rivalries and enmities."

'Avalanche of hunger'

In her update Tuesday, Nashif painted a depressing picture of the profound humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, saying many were being 'pushed to take desperate measures' to survive, including child labour and even reportedly 'the sale of children'.

The UN says more than 23mn Afghans - over half the population - will face an 'acute' food shortage in the winter months, forcing millions to choose between migration and starvation.

The UN's World Food Programme said on Tuesday that its latest surveys estimated that 98 percent of Afghans are not consuming enough food - up 17 percentage points since August.

'Afghanistan is facing an avalanche of hunger and destitution the likes of which I have never seen,' WFP country director for Afghanistan Mary-Ellen McGroarty said in a statement.

The crisis is due to the combined effects of drought caused by global warming, and an economic meltdown aggravated by the international community's decision to freeze funding to the aid-dependent nation after the Taliban takeover.

Nashif warned that "the difficult policy choices that member states make at this critical juncture, to avert economic collapse, are literally life and death."

She voiced particular concern over the severe restrictions placed on women and girls since the Taliban takeover, despite their pledging a softer rule compared to their first stint in power in the 1990s.

AFP

Capitol riot panel votes to hold Donald Trump aide in contempt

Washington, US - Lawmakers investigating the assault on the US Capitol voted unanimously on Monday to pursue criminal contempt charges against Donald Trump's former chief of staff for refusing to testify.

Mark Meadows has made clear he has no intention of complying with a subpoena to appear before the cross-party January 6 congressional select committee and missed a scheduled deposition for the second time last week.

Members are investigating Trump's efforts to overturn his defeat in the 2020 presidential election through an anti-democratic campaign that led to the deadly Capitol riot - and the help he got from Meadows.

Trump's fourth and final White House chief - a former congressman - told the panel he would withhold testimony until courts resolve his former boss's claim of 'executive privilege', which allows presidents to keep certain conversations with aides private.

"Whatever legacy he thought he left in the House, this is his legacy now: Former colleagues singling him out for criminal prosecution because he wouldn't answer questions about what he knows about a brutal attack on our democracy," said committee chairman Bennie Thompson.



Mark Meadows at the White House in Washington, DC (AFP)

"That's his legacy. But he hasn't left us any choice. He put himself in this situation. He must now accept the consequences."

'Uniquely situated'

Investigators maintain Meadows has undermined any right to refuse testimony, as the ultra-conservative is promoting a new memoir that includes detailed accounts of January 6 and his conversations with Trump.

He has also spoken numerous times about the attack in prime-time appearances on right-wing cable network Fox News.

Many of the questions the committee wants to ask him concern 6,600 pages of records taken from personal email accounts and about 2,000 text messages that he turned over before he stopped cooperating,

without claiming any privilege.

An appeals court last week rejected Trump's effort to stop the committee accessing documents and testimony from former White House aides, agreeing with a lower court that the defeated ex-president had provided no reason for secrecy. He was given two weeks to appeal.

Meadows was Trump's most senior aide at the time of the assault and was reportedly with the then-president in the White House as the rioters breached the Capitol.

The committee says, "[He is] uniquely situated to provide key information, having straddled an official role in the White House and unofficial role related to Mr. Trump's re-election campaign."

The probe released a 51-page document on Sunday describing some of Meadows' communications, including a January 5 email in which he told an unidentified person the National Guard was on standby to 'protect pro-Trump people'.

The cache included 'panicked messages' to Meadows from administration officials during the assault, panel member Adam Schiff said.

Donald Trump Jr and 'multiple Fox News hosts' also reached out, urging him to get the president to call off the rioters.

AFP

French soldiers lower flag after years of occupation in the Malian city of Timbuktu

Timbuktu, Mali - French troops were preparing to leave the Malian city of Timbuktu on Tuesday, in a symbolic departure more than eight years after Paris first intervened in the conflict-torn Sahel state.

It was there that then French president Francois Hollande formally declared the start of France's military intervention, in February 2013, designed to root out insurgents.

A few days prior, French legionnaires and Malian troops had conquered Timbuktu, a northern desert city, after an eight-month Islamist occupation.

"Some people were overcome by emotion, women were crying, young people were shouting, I myself was overwhelmed," said Yehia Tandina, a Timbuktu television journalist, recalling the day.

Mohamed Ibrahim, the former president of the Timbuktu regional council, also described the day as 'joyful' and 'beautiful'.

But now French troops are leaving their base in Timbuktu, raising questions about the future of violent activity as fighters put down roots in the countryside.

Mathieu, a French sergeant, was part of the original contingent of French soldiers who arrived in Mali, and has returned to the Timbuktu base for the handover ceremony.

"We've come full circle," he said, smiling.

Since 2013, Paris has deployed around 5,100 troops across the Sahel region - which includes Mali - helping to support local governments and their poorly equipped forces fight an ever-growing insurgency.

However, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a



A French Air Force Airbus A-400 M Atlas is seen at the French Army base of Timbuktu which will be used for the return of over 5,000 troops (AFP)

major drawdown of French troops in June, after a military takeover in Mali in August 2020 that ousted the elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

France's military deployment in the Sahel is due to fall to about 3,000 troops by next year.

French forces have already left bases in the northern Malian towns of Kidal and Tessalit.

Not the same

The French were greeted as liberators when they entered Timbuktu in 2013.

Former president Hollande also described the day French soldiers retook the city as "the

best day of his political life".

Sergeant Mathieu said the atmosphere was no longer as jovial, although that locals are not hostile.

A lack of enthusiasm may be linked to continuing conflict across the vast nation of 19mn people.

Violent attacks have grown more frequent since 2013, and the conflict has spilled over into neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger.

Whether France's mission can be described as a military success is a sensitive question.

Master Corporal Julien, who was also in Timbuktu in 2013

when French entered the Malian city, said, "We have to hope that things will get better for civilians."

Outside the city, locals appear to have come to terms with the attackers, said security officials and Western diplomats.

An acceptance of their legitimacy, at least among locals, may have also decreased violence.

Fewer attacks

"Where there is coexistence, there will certainly be fewer negative acts," said Tandina, the journalist, noting improved security in the Timbuktu region.

According to the UN, militant

attacks on civilians in Timbuktu and the surrounding area are at their lowest since 2015.

Still, Westerners cannot travel outside the city without an armed escort.

The central government, which is supported by the UN inside the city, is largely invisible in the countryside.

Most groups in the region are affiliated to Al Qaeda. In their propaganda, they boast that they control the territory and have won the hearts of locals.

A Timbuktu resident, who declined to be named, told AFP many people prefer to use the Islamic court system rather than



French soldiers of the Barkhane force patrol the streets of Timbuktu (AFP)



Air Force flight waiting to be loaded with vehicles and soldiers (AFP)

the official one.

One Islamic judge, Houka Houka Ag Alhousseini, remains active in the area despite figuring on a United Nations sanctions list for having worked in a similar capacity during the earlier occupation of Timbuktu.

'We live with it'

Near Timbuktu airport, equipment from the French base ranging from satellite dishes to crates of medicine is piled up and ready to ship to the country's main Sahel military base at Gao in northern Mali.

Tents, among other small items, were due to be left behind.

The remaining French soldiers were milling about the camp with not much to do: The WiFi has been disconnected, putting them on the same footing as Timbuktu residents.

A violent group recently attacked telecommunications infrastructure, causing persistent network problems.

"Of course there are problems," said Ali Ibrahim, a 26-year-old law student, citing a lack of work, among other issues impacting residents' lives.

"But we're here, and we will still be here tomorrow," he said. "So we live with it."

AFP

Vulnerable to climate change, New York constructs seawall

New York, US - After major storms highlighted New York's weaknesses in the face of climate change, the city is erecting a US\$1.45bn system of walls and floodgates to protect it from rising sea levels.

Superstorm Sandy in 2012 was the trigger for establishing the East Coast Resiliency Project (ESCR), running 4km along the shoreline of Lower Manhattan. Hurricane Ida, which ravaged parts of the city this year, added further urgency.

During Sandy, which killed 44 city residents while impacting 110,000 more and leaving US\$19bn in damages, water levels rose upwards of eight feet, according to Tom Foley, New York's acting Design and Construction Commissioner.

The completed wall will reach as high as 5m, Foley said. The project will also include gates to prevent water from seeping into Manhattan, home of the densest population in the United States.



Construction workers at the site of a flood defence project in Manhattan (AFP)

The wall between 23rd and 20th streets is already constructed, an area where the East River and residential housing are at their most narrow.

Further down, where terrain allows, the project will include a

hilly park that will serve as a protective wall, as well as a dock, an esplanade, bike lanes, benches and garden areas.

The city will also plant some 1,800 trees - nearly double the number that the project's construction has destroyed, along with an additional 1,000 in the neighbourhood, said Sara Nielsen of the New York City Parks Department. Some 500 new trees have already been planted.

And a new underground

drainage system will improve the sewage network's evacuation capacity, while the construction of a power substation should help prevent a days-long power loss that happened during Sandy.

That major 2012 superstorm proved one of the worst to hit the United States this century, along with 2005's Katrina, which devastated New Orleans, and Harvey, which lashed Houston in 2017.

'Adaptable'

But the project is far from enough: New York's some 835km of coastline faces forecasts of more than 61cm rise in sea levels by 2050 and nearly 180cm by the end of the century.

According to Jaimey Bavishi, who directs the Mayor's Office of Climate Resiliency, the city is having a 'multi-layered strategy'.

"We are building coastal protections where possible to keep the water out - but we also

recognise that we're not going to be able to keep the water out in all places," Bavishi told AFP.

She explained that the protections now under construction are 'built to be adaptable'.

"So if the projections for sea level rise and storm surge get worse than what we believe they are now, we can actually add elevation to the wall to add further protection."

Many buildings in Manhattan along with crucial infrastructure are also being reinforced, Bavishi explained, with construction limited in high-risk areas, and collaboration with residents and small businesses to minimise the impact of extreme weather events.

Some citizens are unhappy with the project and local associations have lodged appeals against it. Barring delays from those hurdles, the project is meant to be finished by 2026.

The hope is that Lower Manhattan will be able to breathe

easier.

"I think it's a good idea but things move slowly, so I don't know how... effective it's going to be," said one resident named Terry.

'Ambitious'

The ESCR is just one component of a larger project announced in 2013, when the city revealed a nearly US\$20bn plan aimed at 'climate resilience'.

But that price tag is just a 'down payment', Bavishi says. "Resiliency is a process, not an outcome."

The US Congress recently approved a massive social spending plan of US\$1.2tn, which will allocate roughly US\$550bn to climate and clean energy tax incentives.

"I do believe that our entire climate resiliency strategy is one of the most ambitious in the United States and potentially in the world," Bavishi said.

AFP

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Chocolate luxury

The dream of Africa's cocoa producers

A morsel of chocolate sits on the tongue, and a strong yet subtle flavour starts to blossom.

"When the chocolate starts to soften, you bite into it," orders chocolatier, Claudio Corallo.

The chocolate tasting then expands into different flavours - ginger, coffee, pepper, sea salt - but underpinning each of these delights is an earthiness, a richness that comes from cocoa trees that grow in volcanic soil, wafted by the tropical Atlantic breeze.

They grow in Sao Tome and Principe, a tiny island nation off the west coast of Africa that has a rich but also tragic association with chocolate.

Once named the 'chocolate islands', the Portuguese-speaking archipelago was the world's leading cocoa producer at the end of the 19th century.

Then, as competition mounted in the second half of the 20th century, the sector was almost wiped out. Many plantations were abandoned, and their fields and buildings were taken over by nature.

Today, though, there is talk of a comeback as a handful of entrepreneurs pitch to the growing world market for high-end chocolate.

"Focusing on quality is the only way to survive," said Jean-Remy Martin, a Frenchman who revived an old, dying plantation about a decade ago on the island of Sao Tome, in Diogo Vaz.

The place gave its name to a brand of chocolate Martin created with his son. Its 82-per cent 'Grand Cru' organic chocolate - with 'hints of flowers, smoke, spices and fruit' - sells to online buyers in Europe for €6.40 (US\$7.42 approx) a bar.

His spread of 420 hectares lies on the slopes of an ancient volcano overlooking the Atlantic, using cocoa trees that are the descendants of plants

brought in by the Portuguese in the 18th century.

Mechanised farming on this terrain is impossible, but the trees grow under a lush natural canopy and in soil so fertile that Martin says he can do without chemical inputs.

Grow cocoa, make chocolate

But going organic was not enough.

"We have organic certification, but growing cocoa by itself won't cover the costs," Martin said. "We had to go for 100 per cent production," taking charge of the entire chain from cocoa pod to chocolate.

The business model demanded a seismic change.

The farm moved from "a monoculture regime, whose cocoa prices were determined by world buyers, to exercising total control over our prices and boosting our cocoa in the value chain," he said.

Since then, Diogo Vaz chocolate has established an international reputation, winning numerous awards and earning enough profit to create an ambitious - and sustainable - business.

Around 250 people, almost all of them locals, are employed by the firm, which aims to replicate its success with fruit and vanilla cultivation, to be transformed into pastries and alcoholic drinks.

Corallo, an Italian from Florence, moved to Sao Tome in the early '90s and became a pioneer in developing top-of-the-range cocoa.

He set up 'laboratories' at his plantation on the island of Principe and his workshop on Sao Tome to try to unravel the unique taste signatures of cacao grown on the archipelago.

"I don't like chocolate myself," Corallo told AFP mischievously, alluding to his professional record as a specialist in coffee.

Corallo's chocolate has developed a growing and devoted international following, although he said that the logistics of exporting from a location more than 300km from the coast of Gabon were often a headache.

Sao Tome and Principe is one of a growing number of cocoa-producing countries to aim at the burgeoning demand for organic.

The world market is expected to grow at nearly eight per cent annually over the next five years, to reach US\$1.3bn by 2026, according to industry research published in October.

Bittersweet history

Cocoa plantations are rooted in the islands' history.

At the industry's peak at the end of the 19th century, the islands cranked out nearly 35,000 tonnes of cocoa per year - the fruit of the labour of thousands of immigrants from Portugal's other African colonies, Cape Verde, Angola and Mozambique.

But once the colonies gained independence in 1975, "the Portuguese left with their know-how, the plantations were hit by outbreaks of pests and the state redistributed land to former employees without any supervision," said Maria Nazare Ceita, a historian at the University of Sao Tome.

"Production collapsed."

"The whole population is linked to cocoa in one way or another," Carlos Vila Nova, the country's president, told AFP.

"Thanks to our know-how we understand the product very well," he said.

"In the globalised economy, we must give cocoa added value. We have to bet on quality. By extending the sector to processing, the cocoa business has a future again."

AFP



We have organic certification, but growing cocoa by itself won't cover the costs. We had to go for 100 per cent productions

JEAN-REMY MARTIN



Agronomist Claudio Corallo's background is in coffee, but he saw potential for Sao Tome in the growing market for top-quality chocolate Adrien Marotte (AFP)



Naoya Inoue celebrates after defeating Aran Dipaen in their WBA and IBF bantamweight title fight, in Tokyo on Tuesday (AFP)

Japan’s ‘Monster’ Inoue defends title against Dipaen

Tokyo, Japan - Japan’s unbeaten ‘Monster’ Naoya Inoue defended his WBA and IBF bantamweight titles on Tuesday with an eighth-round technical knockout win over unheralded Thai challenger Aran Dipaen in Tokyo.

Fighting at Ryogoku Kokugikan - the home of sumo - Inoue wore Dipaen down with a series of punishing shots before dispatching him with a vicious left hand.

The bout, Inoue’s first in Japan for around two years, was widely seen as a stepping-stone toward an attempt at unifying all four bantamweight belts next year.

The 28-year-old took his unbeaten record to 22-0, with

19 wins by knockout.

Inoue unleashed his ferocious punching power to out-class Dipaen, the IBF’s sixth-ranked challenger.

Dipaen, who entered the fight with a 12-2 record, absorbed Inoue’s early blows but could do nothing when the champion hit him with a big left that sent him down to the canvas.

Inoue has set his sights on unifying the bantamweight belts next year, with WBA champion Nonito Donaire and WBO title-holder John Riel Casimero standing in his way.

Inoue beat Donaire in the final of the World Boxing Super Series in 2019.

AFP

OMAN TEAM TO TEE AT ARAB GOLF



Fahad al Kitani



Hamood al Harthy



Azaan al Rumhy



Ayman al Busaidi

Muscat - A team of four golfers from Oman is on its way to Egypt to participate in the 40th Pan Arab Golf Championship to be held in Dreamland Golf Course from Thursday.

Following a series of qualifying events, Oman has selected a team of four players to represent the sultanate in the mega event to be held at Egypt’s world class facility - just a few minutes away from the Great Pyramids.

A press statement from Jamie Wood, championships and technical director at the Oman Golf Association, stated the team of four, which includes three ‘graduates’ from the OGA’s Junior

Dreamland is a course that our players know well as it has been the host venue on several occasions before. We are very excited to be sending our team to participate in the championship

MUNDHIR AL BARWANI

Development Programme, is a ‘testament to the overall development of golf in the sultanate’, and reflects the focus that the sultanate accords on the juniors.

‘Joining the national team stalwart Azaan al Rumhy will be Hamood al Harthy, Fahad al Ki-

tani and current junior squad member Ayman al Busaidi who at the age of 15 saw off several more seasoned players through qualifying to claim his spot on the team,’ the statement added.

‘This year’s event will be played from December 16 to 23

at the Dreamland Golf Course in Cairo and will bring together the finest golfers from the Middle East who compete, both as a team and individually.’

The best three scores from four will be counted each day for the team championship, and individual scores from each country will be weighed for gold, silver, and bronze medals, it said.

“Dreamland is a course that our players know well as it has been the host venue on several occasions before. We are very excited to be sending our team to participate in the championship,” Mundhir al Barwani, chairman of the Oman Golf Association was

quoted as saying.

“It is great to see our younger players qualifying to represent the sultanate at the senior level and we must thank the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Youth and our partners viz., Sohar Aluminium, Moore, Haya Water and Oman LNG for their support to help develop golf in Oman,” he further said.

Morocco, the host of the previous edition of the championship would not take part in the competition this year.

“But we look forward to a good four days of competition against the other teams from the region,” Barwani added.

Curry ‘on doorstep’ of all-time three-point mark

Los Angeles, US - Two-time league MVP Stephen Curry is just two three-point baskets away from breaking Ray Allen’s all-time NBA record after his Golden State Warriors rallied late to edge the Indiana Pacers 102-100 on Monday.

Curry came into the game needing seven three-pointers but could manage only five, leaving him one short of tying Allen’s record of 2,973.

“I’m enjoying the moment, knocking on the doorstep. It’s pretty surreal,” Curry said after scoring 26 points with six rebounds and six assists. “You just keep playing basketball, taking shots you think you can make and enjoy the experience.”

In 35 minutes of playing time, he shot five of 15 from beyond the arc in front of a crowd of 17,018 at Gainbridge Fieldhouse arena in Indianapolis that were eager to



Stephen Curry of the Golden State Warriors shoots the ball against the Indiana Pacers at Gainbridge Fieldhouse, in Indianapolis on Monday (AFP)

see him break the record.

Curry and the Warriors got off to a slow start, trailed for most of the game and were 55-47 behind at the half.

The 33-year-old Curry didn’t hit his first three-pointer until the second quarter and committed

four of his seven turnovers in the first half as he was smothered by the Pacers’ stifling defense.

“I wasn’t going to let him do it on our court,” said Indiana’s Malcolm Brogdon, who had 23 points and eight assists.

Curry made some clutch bas-

kets down the stretch, scoring five of the Warriors’ final seven points, including his fifth and final three-pointer - a 24-foot effort with 84 seconds left on the clock to pull the Warriors to within two points at 100-98.

He then sank two free throws to tie it 100-100 before Kevon Looney got the winning basket with 13 seconds to go.

“It was a grind-it-out kind of win,” said Curry, who missed a potential record-tying three-pointer in the final seconds.

“We had a competitive spirit down the stretch and we got enough stops.”

The three-time NBA champion Curry admitted that the record has become a distraction for the team.

“Let’s be honest,” Curry said. “There is a lot of hype around

this record. Sometimes it gets everybody rushing, playing out of our skin. We had to remind ourselves how we play offence.”

Curry doesn’t have to wait long to get his next shot at the record, against the New York Knicks on Tuesday.

“It will happen when it happens. I have respect for all great shooters that have come through the league,” Curry said.

“I just want to enjoy the moment because it has been a long time coming.”

Andrew Wiggins contributed 15 points for the Warriors, while Draymond Green gathered a team-high nine rebounds to go with 15 points. Domantas Sabonis led all scorers with 30 for the Pacers, who saw a three-game winning streak ended. The Warriors are now 22-5 on the season and among the favourites.

AFP

CELEBRATING OMAN 51st NATIONAL DAY

العید الوطني العُماني 51

CELEBRATING OMAN 51st NATIONAL DAY

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FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Man Utd clash off as virus causes disruption

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

London, UK - Manchester United's match at Brentford on Tuesday was postponed as the English Premier League reported a record number of COVID-19 cases, with the virus threatening to disrupt the busy Christmas fixture list.

It came hours after the Old Trafford club closed their Carrington training complex because of several players and staff members testing positive for coronavirus.

The Premier League Board took the decision to postpone the Brentford clash 'based on guidance from medical advisors', said a Manchester United statement.

United's fixture in west London was the second Premier League game to fall to the virus in three days, after Tottenham Hotspur's match at Brighton on Sunday was called off.

'Manchester United can confirm that our Premier League fixture at Brentford FC, on Tuesday 14 December at 19:30, has been postponed and will be rescheduled in due course,' a United statement late on Monday said.

With the Omicron variant sweeping across Britain, there are growing virus issues at several Premier League clubs.

The Premier League on Monday reported 42 new COVID-19 cases in the past week - a seven-day record since testing figures started being released in May 2020 - up from 12 cases the previous week.

More fixtures could come under threat with Brighton, Tottenham, Leicester City, Aston Villa and Norwich City all reporting confirmed COVID-19 cases in recent days.

Norwich are due to host Villa on Tuesday, while Tottenham are scheduled to travel to Leices-



Manchester United's Portuguese striker Cristiano Ronaldo (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring the opening goal from the penalty spot during the match against Norwich City, at Carrow Road Stadium in Norwich, eastern England, on December 11 (AFP)

ter on Thursday.

All of United's players tested negative before Saturday's match at Norwich, but it was reported a group of players and staff tested positive on Sunday.

'Following PCR confirmation of positive tests among the first-team staff and players, the outbreak requires ongoing surveillance with individuals who tested positive isolating in line with Premier League protocols,' added the United statement.

Emergency measures

The Premier League last week instructed all clubs to reinstate COVID-19 restrictions, including

a return to social distancing and mask wearing.

'With the health of players and staff the priority, and in light of the recent rise in COVID-19 cases across the country, the Premier League has reintroduced emergency measures,' the Premier League reiterated in a statement late on Monday.

'These include protocols such as more frequent testing, wearing face coverings while indoors, observing social distancing and limiting treatment time.'

Brentford expressed disappointment for their supporters at the postponement, but said the 'health and safety of both clubs'

players and staff must always come first'.

Aston Villa manager Steven Gerrard said that his team had a virus outbreak involving 'a couple of staff members and a couple of players' which led to the club cancelling training on Sunday.

However, the squad trained as normal on Monday ahead of their trip to Carrow Road, where United won 1-0 on Saturday.

'We retested this morning and we have got a couple of staff and a couple of players missing for the foreseeable future,' said Gerrard.

"But the vast majority have

come through the test this morning and we look forward to competing against Norwich."

Brighton manager Graham Potter said there were 'three or four' positive tests among his squad, but their match against Wolves on Wednesday was not currently under threat.

Tottenham boss Antonio Conte admitted he had been 'scared' by the outbreak at the north London club, which also caused their European fixture against Rennes last week to be called off after eight players and five members of Spurs' staff tested positive.

AFP

Roma halt mini-slump with Spezia win

Rome, Italy - Roma put an end to their worrying recent run of form in Serie A by beating struggling Spezia 2-0 on Monday and gaining ground in the race for European football.

Goals from corners in each half from Chris Smalling and Roger Ibanez put Jose Mourinho's side back on track following defeat at Bologna and a home hammering at the hands of champions Inter Milan last weekend.

Roma are up to sixth on 28 points, two points behind Fiorentina who hold the Europa League qualification spot and level with Juventus, in seventh after drawing at Venezia on Saturday.

However they are some way from their true objective of Champions League football as they sit eight points behind fourth-placed Napoli, and missing some key players failed to convince at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome.

"I was pleased with the goals because we spent 25 minutes working on corners yesterday," Mourinho told Sky Sport Italia.

"I'm also pleased with the result but I didn't like the way we

played... even when we were two goals ahead I didn't feel like the match was over."

An 11th defeat for Spezia leaves Thiago Motta's team just two points and one place above the relegation zone, despite a spirited display which probably deserved at least a goal.

Smalling put Roma ahead with his first league goal of the season in the sixth minute when, completely unmarked at a corner, he casually met countryman Tammy Abraham's headed effort from a corner with a header of his own that Ivan Provedel had no chance of saving.

Abraham was also involved when the hosts were unlucky to not double their lead in the 25th minute, the England international cleverly flicking a pass to Matias Vina who then watched his goal-bound effort well tipped away by Provedel.

There was time for one more incident though, as talented teen Felix Afena-Gyan rattled home what he thought was Roma's third in added time after obviously handling in the build up and received a second booking while still celebrating with the crowd.

AFP



Roma defender Roger Ibanez (top) celebrates after scoring his second goal during the Italian Serie A match against Spezia on Monday (AFP)



Barcelona's Aguero may retire

Barcelona, Spain - Barcelona forward Sergio Aguero will make an announcement on his future on Wednesday following cardiac and respiratory difficulties suffered while playing in La Liga in October.

Aguero will be accompanied at a press conference on Wednesday by club president Joan Laporta, where local media say he will announce his retirement. He joined Barca from Manchester City in July after helping Argentina to win the Copa America.

Just prior to his switch he suffered a bout of COVID-19, and on October 30 was rushed to hospital after breathing problems while playing in the Liga draw against Alaves. 'It looks clear the Argentine striker will announce his retirement after suffering cardiac arrhythmia,' *Mundo Deportivo* wrote on Tuesday.

AFP

Aubameyang stripped of Arsenal captaincy

London, UK - Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang has been stripped of the Arsenal captaincy following a breach of discipline as manager Mikel Arteta outlined on Tuesday his desire for a culture change at the club.

The 32-year-old forward was left out for Saturday's 3-0 win over Southampton and will also not feature for West Ham's visit to the Emirates on Wednesday.

'Following his latest disciplinary breach last week, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang will no longer be our club captain, and will not be considered for selection for Wednesday's match against West Ham United,' Arsenal said in a statement.

'We expect all our players, particularly our captain, to work to the rules and standards we have all set and agreed.'

According to The Athletic, Aubameyang returned later than agreed from a personal trip to France last week, which subsequently forced him to miss training due to the need to pass coronavirus protocols.

Aubameyang was also left out by Arteta for a victory over north London rivals Tottenham in March over a disciplinary issue when he arrived late for a pre-match meeting.

"It is a really clear statement from the club. It is the decision we have made with the last inci-



Arsenal striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang (right) misses a chance during the match against Everton at Goodison Park in Liverpool (AFP)

dent we had with the player and this is where we stand," Arteta said at a pre-match press conference.

"We had to make the decision, it is the right one to defend the interest of the football club."

Aubameyang was named Arsenal skipper in 2019 after Granit Xhaka was also stripped of the role for his tirade towards supporters after being substituted in a Premier League match against Crystal Palace.

The Gabon attacker initially revelled in the role, leading Arsenal to their only trophy under Arteta by scoring twice in the semi-final and final of the FA Cup in 2020.

However, Aubameyang's form has dipped since signing a three-year deal that made him one of the highest earners in the Premier League worth a reported £18mn a year.

He scored just 10 Premier League goals as Arsenal finished eighth last season and has four in 14 league appearances this campaign.

"It is a really unpleasant situation," Arteta said.

"The players accepted the decision, they know because they have committed to it. We want to take our culture and how we want to represent the football club to a different level."

AFP

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Pakistan seal series win

Shadab's cameo 12-ball 28 set the game up, before his thrifty 0 for 22 applied the brakes on West Indies

Karachi, Pakistan - For the second night in a row, Pakistan's well-rounded bowling attack saw the home side successfully defend a total, and in the process gave the hosts an unassailable 2-0 lead over West Indies in the three-game T20I series.

Ten overs into the chase, West Indies seemed on course to chase the 173 target down courtesy opener Brandon King's elegant strokeplay, but it all unravelled rather quickly thereafter.

Shadab Khan strangled the batters with 0 for 22, Mohammad Nawaz got crucial wickets, Mohammad Wasim Jr bowled to his plans, Shaheen Shah Afridi claimed three middle-order victims in one over and Haris Rauf dismissed King - and the tenth



Pakistan's cricketers celebrate after a dismissal during the second T20 match at the National Stadium in Karachi on Tuesday (AFP)

wicket off the game's last ball - to seal the deal for Pakistan.

In retrospect, though, Shadab's more crucial contribution came with the bat and not the ball. His 12-ball cameo of 28 ended up being the difference between the two sides with Pakistan winning by only nine runs.

Hosein's encore

On Monday, Hosein got Babar Azam for zero in his spell of 1 for 19. Tonight, he indirectly effected Babar's dismissal for 7 when he

strangled the run-scoring from one end after Pakistan chose to bat. Mohammad Rizwan looked to rotate the strike and ended up running his opening partner out in the third over when they took on Hayden Walsh Jr's arm from backward point. Hosein mostly bowled length deliveries that drifted into the right-handers when the ball was brand new, cramping them for space to free their arms.

When Fakhar Zaman came in, West Indies captain Nicholas

Pooran persisted with Hosein despite what conventional wisdom suggests for a left-arm fingerspinner. He dragged back a delivery's length - in the first ball of the fifth over - after spotting Fakhar giving him the charge, and the away movement in the air took the ball past the bat for Pooran to stump him. Hosein bowled four straight overs after taking the new ball, and was done for the evening by the seventh over, taking 1 for 16 with 14 dot balls. At the time, Pakistan's

score read 55 for 2 and with Rizwan and Haider Ali at the crease, the situation was eerily similar to the first T20I.

Middle-order wobble

But it wasn't to be like the first T20I where Rizwan and Haider struck exquisite fifties to lift Pakistan to 200. Instead, Rizwan fell for a 30-ball 38 off sixth bowler Odean Smith's first delivery of the match, just when he looked to accelerate. In Smith's next over, Haider was caught at deep

point for a struggling 34-ball 31. Neither of those were wicket-taking deliveries though, Rizwan was out to a wide slower ball that he bunted to cover and Haider had almost enough in his shot for a six after heaving a wide ball over point.

The 15th over brought another wicket with Nawaz sweeping a Walsh delivery strongly, but was gone for 1 after finding the only fielder in the deep on the leg side. With three wickets falling for 25 runs, it seemed that Pakistan would miss out on the impetus they needed for a big whirl in the death overs.

Iftikhar Ahmed, though, kept playing his shots despite the wickets falling around him. He came in after Rizwan's wicket, and punished Walsh's half-tracker early for four. He then kept the score ticking along with quick running between the wickets in Asif Ali's company. And when Oshane Thomas brought back some extra pace in the 18th over, he punished the tall right-arm quick by drilling two sixes over deep midwicket and long off. However, just when Iftikhar looked to give Pakistan a big flourish, he was gone, caught behind off Thomas' last ball of the

SCOREBOARD			
PAKISTAN			
M Rizwan	c Hope b Smith	38	(30)
B Azam	run out	7	(7)
F Zaman	st Pooran b Hosein	10	(5)
H Ali	c Brooks b Smith	31	(34)
I Ahmed	c Pooran b Thomas	32	(19)
M Nawaz	c Powell b Walsh	1	(3)
A Ali	c Powell b Shepherd	9	(7)
S Khan	not out	28	(12)
M Wasim	run out	5	(3)
H Rauf	not out	0	(0)
Extras	(lb 4, w 7)	11	
TOTAL: 172 for eight in 20 overs			
Fall of wickets: 1-14, 2-38, 3-86, 4-109, 5-111, 6-124, 7-141, 8-171			
Bowling: A Hosein 4-0-16-1, O Thomas 3-0-35-1, R Shepherd 3-0-29-1, H Walsh 4-0-30-1, D Drakes 3-0-34-0, O Smith 3-0-24-2			
WEST INDIES			
S Hope	c I Ahmed b M Wasim 1	63	(43)
B King	c M Nawaz b H Rauf	67	(43)
S Brooks	lbw b M Nawaz	10	(4)
N Pooran	c H Rauf b M Nawaz	26	(26)
R Powell	c F Zaman b M Wasim 4	(11)	
O Smith	c A Ali b S S Afridi	12	(6)
R hepherd	not out	35	(19)
D Drakes	c M Rizwan b S S Afridi 0	(1)	
Hayden Walsh	b S S Afridi	0	(1)
A Hosein	run out	2	(2)
O Thomas	b Haris Rauf	0	(1)
Extras	(w 6)	6	
TOTAL: 163 all out in 20 overs			
Fall of wickets: 1-17, 2-31, 3-85, 4-102, 5-118, 6-127, 7-131, 8-131, 9-149, 10-163			
Bowling: S S Afridi 4-0-26-3, M Nawaz 4-0-36-2, M Wasim 4-0-39-2, H Rauf 4-0-40-2, S Khan 4-0-22-0			

over for a 19-ball 32.

With two overs to go and Pakistan having gained some momentum after the middle-overs trouble, Shadab took over from where Iftikhar left off. The 19th began with Shadab hitting a four and a six, and the 20th saw Shadab smacking Romario Shepherd over long on and long off for two sixes.

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Wounded England face pink-ball challenge

THE ASHES

Adelaide, Australia - England head into the day-night second Ashes Test in Adelaide on Thursday under pressure and facing an ominous task against an Australian team who have won all of their eight pink-ball matches.

The tourists' capitulation by nine wickets in the opening Test in Brisbane exposed their batting and fielding frailties, exacerbated by rain-hit preparations and lack of match practice.

It wasn't helped by poor decision-making - notably captain Joe Root choosing to bat after winning the toss on a juicy Gabba pitch and the widely criticised omission of pace veterans Jimmy Anderson and Stuart Broad.

Root knows his team must find a way to improve, and fast, to stand a chance at a ground where Australia have hosted five of their eight Test wins under lights.



Ben Stokes plays a shot during training at Adelaide Oval on Tuesday (AFP)

"We have got to be better in the field and with the bat," he said, but added: "We're game-hardened now, we're in the series."

Seamers Broad and Anderson are tipped to return given the extra movement found with a pink ball, something coach Chris Silverwood hinted at this week.

"Jimmy will be fit and ready to go for the second Test, as will Stuart," he told British media.

"We have talent and we still have two of the best (bowlers) up our sleeve as well."

That would likely mean one of Ollie Robinson, Mark Wood or Chris Woakes missing out, and England must also decide what to do with spinner Jack Leach, who was hammered for 1-102 off 13 overs at the Gabba.

While losing by nine wickets was bad enough, they were also fined all of their match fees and docked Test Championship points for a slow over rate.

'Confidence is there'

There are also concerns over Ben Stokes, who failed to fire in his first competitive match in six months after a break to deal with a finger injury and mental health issues.

Root insisted England's star all-rounder would bounce back and warned Australia: "You write Ben Stokes off at your own peril."

Silverwood said the team was looking ahead, rather than dwelling on defeat.

"Obviously they were hurting, but there is belief they can win this series," he said, despite England losing three of the four day-night Tests they have played so far.

"We have the players here that can match the Australians. The confidence is there that we can compete with Australia, and that's exactly what we intend to do."

Australia have their own headaches, with Josh Hazlewood ruled out with a side strain. It is a big blow with the fast bowler boasting a pink-ball record of 32 wickets at just 19.90.

He was the major destroyer in Adelaide a year ago, taking an incredible 5-8 when India were rolled for just 36 in their second innings.

Australian captain Pat Cummins said after Brisbane that Hazlewood's injury was 'nothing too serious', but selectors opted not to risk him with the Boxing Day

Test in Melbourne coming hot on the heels of Adelaide.

Jhye Richardson is the frontrunner to add to his two Tests and spearhead the attack alongside Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Nathan Lyon, although Michael Neser is also an option.

There is also a worry over explosive opener David Warner, who scored 94 in Brisbane. He has been nursing bruised ribs and didn't bat in Australia's second innings when just 20 runs were needed to win.

The experienced Usman Khawaja is a likely replacement to open alongside Marcus Harris should Australia choose to rest Warner.

Despite this, Cummins is confident of his team taking a 2-0 Ashes lead given Australia's unblemished pink-ball record at Adelaide and the thumping they handed England last week.

"We're going to Adelaide, a place we love playing and the pink ball's a little bit different... there's a few more unknowns," he said.

"But it's a format we really enjoy and Adelaide Oval's a great place to play cricket."

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