



## NEW CHAPTER CLOSER TIES



### JOINT STATEMENT

**Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud**, Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of Saudi Arabia, left Oman on Tuesday after holding a fruitful round of bilateral talks with **His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq**. In the morning, the Crown Prince was accorded an official welcome at Al Alam Palace accompanied by a 21-gun salute. After initial greetings, His Majesty the Sultan and Prince Mohammed sat down for a round of official talks. The session reviewed numerous aspects of bilateral cooperation, ways to consolidate ties between the peoples of the two countries and means of realising their aspirations. The two sides also exchanged views on issues of common concern.

## Oman-Saudi road opens

Muscat - The Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia issued a joint communique following the visit of Prince Mohammed bin Salman al Saud, Saudi Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, to Oman, reading as follows:

A round of official talks was held by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq and Prince Mohammed. They explored aspects of joint co-operation and ways of developing these in different fields and commended the level of coordination in political, economic, military and security spheres for the good of the two peoples.

The two sides also lauded the accomplishments made during the historic visit of His Majesty the Sultan to Saudi Arabia in July 2021. They underlined the outcome of the Royal visit, which resulted in expanding the scope of bilateral relations and the signing of a memorandum of understanding for the establishment of the Oman-Saudi Coordination Council, which will

contribute to the realisation of the desired integration in all sectors.

The two sides expressed their determination to enhance economic cooperation by encouraging government and private sectors with the aim of forging quality commercial and investment exchange to serve their visions (Oman Vision 2040 and Saudi Vision 2030) and consolidate partnership between the two countries' private sectors. In this respect, the two sides welcomed the opening of the 725km Desert Highway linking the two countries which will significantly boost travel of citizens and the smooth flow of supplies towards the desired full-fledged economic integration. They also welcomed the opening of border checkpoints in Oman and Saudi Arabia.

### Energy and climate change

In the field of energy, the two sides extolled Opec+ efforts - led by Saudi Arabia, with the participation of Oman - that resulted in stabilising petroleum markets. They also underscored the importance of such sustained cooperation and the commitment of all participating countries to the mandates of the Opec+ agreement.

The two sides stressed the need to study all opportunities for cooperation in the oil, gas and petrochemicals sector, as well as cooperation in advancing petroleum products trade, the use of renewable energy and its technologies, electrical energy, commercial exchange and maximising benefits from local energy content for implementing power projects.

The Omani side valued the initiatives made by Saudi Arabia to address climate change, including Saudi Arabia's Green Initiative and Green Middle East launched by Prince Mohammed.

Continued on Page 02

## HM confers Civil Order on Prince Mohammed

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq conferred the Oman Civil Order - 1st Class - on Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of Saudi Arabia, on Tuesday. It is the highest Omani order awarded to kings, heads of state, crown princes and heads of governments whose countries share special relations with the sultanate.

The conferment ceremony was followed by an official luncheon hosted by His Majesty the Sultan in honour of Prince Mohammed.

The luncheon was attended by members of the Royal family, chairmen of State Council and Majlis A'Shura and ministers, besides the official delegation accompanying the Saudi Crown Prince.





# PRINCE MOHAMMED CONCLUDES SUCCESSFUL TRIP

MoUs signed for cooperation in trade and media, joint  
communique issued hailing Oman-Saudi ties





**SULTANATE OF OMAN**  
**Ministry of Heritage & Tourism**

**ANNOUNCEMENT**

**Introducing a competition for renting, operating and hiring a number of archaeological and tourist sites**

In the interest of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism to benefit from the heritage and tourism sites and to empower the local community to ensure its benefit and to create a partnership by providing the opportunity to invest in the heritage sites of the ministry.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism invites private companies that have the technical and financial ability and interested to compete for a long-term investment period, and the evaluation will be based on the best offers submitted operationally and financially, for the following sites:-

| Product Type                        | Location                           | The purchase price of the specifications booklet |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Kout Taqa Building (Al-Askar Tower) | Dhofar Governorate / wilayat Taqa  | RO 25/-                                          |
| Theger Tower                        | Dhofar Governorate /Wilayat Mirbat | RO 25/-                                          |

Bids submission will be at the General Directorate of Heritage and Tourism in the Governorate of Dhofar, to purchase the tender documents of the terms and conditions during official working hours, starting from December 8, 2021 until December 23, 2021, and the last date for submitting bids will be on Thursday, January 6, 2022 at 1:00pm.

## Oman-Saudi road opens

Continued from Page 01

They agreed to step up cooperation in the field of energy and climate change within the framework of Green Middle East to enhance gains at local, regional and international levels.

The two sides also welcomed an initiative to implement Circular Carbon Economy, launched by Saudi Arabia when chairing the G20 Summit. The initiative was hailed by the economic group as a comprehensive framework to address challenges posed by gas emissions responsible for global warming. The initiative, based on the use of available technologies, constitutes an economically sustainable method to manage gas emissions.

**Cooperation in commercial field**

The two sides agreed to increase incentives that contribute to the easy flow of trade, cooperation in food security, joint investment in sectors of standardisation, health, medical drug production, advanced technologies, innovation, renewable energy, industry, tourism, petrochemicals converting industries, logistics and financial technology.

To this effect, two agreements were signed in the field of standardisation.

The two sides expressed their satisfaction with the outcome of the third meeting of the Oman-Saudi Business Council and the Economic Forum held on the sidelines of the meeting.

**Media field**

The two sides affirmed their keenness to upgrade the level of cooperation and welcomed the signing of MoUs in the field of radio and TV, exchange of news between Oman News Agency and Saudi Press Agency and another in the field of visual, audio and print media.

The two sides also welcomed the meeting held by Oman Journalist Association and Saudi Press Association.

**Tourism**

The two sides reiterated their determination to bolster joint action in the field of tourism and the development of the sector due to its significance in augmenting domestic product, creating employment opportunities and diversifying the economy.

**Political arena**

In the political arena, the two sides reaffirmed the fundamentals of the Al Ula Declaration issued on January 5, 2021, which approved the implementation of the vision of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques endorsed by the GCC Supreme Council during its 36th session in December 2015.

The two sides exchanged views about matters of common concern in the regional and international arenas. They affirmed their determination to work together to serve the joint interests and consolidate security and stability in the region and the world at large. They also voiced their support for all efforts aimed at the establishment of peace in the Middle East. They underlined the importance of reaching a comprehensive settlement for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in accordance with the Arab Peace Initiative and related international legitimacy resolutions in a manner that safeguards the right of Palestinian people to set up their own independent state on the borders of 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

On Yemen, the two sides agreed to continue efforts to find a political solution to the crisis based on the GCC initiative, the outcomes of the National Comprehensive Dialogue, the Security Council Resolution and the Saudi Arabian Initiative - all with the overall aim of alleviating the suffering of the Yemeni people.

The two sides also welcomed the success of the elections in Iraq and expressed hope for the formation of an Iraqi government capable of establishing peace and security and realising the country's prosperity.

The two sides welcomed the accord reached by parties to the Transitional Stage in Sudan and reaffirmed their support for all that might achieve security and stability in the country. They wished Sudanese people progress and prosperity.

On Lebanon, the two sides affirmed the importance of comprehensive reforms to help the country emerge from its crisis and to make sure that it will not constitute a hotspot for any terrorist or criminal acts that might compromise the stability of the region.

The two sides affirmed the significance of reaching political solutions for the Syrian and Libyan crises to help end the suffering of the Syrian and Libyan peoples and safeguard their territorial integrity.

The two sides highlighted the importance of consolidating security and stability in Afghanistan and voiced their support for relief efforts and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan.

The two sides also underscored the significance of cooperation in effectively addressing the Iranian nuclear file to help contribute to the establishment of regional and international security and stability. In this context, they affirmed their support for principles of good neighbourliness, respect for UN and international resolutions and the need to spare the region all destabilisation activities.

At the end of the visit, Prince Mohammed thanked His Majesty the Sultan for the warm welcome and hospitality accorded to him and his delegation.

On his turn, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his best wishes for the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud. He wished Saudi people further progress and prosperity.

ONA

# Omani social media in overdrive over UAE's new workweek

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Following the UAE's announcement to adopt a new four-and-a-half day working week effective from January 1, 2022, Omani's social media platforms were flooded with the news and excited reactions. The decision applies to all federal government entities in the UAE and comes with new working hours - 7.30am to 3.30pm, Monday to Thursday, and 7.30am to 12pm on Friday.

According to UAE's news agency WAM, Friday sermons and prayers across the Emirates will be held from 1.15pm. Government staff will have the option of making arrangements to work from home on Fridays, or arrange flexible working hours.

The UAE is the first nation in the world to introduce a national working week shorter than the global five-day week. The extended weekend is part of the UAE government's efforts to boost work-life balance and enhance social wellbeing, while increasing performance to advance



the country's economic competitiveness.

Being the closest neighbour of Oman, the UAE attracts many people from the sultanate during weekends and the move is significant for frequent travellers to Dubai.

"Dubai is my preferred destination for business and my family's favourite weekend escape.

Now that their weekend will change, I will have to adjust my travels there because my friends and other family members live there," said Sufian Jamal, whose sister lives in Abu Dhabi.

While WAM's report noted that adopting an agile working system will enable the UAE to rapidly respond to emerging changes and enhance wellbeing

in the workplace, some people in Oman hope to see a similar move here.

"My business revolves around Dubai and I visit there at least twice a month. I deal with international companies in Dubai, so the new system is a good one considering many international companies are closed on Saturdays and Sundays. The move is a

win-win situation for people and businesses," said Nasser al Musallami, who deals in IT equipment.

From an economic perspective, the new working week will better align the UAE with global markets, reflecting the country's status on the global economic map. The move will ensure smooth financial, trade and economic transactions with countries that follow a Saturday/Sunday weekend, facilitating stronger international business links and opportunities for thousands of UAE-based and multinational companies.

"The move is expected to boost not only trading opportunities but also add to the flexible, secure and enjoyable lifestyle the UAE offers to its citizens and residents," the WAM report said.

The Federal Authority for Government Human Resources proposed the new workweek following comprehensive benchmarking and feasibility studies reflecting potential impacts of the move on the economy, social and family ties and the overall wellbeing of people in the UAE.



## Specialists keep eye on humpback whale in Duqm port

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

A team of specialists from the Environment Authority has been monitoring an Arabian Sea humpback whale in the Port of Duqm waters for a week.

A statement issued by the authority said, "The specialists confirmed that the whale was rescued last January from fishing nets in the port and that they have been following the whale to ensure its welfare and safe passage out of the port."

In January, a massive rescue effort was undertaken to save the whale as it got stranded in the Port of Duqm after being entangled in nets.

Specialists and volunteers from the authority, Five Oceans Environmental Services and Future Seas, supported by Environment Society of Oman and the Port of Duqm, rescued the whale in January.

The authority added that the incident highlights the dangers posed by abandoned fishing gear to the marine environment.

Arabian Sea humpback whales are a small subpopulation of humpback whales, which are the most genetically distinct whales and the most isolated whale population on earth. A study suggests that these have remained separate from other humpback whale populations for perhaps 70,000 years.

## Air passengers drop 26.5% till Sept

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

A total of 2,870,810 passengers travelled through Oman's airports this year till the end of September, a 26.5 per cent drop compared to the same period in 2020.

A statement issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) 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."



The number of flights to Oman's airports in 2021 till the end of September was 26,636, including 18,604 international flights at Muscat International Airport, Salalah Airport and

Sohar Airport, and 8,032 domestic flights at Muscat International Airport, Salalah Airport, Sohar Airport and Duqm Airport.

Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani nationals comprised the highest number of passengers during this period at Muscat International Airport. There were 82,162 Indian passengers, including 48,519 arrivals and 33,643 departures, followed by Bangladeshi passengers (33,685 total - 20,086 arrivals and 13,599 departures) and Pakistani passengers (26,627 total - 17,437 arrivals and 9,190 departures).

In 2020, a total of 4.10mn passengers travelled through airports in the sultanate (Muscat,

Salalah, Sohar and Duqm) till the end of October. The number of flights landing and departing from Muscat, Salalah and Sohar airports in this period was 29,999, according to NCSI figures.

The average drop in passenger numbers in the four airports at the end of October 2020 was 69.5 per cent, compared to the same period of 2019.

The total number of passengers at Muscat International Airport fell by 72.4 per cent to 3.69mn at the end of October 2020 over the same period of 2019. The number of flights at Muscat International Airport fell by 68.1 per cent to 31,321 flights at the end of October 2020.

## MoL offers 440 jobs in North Batinah

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

In line with its earlier announcement to create jobs and training opportunities every month, the Ministry of Labour (MoL) has stated that over 440 opportunities are now available in the private sector in North Batinah governorate.

"Details of the opportunities

can be viewed on [www.moi.gov.om](http://www.moi.gov.om). Those interested can apply through PKI electronic certification," an MoL statement said. "Priority will be given to those laid off from work in North Batinah governorate."

MoL has urged citizens wishing to apply for job opportunities to follow local newspapers, employment platforms and social media accounts authorised to

announce these by the ministry.

The sultanate has witnessed a significant jump in annual employment of citizens.

Over 35,000 Omanis have been employed this year. From 5,000-6,000 jobs annually earlier, the Ministry of Labour has been successful in creating 35,344 positions in public and private sectors this year till September.

## Tax Authority sets Dec 20 date for declarations

Muscat -The Tax Authority has called upon taxpayers to submit their declarations on income tax for outstanding periods by December 20, at the latest, via electronic portals.

The Tax Authority pointed out that entities whose operations are governed by income-tax terms and conditions have an obligation to submit their income tax reports so that they can be entitled to three per cent waiver, if they meet the conditions.

The authority explained that the Tax Law deems deliberate nonsubmission of declaration a crime punishable that invites imprisonment of not less than three months and not exceeding six months, in addition to a fine ranging between RO500 and RO20,000 or either of the two penalties. This punitive measure does not absolve the offender of administrative penalty, which involves a fine - for not abiding with the Tax Law - ranging between RO100 and RO2,000.

ONA

| PRAYER TIMINGS |         |
|----------------|---------|
| Fajr           | 5.17am  |
| Sunrise        | 6.37am  |
| Duhr           | 12.04pm |
| Asr            | 3.05pm  |
| Maghrib        | 5.26pm  |
| Isha           | 6.41pm  |



### MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

Advertisement No. 57 /2021

Muscat Municipality invites interested companies to the following tenders:

| Serial | Tender No.                | Tender Description                                                                             | Document fee | Deadline for inquiry submission | Deadline for obtaining Tender Docs. | Deadline for Submission |
|--------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1      | 34/2021/MM/PA- 5 Recall-1 | Hiring of Non-potable Water Tankers (5000 GLN ) for Irrigation at Al-Seeb                      | 25/- OMR     | 14/12/2021                      | 20/12/2021                          | 22/12/2021              |
| 2      | 35/2021/MM/PA-6 Recall-1  | Hiring of Tankers to Provide Drinking Water and Sewage for Labour Camp at Al-Musfah - Bouwsher | 25/- OMR     | 14/12/2021                      | 20/12/2021                          | 22/12/2021              |

- Specialized Companies with a valid registration certificate from Tender Board can obtain tender documents from the website through the following link: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>. Starting from the date of this announcement until the end of deadline mentioned above.
- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically through link mentioned above.
- Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond which is equivalent to (1%) of the total value of the tender to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality and valid for (90) days starting from the deadline for submission.
- Tender not accompanied by a tender bond will be rejected.
- Clarifications and support:
  - For any inquiries regarding tenders, please contact us through e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
  - For technical support of e-tendering system, please send an email to ([etenderhd@mtc.gov.om](mailto:etenderhd@mtc.gov.om)) or call (+96824402200).
  - For technical support of E-Bond through e-tendering system please send an email to ([esnad@gsth.gov.om](mailto:esnad@gsth.gov.om)) or call (+96824402200/24402330).

Website: [www.mm.gov.om](http://www.mm.gov.om)



Due to unavoidable circumstances, "Yohani - Live in Muscat" is postponed till first Quarter 2022.

For Details: 98052368, 96790778 , 93843389, 98135580

# YOHANI

LIVE IN MUSCAT

# POSTPONED



[www.bposllc.com](http://www.bposllc.com)

#ManikeMageHithe  
#yohanimusic

16 DEC 2021 | THU  
Exclusive Dinner  
Al Falaj Hotel  
@ 7:30 PM

17 DEC 2021 | FRI  
Musical Concert  
Qurum Amphitheatre  
@ 6:00 PM

| MARKET WATCH |           |
|--------------|-----------|
| MSX30        | 3,980.97  |
| BSE Sensex   | 57,633.65 |

| FOREX RATES<br>(RO1 equals) |        |
|-----------------------------|--------|
| Indian Rs                   | 195.95 |
| Pakistani Rs                | 457.78 |
| Bangladeshi Taka            | 222.82 |
| Philippine Peso             | 131.00 |
| Sri Lankan Rs               | 526.69 |

\*Rates as on December 07  
Source: xe.com

**BRIEFS**

**Evergrande misses debt repayment**

Debt-laden Chinese property developer Evergrande has for the first time missed a deadline to repay some of its overseas creditors, a report said on Tuesday, raising the prospect of it defaulting as it prepares for a government-backed mega-restructure.

As a 30-day grace period on US\$82.5mn in overdue coupon payments ended on Tuesday, Bloomberg News reported some bondholders had yet to receive payment, citing sources. The coupons were initially due on November 6 with a one-month grace period with Evergrande's initial default exacerbating already swirling concerns over its future and the wider Chinese property market.

The Chinese government sparked a crisis within the property sector when it launched a drive last year to curb excessive debt among Evergrande and other real estate firms. Evergrande, with a debt pile of over US\$300bn, is the most prominent firm to have buckled under the crackdown.

# Oman, Saudi Arabia eye \$30bn worth investment opportunities

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

Oman and Saudi Arabia are entering a new era of economic co-operation which is set to boost bilateral trade between the two countries and create investment opportunities worth billions of dollars.

A group of leading Saudi companies and a number of companies owned by Oman Investment Authority (OIA) and the private sector have signed 13 memorandums of understanding (MoUs) worth US\$30bn, Saudi Press Agency (SPA) reported on Tuesday.

These agreements were signed on Monday on the sidelines of the visit of Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to the sultanate and in embodiment of the growing economic relations between the two friendly countries.

"Saudi Arabia and Oman are full of promising investment opportunities that provide a fertile ground for establishing various investment partnerships between the Saudi and Omani business sectors," Saudi Minister of Investment, Khalid bin Abdulaziz al Falih said, as reported by state-owned SPA.

Falih clarified that the signing of MoUs will enhance investments in a number of fields,



which will be reflected in the development of services and the achievement of the aspirations of the Saudi Vision 2030 and Oman Vision 2040.

He stressed that these MoUs will contribute to strengthening the relations between the two brotherly countries, by supporting mutual investment relations, developing available investment opportunities as well as achieving economic integration between the two countries.

Speaking at the Omani Saudi Business Forum on Monday, Eng

Redha Juma al Saleh, chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), said, "A manifestation of deep-rooted historical relations between Oman and Saudi Arabia and the keenness of their leaderships requires us to intensify efforts to meet the aspirations of the two countries' peoples, notably the need to speed up joint projects that realise economic diversification and other goals."

Saleh noted that the inauguration of the desert highway between Oman and Saudi Arabia

will pave the way for a new era of partnership, provide more direct access for the flow of goods and services and spruce up economic and commercial activities.

Meanwhile, the Omani Saudi Business Council (OSBC) also held a meeting on Monday during which it discussed the latest steps taken to form sectoral committees representing the two countries.

At the OSBC meeting, Ajlan Abdulaziz al Ajlan, chairman of the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry, said

that investment and commercial exchange opportunities are abundant and this requires the two sides to rally efforts to activate and streamline cooperation.

Sheikh Ali Hamad al Kalbani, head of Omani side at the OSBC, said that, over the next few days, sectoral committees will hold direct meetings to forge joint visions about investment projects and submit the same to the respective ministers.

The signed MoUs aim to enhance investments and joint

*Saudi Arabia and Oman are full of promising investment opportunities that provide a fertile ground for establishing various investment partnerships between Saudi and Omani business sectors*

**KHALID AL FALIH**

work in the specific projects within promising economic sectors including energy, petrochemicals, renewable energy, healthcare, and tourism. The agreements also includes manufacturing industries, food industries, transportation and logistics, information technology and financial technology, in addition to a number of qualitative investments in the Duqm region.



## Muscat Stock Exchange signs MoU with Saudi Stock Exchange

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

Coinciding with the visit of Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of Saudi Arabia, to Oman, the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Saudi Tadawul Group with the aim of strengthening bilateral relations and joint cooperation between the two stock exchanges. Through this agreement, both MSX and Tawawul (Saudi Stock Exchange) are aim-

ing to create a conducive investment environment for investors.

The MoU was signed by Haitham bin Salem al Salmi, CEO of the MSX, and Eng Khalid bin Abdullah al Hussan, CEO of the Saudi Tadawul Group, in a ceremony held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre on Monday.

The agreement provides for strengthening a number of aspects of common interest and working to enter into an agreement on dual listing, activating the role of financial technology, sharing research and data between the two stock exchanges.

In addition to learning from shared experiences, this MoU also helps to develop diversity and inclusion in the two exchanges, explore opportunities for bilateral exchange, and develop sustainability, environmental, social and corporate governance.

In a press statement, Salmi said, "There is tremendous growth potential in both markets and this agreement will help MSX learn from the peer experience and knowledge to enhance further growth possibilities, as Tadawul is not only one of the best regional exchanges in the

GCC but also a great industry partner."

He said the two stock exchanges will work in cooperation with each other to further the case of ethical capital growth in the region while keeping in line with the global best practices to achieve new milestones.

The decision to join hands with Saudi Tadawul comes in light of the latest MSX transformation under the new leadership of its board and the executive management working strength to strength to take Omani stock exchange to the new heights of success.

## OQ signs deal with SABIC for petchem project in Duqm

**Our Correspondent**  
Muscat

OQ Group, Oman's global integrated energy company, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Saudi Arabia's SABIC to study the development of a petrochemical project in the Special Economic Zone of Duqm (SEZD).

This step coincided with the visit of the Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, to Oman. The project involves a world-scale steam cracker unit and derivatives units producing olefins derivatives (ethylene and propylene).

The agreement was signed by Talal bin Hamed al Awfi, CEO of OQ Group and Abdulrahman al Fageeh, executive vice president for petrochemicals at SABIC.

In a press statement, Awfi said, "This agreement focuses on the development of a new petrochemical project in Duqm. OQ aims to enhance the integration of the refinery and petrochemical industries

competencies, we are confident of helping to drive the development of downstream industries in Oman, just as we are currently a key enabler in the achievement of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 objectives."

**MoU with Aramco Trading**

OQ Group also signed a non-binding MoU with Aramco Trading Company (ATC), the trading arm of Saudi Aramco, to explore joint commercial opportunities in the energy sector between the two companies. The MoU was signed on Monday by Awfi and ATC CEO Ibrahim al Buainain.

The two parties intend to collaborate directly or through their affiliates on exploring business prospects in Duqm and nearby crude oil storage terminal in Ras Markaz.

Under the MoU, the parties will undertake a joint review of ATC supplying feedstock to Duqm Refinery & Petrochemicals Industries Company (OQ8), as well as possible off-take of oil products by ATC from OQ8.

with other downstream industries as part of its vision to maximise the added value and contribute to the development of downstream industries. We look forward to enhancing our strategic partnership with SABIC and benefiting from its expertise to carry out this project."

Fageeh said, "We are honoured to sign this MoU with OQ as our focus has always been on key collaborations and on building fruitful relationships for sustainable growth, regionally and globally. With our diverse global portfolio, along with our manufacturing



Season Greetings!







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# Saudi Aramco, BlackRock sign \$15bn gas pipeline deal

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia – Saudi Aramco said it has signed a US\$15.5bn lease and leaseback agreement for its gas pipeline network with a consortium led by BlackRock Real Assets and Hassana Investment Company in its second major infrastructure deal this year.

The deal signed on Monday underscores how Aramco is seeking to monetise its once-un-touchable assets to generate revenue for the Saudi government as it accelerates efforts to diversify the oil-reliant economy.

In June, Aramco sold a 49 per cent stake in its oil pipeline business to a consortium led by US-based EIG Global Energy Partners for US\$12.4bn.

Under the new deal, a newly formed subsidiary, Aramco Gas Pipelines Company, will lease usage rights in Aramco’s gas pipeline network and lease them back to Aramco for a 20-year period, the Saudi oil firm said in a statement.

In return, Aramco Gas Pipelines Company will receive a tariff payable by Aramco for the gas products that flow through the network, backed by minimum commitments on throughout.

Aramco will hold a 51 per cent stake in Aramco Gas Pipeline Company and sell a 49 per cent stake to investors led by BlackRock and Hassana, a Saudi state-backed investment management firm.

“With gas expected to play a key role in the global transition



**Aramco will hold a 51 per cent stake in Aramco Gas Pipeline Company and sell a 49 per cent stake to investors led by BlackRock and Hassana, a Saudi state-backed investment management firm**

to a more sustainable energy future, our partners will benefit from a deal tied to a world-class gas infrastructure asset,” Aramco president and CEO Amin Nasser said in a statement.

“BlackRock is pleased to work with Saudi Aramco and Hassana on this landmark transaction for Saudi Arabia’s infrastructure,” BlackRock chairman and CEO Larry Fink said.

“Aramco and Saudi Arabia are taking meaningful, forward-looking steps to transition the Saudi economy towards renewables, clean hydrogen and a net zero future,” he added.

Aramco, the world’s biggest oil producer, has pledged to achieve net zero carbon emissions in its operations by 2050.

## Maintaining the ‘status quo’

Saudi Arabia, the world’s top oil exporter, has also pledged to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2060.

“Saudi Arabia is restructuring Aramco by exiting sectors and focusing on and investing in others, such as hydrogen production,” Cairo-based independent analyst Mahmoud Negrin said.

“The shift is happening in a

non-abrupt manner, with Aramco maintaining 51 per cent stake and clear agreements that no restrictions can be placed on it.”

According to Ibrahim al Ghitani, from the Abu Dhabi-based Future for Advanced Research and Studies, the kingdom is restructuring to generate liquidity and attract foreign investments.

“Saudi Arabia is not completely abandoning these assets... but continues to maintain the status quo of control,” Ghitani said.

“It is trying to change the local economy’s image... with messages and signs that it continues to open the economy for the private sector and foreign investors.”

Aramco sold a sliver of its shares on the Saudi bourse in December 2019, generating US\$29.4bn in the world’s biggest initial public offering.

AFP

# Billionaires’ share of wealth soars during pandemic

Paris, France – The share of global wealth of the world’s richest people soared at a record pace during the COVID-19 pandemic, a report on inequality showed on Tuesday.

Since 1995, the slice held by billionaires has risen from 1 per cent to 3 per cent, according to the World Inequality Report.

“This increase was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, 2020 marked the steepest increase in global billionaires’ share of wealth on record,” the document said.

The club of the richest 1 per cent has taken more than a third of all additional wealth accumulated since 1995, while the bottom 50 per cent captured just 2 per cent. “After more than 18 months of COVID-19, the world is even more polarised,” Lucas Chancel, co-director of the World Inequality Lab at the Paris School of Economics, said. “While the wealth of billionaires rose by more than US\$4tn, 100mn more people joined the ranks of extreme poverty,” said Chancel, noting that extreme poverty had been previously falling for 25 years.

A real-time ranking by *Forbes* magazine shows that the top ten richest people each have a net worth exceeding US\$100bn, with Tesla boss Elon Musk on top with around US\$265bn.

Only one of the men is not American - LVMH luxury group chief Bernard Arnault - and all but two are tech industry leaders whose fortunes have been turbocharged by soaring company share prices.

As per the report, the world’s



52 richest individuals have seen the value of their wealth grow by 9.2 per cent per year for the past 25 years, well above less wealthy social groups.

Women’s share of total global income from work was less than 35 per cent, up from near 30 per cent in 1990 but short of parity with men.

Europe was the world’s most equal region, with the richest 10 per cent taking 36 per cent of the income share, whereas the Middle East and North Africa was the most unequal as the wealthiest 10 per cent of society took 58 per cent of income.

## Calls for a ‘modest wealth tax’

Chancel, the study’s lead author, said state intervention was crucial in the fight against poverty but that wealthier nations were able to act more during the coronavirus pandemic.

Rich countries introduced measures such as furlough and increased social security pay-

ments during the crisis to prop up income levels and save jobs, which states with fewer resources did not replicate.

The 228-page report, whose contributors include French economist Thomas Piketty, calls for a ‘modest progressive wealth tax on global multimillionaires’ in order to redistribute wealth, along with measures to prevent tax evasion.

‘Given the large volume of wealth concentration, modest progressive taxes can generate significant revenues for governments,’ the report said.

It added that today’s taxes excessively target property and should instead include all forms of wealth, particularly financial assets, which make up the core of modern fortunes.

The authors also recommended the creation of an international financial register to allow authorities to monitor taxpayers’ assets and capital income and reduce tax evasion.

AFP

# IMF chief sees China’s growth ‘slowing notably’

Washington, US - China has an important part to play in the global economy as it recovers from COVID-19, but its growth is slowing, IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva said on Monday.

The head of the Washington-based crisis lender held a virtual meeting with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and discussed topics ranging from inflation to the recovery from the pandemic, according to a statement released by the IMF.

“China achieved a truly remarkable recovery, but its growth momentum has been slowing notably. As China is a vital engine for global growth, taking strong actions to support high-quality growth will help not only China, but the world,” Georgieva said.

In October, the IMF lowered its forecasts for China’s growth due to an accelerating pullback in public spending, predicting an 8 per cent expansion this year and 5.6 per cent growth in 2022.

While the 2021 figure is Beijing’s strongest rate of growth since 2011, analysts warn China is facing a painful fallout from



Kristalina Georgieva

real estate weakness and shocks from surging coal prices and shortages.

Georgieva added that Beijing had made ‘important contributions’ to expanding vaccine access so the world can achieve the IMF’s goal of inoculating 40 per cent of the population of each country against COVID-19 pandemic by the end of this year and 70 per cent by the middle of next year.

With China embroiled in an ongoing spat with the United States, Georgieva said countries need ‘to cooperate to reduce trade tensions and strengthen the multilateral trading system, which is a key engine for growth and jobs’.

AFP



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# National Finance joins Injaz Oman to develop youth talent

In line with its social responsibility and its efforts towards supporting local talent, National Finance has collaborated with Injaz Oman organisation under the company's independent wing for sustainable initiatives - 'Imtidad'. National Finance will contribute in empowering 1,000 participants through the programme of Injaz that aims to equip students with skills in entrepreneurship and prepare them to enter the job market.

The agreement was signed by Tariq al Farsi, chief executive officer of National Finance, and Khaula al Harthi, chief executive officer of Injaz Oman.

The ceremony took place in Hormuz Grand Hotel Muscat and witnessed the presence of senior officials from the two sides as well as media personnel.

The six-month-long programme targets students of higher education institutions which seeks to enable university and private college students to establish real projects after gaining the necessary skills from the training.

Speaking on this collaboration, Farsi said, "We are pleased to sign this agreement with Injaz Oman. Through Imtidad, we constantly seek to partner with such organisations and support their impactful initiatives as we believe that this will add great value to the community as well as the country."

He added, "This programme aspires to support the youth and develop their capabilities to excel in entrepreneurship and start



their projects.

"Such ventures are in line with Oman Vision 2040 as they create jobs opportunities and stimulate economic diversification, ultimately boosting the national economy."

Khaula stated, "At Injaz, we inspire the youth of Oman to be future entrepreneurs by training, encouragement and sharing entrepreneurship knowledge. We

express our gratitude to National Finance Imtidad for lending support to one of our key programmes that drives this objective.

"As an organisation that aims to fulfill national priorities with regards to learning, development and employment, Injaz believes in the strength of such strategic collaborations that help drive national goals of Oman Vi-

sion 2040."

It is worth noting that National Finance remains committed to its corporate social responsibility by delivering various such initiatives.

Therefore, the company launched 'Imtidad', an expression of the company's commitment to positively impact various vital segments that include education, community, health and

environment.

National Finance, established in 1987, has built a reputation as the market leader trusted by thousands of customers across the sultanate.

National Finance offers a wide range of products targeting both individual customers and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) through its 20 branches across the sultanate.



## Oman Air receives APEX Five-Star Major Airline award

Oman Air, the national airline of the Sultanate of Oman, has been awarded a Five-Star rating in the Major Airline category by the Airline Passenger Experience Association (APEX).

The award was announced and presented to Oman Air on December 1 in Long Beach, California at the APEX/IFSA Awards, the industry's first major in-person event of the year. This is the second consecutive year that Oman Air has received the Five-Star Major Airline award.

APEX Official Airline Ratings are based on neutral, third-party passenger feedback and insights gathered through APEX's partnership with Triplt from Concur, the world's highest-rated travel-organising app. For the 2022 awards, nearly one million

flights were rated by passengers across more than 600 airlines from around the world using a five-star scale. The APEX Official Airline Ratings were independently certified by a professional external auditing company.

"An exceptional guest journey is at the heart of everything we do," said Oman Air chief executive officer Eng Abdulaziz al Raisi.

"We're delighted and honoured that our ongoing efforts to provide service excellence have been endorsed so highly by the flying public. Our pilots, cabin crew and ground staff go above and beyond to deliver a safe and memorable experience across the entire passenger journey, and this five-star award is a testament to the high level of service and professionalism they provide."



## Omani SME plays critical role in Jeddah STC F1 success

Ultimately how fast you can accelerate or how fast you can go around a bend is dependent on the traction you have between your tyres and the road, the grip level.

Quoting F1 Mercedes driver, Valtteri Bottas, "...you base your starting setup on simulations and grip level...It was good to get confirmation of the grip level..."

Specialist Omani SME, Vanguard Systems and Services were retained by UNIMAC, the builders of the F1 Circuit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to conduct Grip Testing of the test circuit strips and advise on friction enhancement options to ensure the F1 circuit grip levels were meeting the customer requirements and provided optimum performance level.

VSSI MD mentioned that "Vanguard Systems and Services International provides specialist grip testing services for airport runways, roads, race circuits and

tracks. We are proud to have played a critical role in the success of the FIA F1 race in Jeddah.

"Our input was used by UNIMAC to identify the best mix, Tilke the circuit designer, Ministry of Sports to approve, the tyre manufacturer to decide on the correct compounds, the racing teams to test and decide on the ideal tyre strategy and ultimately, the drivers to be confident that the tyres will perform safely, thus leaving them to focus on the race and winning.

"This is testament to the quality of services that Omani SMEs can achieve at the international level.

"We congratulate the brotherly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on a very successful inaugural hosting of their first and fastest F1 event in the 2021 calendar.

"F1 pundits are already hailing it as one of the greatest events in F1 history."

## Oxford Business Group and Bank Nizwa team up to produce new COVID-19 Response Report

The high-growth opportunities emerging in digital banking and payments in Oman on the back of pandemic-induced shifts in consumer behaviour are explored in a new COVID-19 Response Report (CRR), produced by Oxford Business Group (OBG) in partnership with Bank Nizwa.

The CRR provides in-depth analysis of the sultanate's response to the pandemic in an easy-to-navigate and accessible format, focusing on key data and infographics relating to its socio-economic landscape. The report considers the part that digital advancements, buoyed by the planned rollout of 5G services, will play in accelerating the expansion of e-commerce.

It also highlights the potential that Islamic banking presents for growth, with forecasts suggesting that rising demand will see



the segment's market share of Oman's total banking assets reach 20-25 per cent by 2025.

In separate coverage, the CRR tracks the performance of Oman's banking sector throughout the pandemic, noting that lenders continued to perform well in stress test scenarios and maintained strong liquidity under pressure, even though asset quality deteriorated and loan

risks rose. Here, it also examines the measures introduced by the government and Central Bank of Oman to ease the strain on businesses and households at the height of the crisis.

Looking ahead, the report considers the positive impact that higher oil prices and a gradual recovery in the service sector could have on the sector, while contemplating the challenges

that lenders are still expected to face in an uncertain global environment. Bank Nizwa's performance through the pandemic is looked at in detail, with in-depth analysis of how it navigated the challenges of COVID-19 to record growth in key metrics, which have left it well placed for future growth.

In this section, the planned rollout of a new digital banking services is a key focus. Subscribers will also find an in-depth interview with Khaled al Kayed, Bank Nizwa's CEO, in which he shares his thoughts on how Oman-based Islamic banks can capitalise on rising interest in Sharia'a-compliant financial services.

"Oman is in an advantageous position to capitalise on a rise in demand for Islamic financial products. In 2021 the sultanate became the 15<sup>th</sup>-largest Islamic

banking market in the world and the segment accounts for over 14 per cent of the country's total banking asset," he told OBG.

"The introduction of new products and the adoption of sharia-compliant liquidity management tools will further support long-term, sustainable growth in the Islamic segment."

Jana Treeck, OBG's managing editor for the Middle East, said that although Oman will inevitably feel the weight of fallout from COVID-19 in the immediate term, economic recovery is expected to gain momentum in 2022, galvanised by non-oil growth. "Oman had already begun broadening its economic base and developing the private sector when the pandemic arrived, while its robust financial services system ensured macroeconomic stability was maintained throughout the crisis," Treeck said.

## Sivan, Suhail ISC tennis veterans doubles champs

Top seeded Sivan G and Suhail Khan beat Mohan Kannan and Girish KK to lift ISC Veteran's Doubles title in the annual tennis tournament organised by Indian Social Club (ISC).

Mohan and Girish started the game with full energy and power but could not turn the game in their favour. There were neck-to-neck instances and advantages in the first set but the luck favoured Sivan and Suhail whereas the second set did not see any resistance from Mohan and Girish. Sivan had won many medals in India and abroad before he became a professional tennis coach. Suhail played well in the tournament and showed real mettle against the defending pair.



# Bank Muscat's Corporate Internet Banking helps MSMEs

In line with its customer centric vision 'To serve you better, everyday' and commitment to excellence in providing banking and financial services to all its customers, Bank Muscat the leading financial services provider in the sultanate continues to keenly support Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) through its Retail Enterprises (Najahi) unit.

The collateral-free financing offered by Najahi and its online banking facilities have been supporting small businesses in growing their business. Over the years, Bank Muscat has been working steadily to further improve its portfolio of services and solutions as well as enhance the ease of banking through all customer touchpoints.

The immense benefits of the current digital shift include increased efficiency, cost reduction,



tion, accountability, speed and scalability. In particular, digitalization is helping speed up transactions, optimize employee efficiency, minimise data-entry related risks in payment processes and improve security. Bank Muscat's Corporate Internet Banking services provide a fast, convenient and secure banking experience for MSMEs control their finances 24x7.

Available in both Arabic and English language options through <https://www.bankmuscatonline.com>, the Corporate Online Banking platform can be used by Najahi customers for real-time banking, fund transfers to local or foreign accounts, bill payments and bulk payments to vendors. It also facilitates salary payments for employees under the Wages Protection System (WPS). Najahi Current Account holders can also open FD accounts and request for cheque books.

They can block their Najahi Card in case it is lost or stolen. Security is ensured by a physical token and secure mailbox. It must be noted that the bank's online banking platform features the latest technologies and world-class security features.

Bank Muscat's Najahi has been playing a pioneering role in supporting micro and small businesses in Oman through a number of collateral-free credit facilities. The Najahi suite of products include the value-added Najahi Current Account, Najahi Flexi Loan to support working capital, business expansion and other business needs; the Najahi Business Credit Card; and Najahi PoS Receivables financing for customers who use PoS machines for sales.

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## Appreciation

### Not the doctor we deserve, but the hero we needed

In times of COVID-19, a time of confusion and fear, our doctors and healthcare providers were our first and only line of defence. These brave souls are a blessing upon us from God that we often neglect and forget. Among these is someone you do not know about, someone worth the world and beyond, someone of modesty, someone who denies any praise. Someone who does this not for recognition, someone who does this not for any gain other than fulfilling her obligation; I know first hand all that she has endured; I know the sacrifices she has made.

They seek. I don't think her patients know how lucky they are, how good they have it, most of them take it for granted, but with beautiful patience, she endures and keeps going on.

Her compassion extends beyond just her patients. I've seen her stand up for her staff when they have been wronged. She's the voice of the voiceless in times of difficulty.

Her staff, her nurses.. she values them all. No one has to ask, she's just there for them in their time of need. She'll fill your heart and life with laughter and light, even when hers is exhausted, burnt out, and drained.

The long hours,  
The mental stress, and  
The physical distress.  
I've seen her go on nights and days non-stop without a single complain.

We do not expect our doctors to fall ill or sick; let alone fight to save our lives while she fights for her own, what no one knows is that she's been on Immunosuppressive Therapy as she goes on fighting for us, leaving her immunity at risk still serving her time at the COVID-19 ward vulnerable and exposed, willingly putting her life on the line to save yours.

Yet she remains steady and brave as she deals with her patients with compassion and care.

It's not every day you see people coming from other ends of the city just for any GP, there's a demand for her at Badar Al Samaa; you see lines far exceeds the waiting area as she sees well over a hundred patients in a single shift giving her time and attention to each one with the utmost professionalism, compassion, and respect.

Calling and following up on her sick patients is not a part of her job but is a part of her routine. She makes sure once they leave, they understand what they need, making sure they get the medical attention

The body aches,  
The night shifts,  
Doing whatever it takes.  
Throughout the darkness and despair of lockdown at the break of dawn I've seen her get up day after day without any exception. Never on time to work, instead always extra early; Never leaves on time either, always the last to leave. Night after night risking her life to save yours; Her loved ones she's left behind because your's are in need.

The holidays,  
The celebrations,  
all the moments she has sacrificed.

All that she's been through I have seen, yet I cannot describe, words do not justify all that she's done for us.

The life of a doctor is one of endurance and sacrifice but in times of COVID-19, it's been multiplied. At the end of the day, she's nothing more than a human being much stronger and better than you and I.

They say not all heroes wear a cape, well she's my hero and she wears a white coat.

I thank you Dr Sana Ali Khan, ER physician - Badar Al Samaa, on behalf of all of Oman.

Syed Namir A

## Workshop promotes genetic resources research

Mawarid (Oman Animal and Plant Genetic Resources Centre) of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation organised its first workshop with the Directorate General of Agriculture and Livestock Research of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources to promote joint research activities in the field of animal and plant genetic resources on Tuesday at the Social Centre of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

The workshop included a series of lectures on animal and plant genetic resources research projects, with the aim of promoting and raising the standards of both the animal sector and plant



sector in the sultanate.

The main objectives of the workshop were exploring the results of previous and current joint projects in the field of animal and plant genetic resources, reviewing projects implemented in the field of animal and plant genetic resources in each entity, discussing and identifying future projects in the field of animal and plant genetic resources, and discussing the possibility of the parties of common interest in participating in joint projects in the field of animal and plant genetic resources. The cooperation between both ministries hopes to

enhance the support for the local economy and provide food security in the sultanate, which will help achieve the goals of the Oman Vision 2040 in the future.

Mawarid is one of the specialised research centres established to be an important and essential reference in promoting the sustainable use of genetic resources.

It aims to spread awareness of the importance of genetic diversity inherent in animals, plants, microorganisms and marine life in Oman, and achieve the priority goals of Oman Vision 2040, including education, scientific research, national capabilities, natural resources as well as environmental sustainability.

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## Modern Exchange joins Nium for international payments

Global payments and cards issuance leader Nium and Oman's leading remittance and money exchange company, Modern Exchange Co announced a strategic partnership that will see Modern Exchange Co leverage Nium's global payments infrastructure in key markets and regions such as APAC, Canada, Europe, Latin America, the UK and the US.

As the country moves rapidly



towards a more digitised, seamless, and transparent system of

processing both national and international payments, companies like Modern Exchange Co are embracing the adoption of digital payments and looking for trustworthy partners like Nium to help with their global growth strategy.

Through this partnership with Nium, Modern Exchange Co will be able to connect to correspondent banks worldwide, wherein customers can make payments to beneficiaries' accounts in real-

time. Customers can access the Modern Exchange Co mobile app and payment link for remittances to any country around the globe from anywhere, at very competitive charges and FX rates.

"We are honoured to partner with Modern Exchange Co, Oman's leading remittance provider and a company that is at the forefront of technology and innovation. With 36 branches spreading over the entire sultanate, the company is set to grow its footprint globally and develop its digital payments offering internationally and we are excited to be their partner on this journey. Our global platform will enable Modern Exchange customers to reach beneficiaries in countries across the globe and make payments in local currencies in a simple, timely and cost-saving manner," said Frederick Crosby, chief revenue officer at Nium.

tanate, the company is set to grow its footprint globally and develop its digital payments offering internationally and we are excited to be their partner on this journey. Our global platform will enable Modern Exchange customers to reach beneficiaries in countries across the globe and make payments in local currencies in a simple, timely and cost-saving manner," said Frederick Crosby, chief revenue officer at Nium.

## 130 volunteers take part in SEZAD's Al Antout beach clean-up campaign

The Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD), represented by the Environmental Regulatory Department, organised on Tuesday a clean-up campaign in Al Antout beach in Duqm.

The Campaign 'Together to Combat Beach Pollution in Duqm', was supported by a number of companies, including OQ8 and its contractors, Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be'ah), Renaissance Services Company, Tatweer Duqm, INCO Duqm Company and the City Hotel. In addition, a number of volunteers from the local community and the companies operating in SEZAD took part in the Campaign.

Al Mutasim bin Ali al Sheibani, from the Environmental Regulatory Department in SEZAD, pointed out, "This campaign marked a good example of partnership between SEZAD, local community and the companies operating in the zone. As preserving the environment is one of the key priorities of SEZAD's management, this



campaign is streamlined with the agenda of the Environmental Regulatory Department, which includes many other environment-related, whether on land or at sea.

"Other awareness and educational programmes on environmental aspects will be conducted throughout the year. Further, SEZAD management is organising other environmental initiatives such as hygiene campaigns and awareness programmes, which will be held in partnership with the community and corporates operating in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm."

Sheibani added, "Plastic waste is very common and represents about 50 per cent of the total solid waste on the sea coast as indicated by many studies. As well, the total number of seabirds



that die due to this waste is estimated at one million birds annually and one hundred thousand of marine and fungal organisms die of plastic waste at the global level."

The campaign, which attracted more than 130 volunteers, covered cleaning over 3km of the beach by using a special machine to collect big quantity of wood, plastic waste and fishing nets.

# Israel strike targets Iran weapons in Syria port

The raid triggered a series of explosions at port of Latakia resulting in huge material losses: Monitor

Beirut, Lebanon - An Israeli airstrike hit a shipment of Iranian weapons in the Syrian port of Latakia on Tuesday, in the first such attack on the key facility, a war monitor said.

The Israeli raid 'directly targeted an Iranian weapons shipment in the container yard', the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Syrian state media reported the strike on the container yard at Latakia port without specifying what was targeted.

The Observatory, a UK-based organisation with a wide network of sources on the ground across Syria, said the raid triggered a series of explosions.

It reported 'huge material losses' but added there were no immediate reports of casualties.

According to the Syrian state news agency SANA, the strike occurred at 1:23am (2323 GMT Monday). 'Our air defences repelled the Israeli aggression in Latakia,' it said, adding that a number of containers caught fire in the strike.

Latakia is the northernmost of Syria's main ports, and lies around 230km north of Damas-



A fire is seen near containers following an alleged Israeli airstrike that targeted a shipment of Iranian weapons at the Syrian port of Latakia on Tuesday (AFP)

cus. Photos and footage published by SANA showed a fire in the yard but state television said later that firefighters had brought the blaze under control. Israel rarely comments on the airstrikes it carries out in Syria

*Our air defences repelled the Israeli aggression in Latakia. A number of containers caught fire.*

SANA NEWS AGENCY

but has said repeatedly it will not allow its archfoe Iran to extend its footprint in Syria.

## Syria FM in Tehran

Since civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, Israel has carried out hundreds of airstrikes on Syrian territory, targeting government positions as well as allied Iran-backed forces and Hezbollah fighters.

On November 24, Israeli missile strikes in the west of Homs province killed five people, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

In two separate Israeli attacks in October, five pro-Iranian militiamen were killed near the Syrian capital Damascus while nine

pro-government fighters were killed near the T4 airbase east of Palmyra in central Syria, the Observatory said.

Iran has been a key supporter of the Syrian government in the decade-old conflict.

It finances, arms and commands a number of Syrian and foreign militia groups fighting alongside the regular armed forces, chief among them Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah group.

Tuesday's strike came as Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad wrapped up a visit to Tehran, where he met with top officials to discuss deepening ties.

In 2019, Syria announced it was planning to turn over the container terminal at Latakia port to Iran.

Earlier this year, Iran said it was planning to establish a direct shipping line between Latakia and one of its southern ports.

The war in Syria is estimated to have killed nearly half a million people and displaced millions more since it began with a brutal crackdown on anti-government protests in 2011.

AFP

# Israel lays down law on its cyber exports after Pegasus spy scandal

Jerusalem - Israel laid down the law on Monday on the use by foreign governments of its cyber exports, after the private Israeli developer of Pegasus spyware became engulfed in scandal abroad.

The Defence Ministry-linked agency for military exports, in a statement, specified that a foreign state seeking a cyber or intelligence system must only use it to combat terrorism and 'serious crimes'.

Smartphones infected with Pegasus spyware developed by the private Israeli firm NSO Group are essentially turned into pocket spying devices.

This allows the user to read the target's messages, look through their photos, track their location and even turn on their camera without them knowing.

US authorities last month blacklisted NSO by restricting exports to it from American groups over allegations the Is-



This illustrative image shows a smartphone with the website of Israel's NSO Group which features 'Pegasus' spyware, on display in Paris (AFP)

raeli firm 'enabled foreign governments to conduct transnational repression'.

An updated Israeli end user certificate issued on Monday, to be signed by buyers, listed terrorism as including offences committed with the aim of 'seriously intimidating a population' or 'unduly compelling a government' through crimes such as hostage taking and po-

tentially fatal attacks upon a person's life.

'An act of expressing an opinion or criticism, as well as presenting data regarding the state, including any of its institutions, shall not, in and of itself, constitute a Serious Crime', or terrorism, the certificate says.

Violation of the provisions would result in the spyware being restricted or disconnected,

the agency warned.

'The system shall not be used, under any circumstances, to inflict harm on an individual or a group of individuals, merely due to their religion, sex or gender, race, ethnic group, sexual orientation, nationality, country of origin, opinion, political affiliation, age or personal status.'

The military exports agency said the provisions follow 'a series of measures' taken in the last few years in which Israel 'approves the export of cyber systems solely to governments for the purposes of investigation and prevention of terrorism and crime'.

In the latest in a string of commercial cases, Apple last month sued the Israeli spyware maker, seeking to block NSO Group from targeting the more than 1bn iPhones in circulation.

NSO has consistently denied any wrongdoing and defended use of its software.

AFP

# UN chief taps US diplomat as Libya advisor ahead of key vote

United Nations - American diplomat Stephanie Williams was appointed on Monday as the UN secretary-general's special advisor on Libya, after the sudden resignation of the current envoy Jan Kubis one month ahead of a critical presidential election.

An Arabic-speaker, Williams served in 2020 as acting director of the UN's Geneva-based Libya mission, after being its deputy director from 2018-2020. In her new role, she will reside in Tripoli, Libya.

Her nomination by secretary-general Antonio Guterres as 'special advisor' instead of 'envoy' sidesteps the 15 member Security Council, and avoids an embarrassing vacancy before Libya's presidential election on December 24, which aims to turn the page on ten years of war.

"This appointment of Williams as a special advisor ensures that we will have the leadership in place during this very critical month of December,"



Stephanie Williams speaks during a press conference in Geneva (AFP)

noted UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric.

"She will be based in Tripoli and will start in the coming days," he added, confirming that the secretary general had rejected a proposal by Kubis, who will vacate his post December 10, to continue working through the elections.

Kubis, an ex-Slovakian minister and UN veteran who took up the post of Libya envoy in January, transmitted his resignation to Guterres on November 17 - al-

though it was only disclosed once accepted a week later, and never fully explained by the UN.

According to diplomats, Kubis had been refusing for his post to be transferred from Geneva to Tripoli, as was scheduled to happen in 2022.

According to one diplomat, his relationship with Guterres had deteriorated to a point of 'breakdown' and 'they could no longer work together'.

AFP

# 3500-year-old Gilgamesh tablet back in Iraq after three decades

Baghdad, Iraq - A 3,500-year-old tablet featuring the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh has been returned to Iraq three decades after it was stolen and illegally imported to the US.

The tablet was exhibited to the media in Iraq on Tuesday by the authorities who welcomed its return as a 'victory' over those who stole the country's 'history'.

The clay tablet features characters in cuneiform and is believed to have been stolen from an Iraqi museum in 1991 while the country was caught up in the first Gulf War.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is considered one of the oldest pieces of literature in the world, telling the story of a Mesopotamian king on a quest for immortality.

In a press conference on Tuesday in Baghdad, the Iraqi Foreign Minister delivered to the Culture Minister three artefacts recovered from the US and the UK: The tablet of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian ram's head and a Sumerian tablet.



The Gilgamesh Tablet, a 3,500-year-old Mesopotamian cuneiform clay tablet that was believed to be looted from Iraq around 1991 and illegally transported to the US, is displayed in the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the capital Baghdad, after its repatriation on Tuesday (AFP)

The tablet of Gilgamesh 'is of great importance, it is one of the oldest literary texts of Iraq's history', Minister of Culture and Antiquities Hassan Nazim said.

During the press conference, he stressed the 'message sent to all those who smuggle our antiquities and have sold them at international auctions: Ultimately, the fate of such operations is restitution'.

## 'Ancient civilisation'

In one year, Iraq has recovered nearly 18,000 artefacts, including 17,899 pieces returned from the US in the summer.

About 4,000-years-old, the artefacts were returned in late July aboard a plane carrying Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhemi from a trip to Washington where he met US President Joe Biden.

"This day represent a victory in the face of the desperate attempts of those who try to steal our great history and our ancient civilisation," Iraqi

Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said on Tuesday.

The tablet reappeared in Britain in 2001. An American art dealer bought it from a London-based Jordanian family in 2003, before sending the piece to the United States without declaring its true nature to customs.

It was then sold to antique dealers in 2007 for US\$50,000 under a false certificate of origin.

The tablet was sold once again in 2014 for US\$1.67mn to the owners of craft chain Hobby Lobby, the Green family, fundamentalist Christians who wanted to display it at their Museum of the Bible in Washington.

A museum curator became concerned about the tablet's origins in 2017, feeling that its documentation was incomplete. It was finally seized in 2019.

Iraq has seen its historical artefacts looted for decades, including since the US invasion in 2003 and the rise of the Islamic State militant group ten years later.

AFP

# Suu Kyi down but Myanmar democracy movement not out

Bangkok, Thailand - Myanmar's military hopes jailing Aung San Suu Kyi will be the 'closing chapter' for its longtime nemesis and her party, but resistance to junta rule has already moved out from under her shadow, analysts say.

Massive protests and a bloody crackdown on dissent followed Suu Kyi's detention in the early hours of the February 1 putsch that ended the Southeast Asian country's democratic interlude.

While the junta Min Aung Hlaing has since brought a catalogue of charges against the 76-year-old Nobel laureate, and slapped her with a first sentence on Monday of two years in jail for incitement against the military and breaching coronavirus rules, pro-democracy demonstrators are moving beyond the movement she led decades ago.

Many protesters believe the current struggle must permanently root out military dominance of the country's politics and economy.

But for the junta, crushing Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) party she founded is seen as an end to a major source of anti-military resistance.

"These are the soft charges which the regime could have spared her, but chose not to," said independent analyst Soe Myint Aung of Monday's ruling, which drew swift international condemnation.

"The military seems to have doubled down on its highly oppressive approach" towards Suu Kyi and the NLD, he added.

She faces a raft of other indictments in the closed-door junta court, including multiple charges of corruption - each carrying a possible sentence of 15 years in prison.

The next verdict is expected on December 14 on another charge that she breached coronavirus rules during 2020 elections won by the NLD, according to a source familiar with the case.

In recent weeks, junta-ap-



This file photo shows a protester holding a poster with an image of Aung San Suu Kyi during a candlelight vigil to honour those who have died during demonstrations against the military coup in Yangon on March 13 (AFP)

## United Nations shelves decision on Myanmar, Afghanistan envoy dilemma

United Nations - The United Nations (UN) on Monday indefinitely postponed recognising Afghanistan's Taliban regime and Myanmar's junta Min Aung Hlaing, depriving both of the international legitimacy they desperately crave.

A resolution denying either state representation was adopted by the UN General Assembly without a vote on the recommendation of a committee that included the United States, Russia and China.

No change to their status is expected in the short to

medium term, officials said.

For Afghanistan and Myanmar, competing applications for accreditation from both old and new regimes were on the table at the UN.

The Taliban and Myanmar's military rulers are separately desperate for international recognition in the hope of having targeted sanctions lifted and getting access to assets and funds held abroad.

Both criticised the UN for not confirming their chosen ambassadors.

The move ignores 'the legit-

imate rights of the people', the Afghan Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Zaw Min Tun, the Myanmar junta spokesman, said the committee's choice did not reflect the reality on the ground.

The committee on Wednesday confirmed envoys of 191 other nations, although Venezuela drew a reservation from the United States.

President Nicolas Maduro's 2018 re-election has not been recognised by the full international community.

AFP

pointed judges have sentenced other senior members of the NLD to long periods in jail.

A former chief minister was sentenced to 75 years in prison, while a close Suu Kyi aide and NLD speaker received 20 for

treason.

"This period seems like the closing chapter, totally sidelining Suu Kyi and rupturing the party for good," independent analyst David Mathieson said.

Suu Kyi remains hugely popu-

lar in Myanmar, even if her international image has been tainted by her previous power-sharing deal with the generals and failure to speak up for the persecuted Rohingya minority.

After Monday's verdict, resi-

dents in Yangon banged pots and pans - a practice traditionally associated with driving out evil spirits but which has been used since February to voice defiance.

Flash mob rallies and adoption of the three-finger pro-democracy salute have become prominent symbols since the coup, showing younger activists share more in common with contemporaries in Hong Kong and Thailand than the elderly veterans of their own country's political struggles.

Analysts also say hundreds have trekked to rebel-held areas for combat training or joined 'people's defence forces' to fight back against the military - shunning Suu Kyi's core principle of non-violence.

A shadow government dominated by ousted lawmakers from Suu Kyi's party has sought to fan the flames, declaring a 'people's defensive war' against the junta.

The months of bloodshed have left a shrinking space for the kind of compromise between the NLD and the military that characterised Suu Kyi's government, even as the junta says it wants to hold fresh polls.

"Being involved in any future elections will likely be dangerous... former NLD members will be branded as turncoats and could be targeted by the resistance," Mathieson said.

It is more likely the party will continue to exist as a vehicle working to overturn the putsch, he added, but will be made up of disparate elements working to mobilise civil and armed resistance against the generals.

In seeking to remove Suu Kyi and the NLD from the field, the State Administration Council - as the junta calls itself - may have opened up space for a new unknown, he added.

"Perhaps the SAC have created a political force of a different stripe that could prove even more determined than Suu Kyi to end military rule?" Mathieson said.

AFP



Rescuers help survivors evacuate Sumber Wuluh village in Indonesia following a volcanic eruption on Monday (AFP)

## Toll in Indonesia's volcanic eruption rises to 34: Agency

Curah Kobokan, Indonesia - The death toll from the eruption of Indonesia's Mount Semeru volcano rose to 34 on Tuesday, the national disaster agency said, as aid was rushed to the affected region.

The mountain on the island of Java had thundered to life on Saturday, ejecting volcanic ash high into the sky and raining hot mud on villages as thousands of panicked people fled their homes.

The disaster swallowed entire homes and vehicles, blanketing villages such as Curah Kobokan in grey ash and leaving residents terrified of returning home.

"I'm traumatised, I asked my relatives if they were brave enough to go back to Curah Kobokan and they all said no, they'd rather sleep under a tree," said Marzuki Suganda, a 30-year-old who works at a sand mine in the area.

"When the eruption happened, I really thought I was going to die here."

Rescuers have been battling dangerous conditions since the deadly weekend eruption, searching for survivors and bodies in the volcanic debris, wrecked buildings and destroyed vehicles.

Search crews deployed dogs on Tuesday to aid the operation.

"The latest update from the ground... [is] 34 people died, 17 are missing," the disaster agency spokesman Abdul Muhari said.

Almost 3,700 have been evacuated from the affected area, he added.

### Dangerous rescue operation

Mt Semeru has remained active since Saturday, keeping emergency workers and area residents on edge.

There were three small eruptions on Tuesday, each spewing ash around a kilometre into the sky, authorities said.

The task for rescuers was made more difficult by the instability of the volcanic debris.

"What we are afraid of is the ground being cold outside but still hot inside," said police officer Imam Mukson Rido. "If it's hot inside, we must get away."

Officials have advised locals not to travel within 5km of Semeru's crater, as the nearby air is highly polluted and could affect vulnerable groups.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo said during a trip to the area on Tuesday that the government will look into moving homes away because of the threat posed by the volcano.

"I hope after things calm down we can start both fixing infrastructures and think about the possibility of relocation from areas we believe to be dangerous," he told Indonesia's Metro TV.

"Earlier I got a report [that] there are around 2,000 houses that must be relocated."

AFP

## China to repatriate Taiwan murder suspect in rare deal

Taipei, Taiwan - China will repatriate a Taiwanese murder suspect who fled to the mainland last month, officials said on Tuesday, in a rare act of cooperation between the two sides at a time of soaring tensions.

The suspect, identified by his family name Huang, fled to the southeastern Chinese city of Xiamen last month after allegedly shooting and killing a man in New Taipei.

Xiamen police decided to send him home after he admitted to the crime, China's Taiwan Affairs Office said.

The move will boost efforts to fight violent crime and 'maintain order' in relations between the two sides, it added.

No date has been given for the extradition.

Taiwanese media reported Huang has been trapped in a hotel since fleeing to the mainland, which requires all inbound travellers to undergo a 14-day quarantine upon arrival.

China claims Taiwan as part of its territory to be re-taken one day, by force if necessary, though both have been ruled separately since 1949.

The division has complicated law enforcement efforts, and for years some of Taiwan's most wanted criminals fled to China to



Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen

dodge prosecution at home.

A more Beijing-friendly Taiwanese government signed a crime-fighting deal with China in 2009, agreeing that police from both sides could return suspects to their respective territories.

But China has cut off official communication and ramped up pressure on Taiwan since the 2016 election of President Tsai Ing-wen, who rejects Beijing's stance that the island is part of Chinese territory.

Taiwan's top China policy-making body promised to cooperate with Beijing on Huang's repatriation.

'Criminals are the enemies of the world. We hope the authorities on both sides can continue to

fight crimes,' the Mainland Affairs Council said in a statement, adding that China had repatriated four Taiwanese suspects last year.

No data has been released on how many Chinese citizens have been sent home from Taiwan.

The looming repatriation stands in stark contrast with an impasse provoked by the high-profile murder of a Hong Kong woman by her boyfriend during a holiday to Taiwan in 2018.

Chan Tong-kai has admitted killing his girlfriend in a Taipei hotel room but he has remained free in Hong Kong as Taiwan and the semi-autonomous city argue over the handling of his case.

AFP

## From art shows to theatre, Baghdad sees cultural revival after decades of conflict

Baghdad, Iraq - Art exhibitions, book fairs on the Tigris and Godot in Baghdad - after decades of conflict and strife, the Iraqi capital is experiencing an artistic renaissance.

"People need art, they want to develop their artistic taste - it's an escape route," said Noor Alaa al Din, director of art space The Gallery. "We are like any country, we have the right to art to entertain us."

The Iraqi capital often makes grim headlines for violence and geopolitical rivalry.

But behind the conflict, tensions and recently the pandemic, a fledgling cultural renaissance has emerged in recent years.

Galleries have opened and festivals have blossomed, attracting crowds eager to make up for lost time.

The Gallery opened its doors barely a month ago, but visitors queue around the corner on opening night of any show.

In a recent show, Iraqi-Canadian artist Riyadh Ghenea paid tribute to his late mother with a series of brightly coloured abstract compositions.

She 'suffered all the phases that Iraq has been through', said the artist, who came back to Baghdad in 2011.

Upon his return, "I found nei-



Actors perform at the Al-Rasheed Theater during the Baghdad International Theater Festival on November 26 (AFP)

ther my mother nor the country that I had left behind," he said.

### 'Alleviate stress'

Years of sectarian violence followed the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Iraq's former dictator Saddam Hussein.

The rise of the Islamic State militant group in 2014 saw more brutality and bloodshed.

Amir, a 25-year-old pharmacist, acknowledges that his entire childhood was accompanied by conflict.

"Art allows us to alleviate the stress of our daily lives," he told AFP from outside The Gallery.

On a balmy November afternoon, thousands of visitors gathered along the banks of the Tigris

for the eighth edition of a book festival. Organisers of the 'I am an Iraqi, I read' event were distributing 30,000 books for free, from fiction to philosophy and foreign languages.

A singer accompanied by traditional instruments performed local folk music as the fashionably dressed youth, couples with small children and senior citizens enjoyed the event.

Last month, the city hosted the second edition of an international theatre festival, organised by the Culture Ministry.

The audience overflowed from the hall in the opening days, said host venue director Ali Abbas.

Troupes hailing from Egypt,

Tunisia, Germany and Italy performed for free, and Iraqis too had a chance to shine. Among them was director Anas Abdel Samad, who staged a performance of his piece Yes Godot.

German actor Hanno Friedrich, on his first trip to Baghdad, was among the foreigners performing at the festival with his play Tyll.

"They told us 'don't go, it's dangerous,'" the 55-year-old said - but his experience shattered those stereotypes.

"People climbed on stage and hugged us. They told us they had never seen anything like that," he said. "We had goosebumps, and tears in our eyes."

AFP

# Rare chance: Teen girls study under Taliban

I see the Taliban every day when I come to school. They have no problem with us: Student Zahra

**Nawabad, Afghanistan** - When the Taliban overran Nawabad village in central Afghanistan, lessons carried on at the local girls' secondary school - in stark contrast to most of the country where older girls have been barred from secondary education.

The school has remained open to teenage pupils because it is run by an NGO, exposing the contradictions emerging across Afghanistan as its new rulers' orders are implemented.

"The (Taliban) came and saw the students and classes and they were happy because we all had our hijab," Forozan, one of the young teachers, said.

Since taking control in August, the Taliban have imposed severe restrictions on women and girls, despite pledging a softer rule compared with their first stint in power in the 1990s.

In several provinces, local Taliban authorities have been persuaded to reopen schools - but millions of girls still remain cut off.

In Nawabad, the school is run by the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA), an organisation active in the country for four decades.

It is in Ghazni province, which the Taliban have long controlled part of, and where they have largely tolerated girls' schooling.

## University dreams

In Langar, another village in the district, the only class for girls and young women at another SCA-run project is continuing.

"When the Taliban took Kabul we had no hope that they would let the school continue - but they did," said 18-year-old Mahida.

Her class is made up of 18-26



School girls sit in a classroom at a secondary school in Nawabad village, in the Qarabagh district on November 14 (AFP)

## Malala Yousafzai calls for stronger US support of Afghan women

**Washington, US** - Human rights advocate Malala Yousafzai, who survived an attack by the Pakistani Taliban in 2012, argued on Monday for stronger US support of Afghan girls and women during a visit to Washington.

"Afghanistan right now is the only country where girls do not have access to secondary education. They are prohibited from learning," the 24-year-old, who works with female Afghan activists, noted in re-

marks standing alongside US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

"This is the message of Afghan girls right now: We want to see a world where all girls can have access to safe and quality education," she added, while presenting a letter addressed to President Joe Biden from a 15-year-old Afghan girl named Sotodah.

Sotodah wrote in her letter that 'the longer schools and universities remain closed to

girls, the more it will shade hope for [their] future', according to Yousafzai. "Girls' education is a powerful tool for bringing peace and security," added Yousafzai, reading the letter, "If girls don't learn, Afghanistan will suffer, too."

"We hope that the US, together with the UN, will take immediate actions to ensure that girls are allowed to go back to their schools as soon as possible," Yousafzai noted.

AFP

year-olds who missed out on education and are now gearing up for end-of-year exams.

"We were afraid to go to school. We couldn't get out of our home because of the war," Mahida said.

All of the girls in Langar hope to continue their studies, to become teachers, doctors or engineers.

But they don't even know if they will be able to sit university entrance exams.

Even before August, many girls in Ghazni province were deprived of any secondary education at all because of distance, poverty, early marriage and conflict.

Some 6km away in the re-

mote village of Jangalak, 19-year-old Zahra, an aspiring engineer, attends an SCA-run class for students who have gaps in their education.

The Taliban approved her and others' schooling, though classes on civic pride and patriotism were replaced by religious instruction. "I see the Taliban every day when I come to school," Zahra said. "[They] have no problem with us."

## Uncertain future

But in the same building, other female students who were previously enrolled in state-run classes have been stuck at home since the takeover.

Education Ministry data for

2016 indicates less than one in five Afghan women can read and write, compared with more than 60 per cent of men.

Sat at a restaurant in the city of Ghazni, the Taliban's deputy provincial head of culture sought to justify the suspension of schooling.

"We have to find money to pay salaries for the teachers," Mansoor Afghan said.

School curriculums also still need to be assessed as 'good or bad' and more teachers employed, he added.

Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen said that he expects high school-age girls to return to class in the spring.

Even if they do, the next steps dreamed of by the ambitious girls in Langar and Nawabad - university and a professional career - seem more out of reach.

Since August, women have once again been largely barred from work outside the education and healthcare sectors.

Many are sceptical about pledges from the Taliban, who failed to live up to promises of women's rights during their last rule.

The hope is that the group's battle to gain international recognition and get aid flowing back into one of the poorest countries in the world will lead to concessions.

"We hope they will reopen the universities and when we finish high school we will be able to go without any problems," said 17-year-old Shafiq, sat in the front row of the Nawabad class, who said that she wants to be a doctor.

AFP

# Ethiopia govt claims recapture of key towns

**Addis Ababa, Ethiopia** - Ethiopia's government said on Monday it had recaptured two strategic towns from rebel fighters, the latest in a rapid series of battlefield victories claimed by forces loyal to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

The announcement marks another dramatic twist in the 13-month-old conflict that has killed thousands of people and triggered a deep humanitarian crisis in the north of Africa's second most populous nation.

The government's communications service said on Twitter that Dessie and Kombolcha had been 'freed by the joint gallant security forces' that had also taken control of several other towns on the eastern front.

The two cities, which lie in the Amhara region on a highway about 400km by road northeast



Resident react as a convoy of soldiers from the Ethiopian National Defence Forces drive through Sendafa (AFP)

of the capital Addis Ababa, were reportedly taken by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) at the end of October.

Their capture had sparked fears that the TPLF and its ally, the Oromo Liberation Army,

would march on the capital, leading alarmed foreign governments to urge their citizens to leave the country as soon as possible.

The state-run Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation quoted Abiy as saying the rebels

had sustained 'heavy losses and [were] unable to cope with the strike by allied forces'.

"The enemy will be hit and the victory will continue," he said.

Ahmed announced last month he would head to the bat-

tlefront following a series of advances claimed by the rebels, as fighting reportedly raged on at least three fronts.

And over several days last week, the government said the military and its allies had retaken the UNESCO World Heritage site of Lalibela, which had fallen to TPLF fighters in August, as well as the town of Shewa Robit which lies only 220km from Addis Ababa by road.

TPLF spokesman Getachew Reda said on Twitter that rebel forces had left towns including Kombolcha and Dessie 'as part of our plan'. On Sunday, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael had denied the government was scoring major victories, saying the rebels were making strategic territorial adjustments and remained undefeated.

AFP



Demonstrators march during a rally against measures to curb the spread of the COVID-19 and mandatory vaccination in Brussels on Sunday (AFP)

## COVID-19 vaccine mandates should be 'last resort': WHO

**Copenhagen, Denmark** - The World Health Organization (WHO) in Europe on Tuesday cautioned against making COVID-19 vaccines mandatory, while urging better protection of children among whom cases are high.

WHO Europe director Hans Kluge said compulsory vaccines should be 'an absolute last resort and only applicable when all other feasible options to improve vaccination uptake have been exhausted'.

Noting that mandates have increased vaccine uptake in some cases, Kluge said that these are 'context specific', and added that the effect mandates may have on 'public confidence and public trust' must also be considered.

The regional health bloc also noted that number of cases had increased 'across all age groups, with the highest rates currently observed in the five to 14 years age group'.

"It is not unusual today to see two to three times higher incidence among young children than in the average population," Kluge told a press conference.

"The health risks extend beyond the children themselves," Kluge added, noting that children risk passing the infection to parents and grandparents in the home.

"Vaccinating children should be discussed and considered nationally," Kluge added.

In a separate development, the WHO on Tuesday said COVID-19 treatments using plasma taken from the blood of recovered coronavirus patients should not be given to people with mild or moderate illness.

Convalescent plasma showed some early promise when given intravenously to people sick with COVID-19.

But in advice published in the British Medical Journal, the WHO now says that "current evidence shows that it does not improve survival nor reduce the need for mechanical ventilation, and it is costly and time-consuming to administer".

It made a 'strong recommendation' against the use of blood plasma in people who do not have serious COVID-19 symptoms.

AFP

## One dead, two missing after building collapses in France

**Sanary-sur-Mer, France** - French rescue workers on Tuesday recovered a man's body from the rubble of a residential building destroyed overnight in a suspected gas explosion, and were scrambling to find two other people still missing after extracting a woman and a baby alive.

The woman and baby as well as three others were injured in the blast in the Mediterranean coastal city of Sanary-sur-Mer, which was heard from as far as 8km away.

"It's very likely that the victim is the father of the baby," Houda Vernhet, director of the government's regional authority for the Var region, said.

He was unconscious when located and declared dead after



French firefighters search for the missing inhabitants after a building collapsed following a suspected gas explosion, in the Mediterranean coastal city of Sanary-sur-Mer on Tuesday (AFP)

rescue workers spent more than two hours removing him from the unsteady wreckage of the three-storey building.

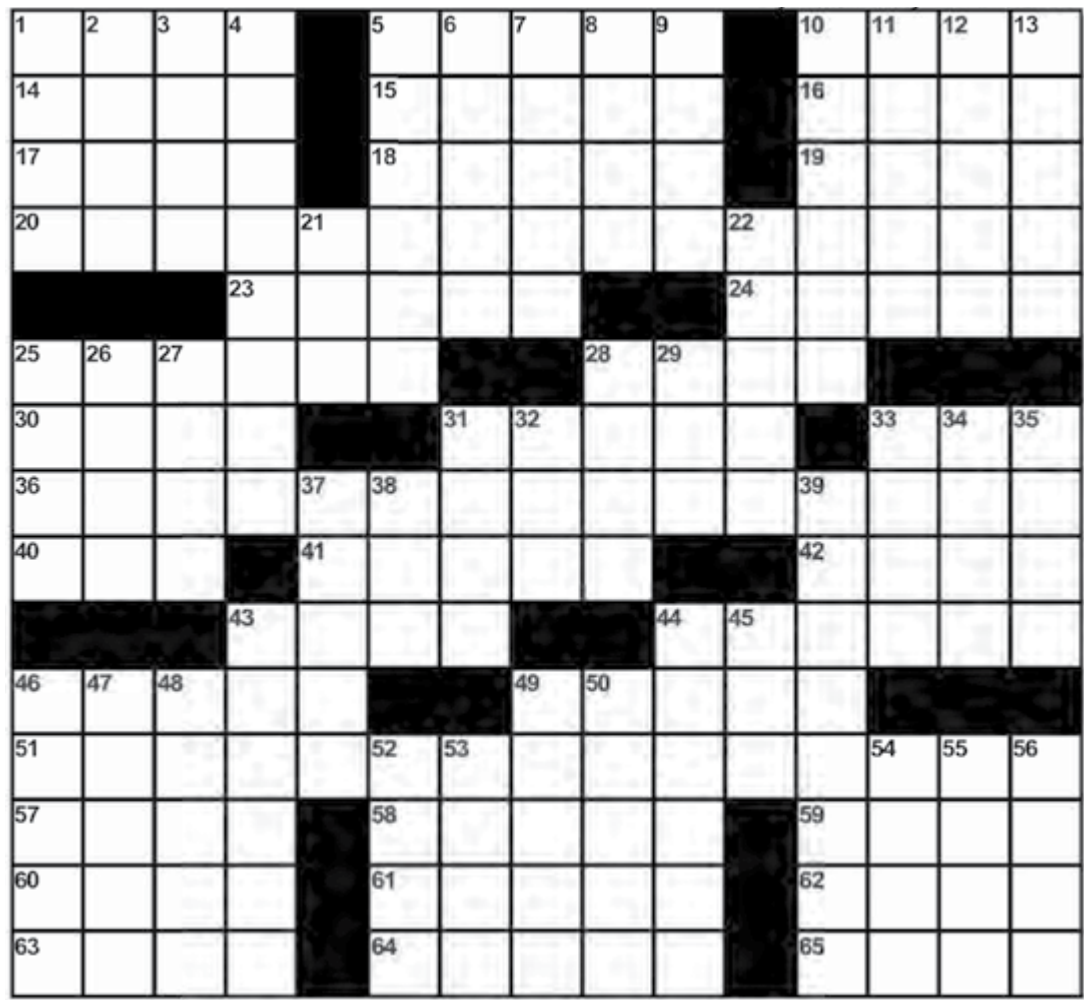
The two people still missing 'are a mother, an elderly woman, and her son' who lived on the ground floor, Vernhet said.

"For now, we haven't yet found any signs of life from the rubble, but we didn't hear the baby right away, either," said Colonel Eric Grohin, director of the fire service for the Var department.

'The causes aren't known for now. There was smell of gas, but we can't say anything more while the police inquiry is underway,' the regional authorities said in a statement.

AFP

## DAILY CROSSWORD

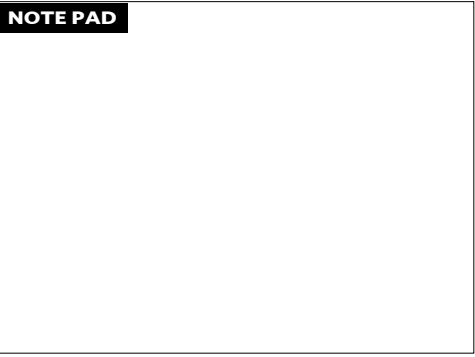


- ACROSS**
- 1) Campus military org.
  - 5) City known for romance
  - 10) Blood vessel obstruction
  - 14) Geometry calculation
  - 15) Decrease in intensity
  - 16) Puerto\_
  - 17) Dispatched
  - 18) Moscow monetary unit
  - 19) Line on a list
  - 20) Three things a chef might bake
  - 23) West Point student
  - 24) Ecstasy opposite
  - 25) Ants, collectively
  - 28) Fill a belly
  - 30) Egg, to a biologist
  - 31) Ruin
  - 33) Gabor of old Hollywood
  - 36) Three things a chef might roast
  - KITCHEN RANGE
  - 40) Snowy place that provides quite a view
  - 41) Legendary actress

- Sophia
  - 42) Pond organism
  - 43) Basketball highlight
  - 44) Tuition collector
  - 46) Its business is beauty
  - 49) Favored by God (Var.)
  - 51) Three things a chef might fry
  - 57) Russo of "Outbreak"
  - 58) Fertilizer derived from sea
  - 59) Wield the scepter
  - 60) Sermon sign-off
  - 61) Intense hatred
  - 62) One of the Great Lakes
  - 63) Attention-getter, in a theater
  - 64) Have a feeling about
  - 65) Designates, as a knight
- DOWN**
- 1) Sculptor's tool
  - 2) Twistable cookie
  - 3) Pitched shelter
  - 4) Ancient burial place
  - 5) Travesty or spoof
  - 6) Mistreatment
  - 7) Morocco's capital

- 8) "\_ do you good!"
- 9) "So it would \_"
- 10) Wince
- 11) Collectible art print, briefly
- 12) Crossing medium
- 13) Famous rock opera
- 21) It may be picked up at the beach
- 22) Solemn promises
- 25) Soda selection
- 26) Shape of Obama's office
- 27) Oatmeal glob
- 28) Hit like a ton of bricks
- 29) Section of a play
- 31) Boxer's comeback?
- 32) Bill often passed
- 33) Sinuous coral reef dwellers
- 34) Chevy car of yore
- 35) Way off yonder
- 37) Hollow twanging sound
- 38) Longest division of geologic time
- 39) Traded
- 43) Learned teacher
- 44) Turn into
- 45) Get mileage out of
- 46) Type of heap or metal

- 47) Throaty cries for attention
- 48) Airport inconveniences
- 49) Egghead
- 50) "Peanuts" character
- 52) Psychiatric components
- 53) Like all newborns
- 54) Wise Hindu teacher
- 55) Silver-tongued
- 56) Witnesses



## YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



**ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19  
Just when you thought things absolutely couldn't get any more intense, here it is. One more situation you have no choice but to become completely emotionally involved in. Go ahead and give it your all, but know that there could be one more dispute en route before you can actually let go and put it all behind you.



**LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22  
All that solitude gave you a chance to do some thinking, and you've arrived at a decision with regard to a certain someone who's been feeling more and more like a weight around your neck. You're done playing this game, and there's no talking you out of it. Now, however, you have to tell them about it. And while you might want to do it tonight, that will only result in a highly volatile situation. Just wait a day or two if you can.



**SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21  
Keeping quiet has never been your specialty, particularly after weeks of trying and getting no help from all other parties concerned. Fortunately, there is someone else who is actually as irritated about all this as you are and just as eager to see it all come to an end. Just this once, then, you can keep quiet. The situation will be resolved without any involvement on your part.



**TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20  
You're ordinarily quite respectful of family members, especially your elders, and of friends too. But no matter who it is, if you see them trying to interfere with your relationship, whether they be friend, foe, family or stranger, you just won't stand for it, and you'll make it your business to stop them. Immediately. Just be sure they're worth it.



**VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22  
Your friends have some rather shell-shocked looks on their faces. They can't believe the things you've been saying, the moments you've chosen to say them, and the complete abandon you've said them with. It's kind of fun seeing them this way, isn't it? Still, you should try to resist the urge to shock them any further. They can only take so much.



**CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19  
Not to worry. Your closest and truest friends won't be going anywhere, not even after you tell them that you need new stimulation when it comes to conversation and social interactions. They may even sympathize. And some might ask to go searching for new companions right along with you. These are the people who count, the ones who'll be there for the long haul.



**GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21  
If you weren't on your game yesterday, it was probably because you were concentrating on a certain someone and quite unable to think about much else. A whole new day is here, and this time out you'll need to have your wits about you. Even if you have to force yourself, you really must put all your energy into the task at hand. You can do it. Focus.



**LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22  
Still wondering about how you can turn what you love to do as a hobby into what you love to do for a living? Maybe it's time to ask someone who knows the ropes for some advice. If anyone knows how to engage another person in conversation, it's you. You also know where to look for the conversation you're after, and who could ever pass up a chance to chat with someone as charming as you?



**AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18  
If you manage to resist marching up to your superior and demanding that they give in to you on all counts, it might mean that you didn't make it into work today. But if you did, and you still manage to keep quiet (or at least voice your concerns nicely), you're probably walking out with a raise, bonus, or promotion under your belt. If not, there's always tomorrow. When you're calmer.



**CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22  
This definitely won't be a boring day or a boring evening. Startling, maybe. Surprising, for sure. But not boring. There's also a fair bit of romance coming along, and not a moment too soon. Sure, you have work to do, but who cares? When things are going this well, it's obvious. If you happen to wander into work a bit late tomorrow, all you'll have to do is grin and no one will be mad.



**SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21  
You're feeling wonderful. You're exhilarated, excited, and anxious for all new things to happen. Here's a news flash: just thinking about change the way you are means it's already started. Everything begins as a thought, an idea, right? So now your only job is to get the show on the road with some action. Map out a battle plan on paper and get started.



**PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20  
Every now and then you need to get emotionally intense, experience a tender exchange of sentiments, or just sit down and have a heart-to-heart talk with someone. This is definitely one of those times. You won't settle for anything that even remotely smacks of a surface encounter. You want depth, intensity, and passion, and if you don't get them, you'll take your toys and go home.



### TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The largest city of India is

- a. New Delhi
- b. Mumbai
- c. Kolkata
- d. Chennai

2. The literacy rate of Andaman & Nicobar Islands is

- a. 81.18 per cent
- b. 80.76 per cent
- c. 79.23 per cent
- d. 78.11 per cent

3. The longest rail line of the world, Trans-Siberian line, is in

- a. Russia
- b. China
- c. USA
- d. Saudi Arabia

Answers: 1. b 2. a 3. a

### KIDS COLOURING



### BOGGLER

|   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| L | T | E | P |
| D | R | I | I |
| L | N | A | A |
| E | S | G | I |

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

### 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 | 9 | 4 | 2 | 8 | 1 | 7 | 9 |
| 7 | 1 | 9 | 8 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 5 |
| 2 | 8 | 5 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 4 | 1 |
| 8 | 7 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 9 | 5 | 1 |
| 9 | 2 | 5 | 8 | 1 | 7 | 6 | 4 |
| 4 | 1 | 8 | 6 | 7 | 9 | 2 | 5 |
| 5 | 9 | 7 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 8 | 6 |
| 4 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 7 |
| 5 | 8 | 1 | 7 | 9 | 6 | 4 | 2 |

COFFEE CULTURE



# True brew

A new coffee manufacturer in Oman takes on a mission to connect people to each other and to the planet, especially the younger generation, through the world's original coffee – Arabic coffee



Hubert Vaz

Falling in love with a brew is something only for a few! And the ones who stay committed in their aromatic relationship with a bag of beans and the far-reaching consequences that come with it, can do anything to further their romance...

Medina Ilyas, an avid adventurer and founder of an experiential travel company, fell in love with Arabic coffee instantly when she came to the sultanate 15 years ago. What began as 'love at first sip', soon blossomed into a full-fledged obsession for the brew with its heady aroma and unique ability to usher in balance, not just within an individual's mind but also in his/her interpersonal relationship via warm exchanges over coffee – a key element of Arabic culture.

Medina explored her love and obsession for coffee and took it to another level by establishing her own company to manufacture authentic Arabic coffee, as well as share some of her own secrets of coffee brewing with interested individuals through varied fora, including zoom workshops.

Based in Oman, Medina Coffee Company delivers the 'world's best Arabic coffee experience' to everyone who loves coffee. The company's coffee kits contain exclusive Specialty Yemeni Coffee, a proprietary blend of exotic Arabic spices and a measuring spoon, along with a few recipes to get one started. The company also enjoys experimenting with cold brews, lattes and cappuccinos, besides simply making regular coffee in a coffee maker.

"During our zoom classes we teach customers the proper way to prepare Arabic coffee,



fee, as well as the history of coffee and the proper Arabic coffee ritual," says Medina, adding, "We are particularly focused on Arabian consumers who drink specialty coffee. Although we sell Arabic coffee kits, our exclusive Yemeni coffee beans are an exceptional choice for preparing any coffee drink. We are targeting Oman, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, as the Middle East region boasts coffee consumption of between 4.5 million and 5 million bags.

## Complex flavour, charitable move

Medina coffee's complex flavour profile

comes from rare, high quality, organic Yemeni beans. It has a deep, earthy flavour with a satisfying, lingering finish, and carries hints of chocolate. Also, the extraordinary Arabica coffee is certified by the Specialty Coffee Association.

"We buy our beans directly from Yemeni farmers and pay a fair amount to compensate them for their hard work. A portion of every purchase is donated to UNCHR to support internally displaced people in Yemen, providing basic needs like food, medicine and clothing," Medina disclosed.

## Bringing in balance

Medina further asserts that the modern pace of life can leave one feeling drained, stressed, and disconnected. And wellbeing begins with creating good self-care habits that help you feel balanced. "When you are balanced, you feel centered, productive, responsible and connected. Without balance, we cannot contribute or feel fulfilled," she says pointing out that coffee and spices come together to deliver a wealth of health benefits and a healthy boost of energy.

During her adventures in Oman, having stayed with Bedouins, Medina first witnessed the original coffee preparation process and was fascinated by how much detail went into making the coffee. "I had since traveled to different regions of Oman and experienced different styles and recipes of Arabic coffee. While preparation styles differ, one thing remains consistent – the friendliness and warmth of Arabic hospitality," she said.

Asked about the difference in coffee cultures in the Arab world and the West, Medina said, "The biggest difference between the Western world coffee and the Arabic coffee is that Qahwa or coffee in the Arabic culture is all around hospitality. The process of



## LOVE AT FIRST SIP...

"Fifteen years ago, I fell in love... I visited Oman for the first time and was introduced to Arabic coffee. It was love at first sip! I was mesmerised by not only the taste but the culture surrounding the Arabic coffee ritual. I opened the Pandora's box of coffee, and it soon became an everyday part of my life," says Medina explaining the origin of her coffee craze.

"Since then, I tried over 60 different types of coffee and over a 100 different recipes. It became a true passion. To me, having Arabic Coffee is not just a fun activity, it is a heartwarming cultural experience. I believe that introducing Arabic coffee to people is the best way to showcase Arabic hospitality and culture. Everything about the experience is truly magical."

preparing, serving and drinking coffee is some sort of a ritual, a social experience. The Qahwa ceremony is also considered a 'UNESCO intangible cultural heritage'. That's why we are organising workshops where we teach the history, rituals, preparation process, and share other information about Arabic coffee." (For more details: [www.medinacoffeecompany.com](http://www.medinacoffeecompany.com) Instagram - @medina.coffee)

MASERATI COOK-UP

# Italian elegance

**G**race, style, elegance, and a sporting attitude... the Maserati Quattroporte MY19 is an embodiment of all these virtues. And those who get to own and ride one, need to fall in sync with a fitting disposition behind the wheel.

To aptly demonstrate how the MY19 Quattroporte gracefully embraces elegance and style, Al Fardan Motors - dealers of this beauty on wheels - invited a select group of scribes to drive down from its showroom, in Azaiba, to the Al Bustan Palace hotel, to get a first hand experience of Italian elegance in motion.

Strapping themselves behind the wheel of this executive Italian sedan, which makes its presence felt on the roads in sheer style and stature, the journo's drove down town for a unique task that would culminate their romance with the Quattroporte - a hands-on Italian cooking stint that would ultimately elevate their engagements for the day wherein Maserati would steal the show.

A classic example of authentic Italian design, the Quattroporte is known for gracefully embracing the virtues of elegance and an athletic attitude in a bid to give those who cannot settle for anything but the best a shot in the arm.

The best Italian designers have been involved in developing the design language of the Quattroporte throughout its 55-year history. In 1963, the first Quattroporte seamlessly fused the qualities of speed, style and luxury in a sleek body de-

signed by Pietro Frua - and ever since, Maserati has been considered a master of sports sedan design.

The modern-day Quattroporte is as distinctive and exclusive as its predecessors the least. The dominant, powerful nose is sculpted around the Alfieri-shaped three-dimensional grille, which is pointed and imposing, featuring vertical chrome rib elements that contrast with the depth of the 'sharknose' effect.

But, wait a minute, what about the cooking stint? After a cool 30-minute ride to the hotel, the journo's donned navy blue aprons bearing the Maserati logo and got behind work-stations for some 'serious' Italian cooking. With a set of ingredients that included Burrata cheese, salad vegetables, herbs, chicken, pasta, and a variety of seasonings, they each conjured up a Burrata salad and a pasta to suit their own taste as a fitting finale to their Italian experience.

Whether behind the wheel of a Quattroporte or behind a work-station for Italian cuisine, the experience seemed to have a touch of class and elegance of its own in both cases. And as they got down to eating their own creation, their minds still behind the wheel during their dream drive, it seemed to occur to them, with some conviction, that there's no parallel for 'a timeless masterpiece of authentic Italian elegance'.



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Bayern Munich's goalkeeper Manuel Neuer practices during a training session on the eve of the UEFA Champions League match against FC Barcelona, in Munich on Tuesday (AFP)

# Bayern to ring changes for Barcelona match today

Munich, Germany - Injuries will force Bayern Munich coach Julian Nagelsmann to make changes for Wednesday's Champions League match at home to Barcelona behind closed doors.

Bayern are already into the last 16 as group winners, but want a sixth win from six games in the group stages when they host Barcelona, who they trounced 3-0 at the Camp Nou in September.

Barcelona are second in Group

E, but need a win at the Allianz Arena, which will be void of supporters due to high numbers of COVID-19 cases in Bavaria, to guarantee a last 16 spot.

Nagelsmann still plans to field 'the best available' Bayern team, but at least two of his stars are carrying knocks.

"Leon (Goretzka) broke off training again, he probably won't play, Serge Gnabry as well," Nagelsmann said on Tuesday.

The plum European tie also comes too early for both Eric

Maxim Choupo-Moting and Joshua Kimmich, who are on the verge of leaving quarantine after testing positive for COVID-19.

Nagelsmann revealed that in Choupo-Moting's case, "the after-effects of the infection are still such that we will wait until next week, even if he's negative".

Kimmich is set to end house isolation on the day of the game, but "after a four-week break, it makes no sense" for him to play, added Nagelsmann.

The Bayern boss said it 'feels

weird' to face Barcelona in front of empty terraces at the Allianz Arena.

The Bayern boss and his squad wants a perfect set of six wins to round off the group stages as reaching the last 16 "was important and a sixth win would be nice".

The only time Bayern previously six wins from six was in 2019/20 on the way to winning the Champions League as part of the treble alongside the Bundesliga and German Cup titles.

Nagelsmann has already seen the impact of Xavi Hernandez, who took charge of the struggling Barcelona side four weeks after, but suffered his first defeat as head coach last weekend.

"They defend a little higher under him (Hernandez)," said Nagelsmann.

"The counter-pressing is more like in the days of Pep (Guardiola). That frees up space, but you have to first escape the pressure."

AFP



Chelsea midfielder Mateo Kovacic

## Kovacic tests positive for COVID-19 in 'huge setback' for Chelsea

London, UK - Chelsea midfielder Mateo Kovacic has tested positive for coronavirus just a day after returning to training, manager Thomas Tuchel announced on Tuesday.

The 27-year-old has been out of action since late October and Tuchel had hoped to ease him back into action this week.

N'Golo Kante remains sidelined with a knee issue, while Jorginho has been forced to play through the pain of a back problem and will now miss Wednesday's Champions League trip to Zenit Saint Petersburg, leaving Tuchel short of defensive midfielders.

"We have bad news because Mateo was in training yesterday and with a big smile and it was a pure pleasure to have him back," said Tuchel.

"But he tested positive today, for coronavirus, so he's quarantining for a few days. So it's a huge setback for him personally and for all of us."

The defending champions have already qualified for the knockout stages of the Champions League and will be con-

firmed as winners of Group H if they equal or better Juventus' result against Malmo this week.

Securing top spot could offer an easier knockout draw, but Tuchel will balance those interests with the need to keep his players fresh for

*Mateo is quarantining for a few days. So it's a huge setback for him personally and for all of us.*

THOMAS TUCHEL

Saturday's Premier League clash with Leeds at Stamford Bridge.

Tuchel, who is also missing defenders Trevoh Chalobah and Ben Chilwell, admitted the midfield injuries had taken a hefty toll, with Chelsea knocked off the top of the Premier League at the weekend after defeat at West Ham.

AFP



Jude Bellingham (left) and Marco Reus discuss with referee Felix Zwayer after a deliberate handball during a match against Bayern Munich (AFP)

## Bellingham fined €40,000 for match-fixing comment

Berlin, Germany- Borussia Dortmund midfielder Jude Bellingham was on Tuesday fined €40,000 (US\$45,000), but escaped a ban after making explosive comments about the referee following last weekend's Bundesliga home defeat to Bayern Munich.

The German Football Association (DFB) said they have fined Bellingham for 'unsportsmanlike conduct'.

The 18-year-old claimed costly decisions by referee Felix Zwayer in Saturday's 3-2 loss in a top-of-the-table league clash,

were to be expected given the ref was implicated in the worst match-fixing scandal in German football history.

In a statement, Borussia Dortmund said the club 'and the player have accepted the verdict, Jude Bellingham is thus eligible to play in the Bundesliga game on Saturday at VfL Bochum.

The England midfielder' was fuming when Zwayer awarded Bayern a penalty on Saturday for a Mats Hummels handball, which resulted in the winning goal.

AFP

## Spurs hit by COVID-19 outbreak before crucial European tie

London, UK - Tottenham have been hit by a coronavirus outbreak ahead of their vital Europa Conference League match against Rennes, reports said on Tuesday.

It is understood that a number of first-team players and members of the coaching staff have tested positive for COVID-19, with more tests due to take place.

Antonio Conte's side are due to face French team Rennes on Thursday before Premier League games against Brighton and Leicester.

Under current rules, players who test positive must self-isolate for 10 days.

Calling off the Europa Conference game appears unlikely as, according to UEFA rules, a team needs to have fewer than 13 available players or no registered goalkeeper available for that to be the case.

Rennes are already through to the last 16 of the competition as group winners while Tottenham currently lead Vitesse on goal



Tottenham Hotspur team members celebrate after their third goal during a match against Norwich City, in London on December 5 (AFP)

difference in the battle for second place.

If the situation does worsen, the club could consider asking the Premier League to call off the Brighton game on Sunday.

The league works on a case-by-case basis and if a club does

request a postponement, it would be a Premier League board decision.

Spurs have climbed to fifth in the Premier League after three straight wins under Conte, who took charge last month.

AFP



# Novak Djokovic slated to play in Australia's ATP Cup ahead of Open

**Sydney, Australia** - After months of speculation that Novak Djokovic may miss the Australian Open over tough COVID-19 vaccination requirements, the world number one was on Tuesday named to play in a Sydney tournament weeks before.

The 20-time Grand Slam champion had cast doubt on whether he would defend his title at Melbourne Park next month, refusing to reveal whether he was inoculated against coronavirus.

However, he was listed as part of the five-man Serbia team when the draw was made for the ATP Cup in Sydney that will precede the opening major of the year.

Rafael Nadal was missing, with the Spanish fellow 20-time Grand Slam winner last month suggesting he would play an exhibition in Abu Dhabi this month, then another tournament before arriving in Melbourne for the Australian Open.

The only other absent top 20 player for the 16-team ATP Cup was injured Swiss great Roger Federer.

"The playing group enjoy representing their countries and to see 18 of the world's top 20 players commit to the event is testament to that," said tournament director Tom Larner. "The event shows off the passion the playing group have for this format."

An ATP statement accompanying the draw noted that top seed Serbia was 'headlined by world number Novak Djokovic', who won three of the season's four Grand Slams.

The 34-year-old ended his rollercoaster season with a Davis Cup defeat last week and then promised to make a decision on his Australian Open participation 'very soon'.

Organisers of the Australian Open have insisted only fully-vaccinated players will be allowed into the country, which saw Djokovic's father Srdjan last month suggest his son 'probably won't' play.

"Of course he would want to go with all his heart," he told Serbian television. "But I really don't know if that will happen. Probably not under these conditions, with this blackmail and when it's done that way."

Djokovic contracted COVID-19 during the ill-fated Adria Tour event he organised in the Balkans

*The event shows off the passion the playing group have for this format. To see 18 of the world's top 20 players commit to the event is testament to that*

TOM LARNER



This file photo shows Serbia's Novak Djokovic hitting a return against Canada's Denis Shapovalov during their Group A singles match of the 2021 ATP Cup, in Melbourne on February 2 (AFP)

hibition in Abu Dhabi this month, then another tournament before arriving in Melbourne for the Australian Open.

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An ATP statement accompanying the draw noted that top seed Serbia was 'headlined by world number Novak Djokovic',

in June 2020, but said he did not suffer from any symptoms.

Russia are the defending ATP Cup champions after their team spearheaded by Daniil Medvedev and Andrey Rublev swept past a Matteo Berrettini-led Italy in the final.

Djokovic's Serbia won the inaugural event in 2020, overpowering the Nadal-led Spain.

The teams in next year's US\$10mn event, from January 1-9, are divided into four groups of four, playing across two Sydney venues - the Ken Rosewall Arena and Qudos Bank Arena - with each tie comprising two singles matches and one doubles.

Top seeds Serbia were

grouped with Spain, Norway and Chile, while Russia will face Italy, Austria and home nation Australia.

Germany, led by reigning ATP Finals champion Alexander Zverev, headline Group C against Canada, Great Britain and the United States, while Greece, featuring world number four Stefanos Tsitsipas, are in Group D with Poland, Argentina and Georgia.

It kicks off a bumper series of ATP and WTA tournaments in the lead-up to the Australian Open, beginning on January 17, with events across Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne.

AFP

| ATP CUP                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>GROUP A</b><br><b>Serbia</b> - Novak Djokovic, Dusan Lajovic, Filip Krajinovic, Nikola Cacic, Matej Sabanov<br><b>Norway</b> - Casper Ruud, Viktor Durasovic, Lukas Hellum-Lilleengen, Leyton Rivera, Andreja Petrovic<br><b>Chile</b> - Cristian Garin, Alejandro Tabilo, Tomas Barrios Vera + two more<br><b>Spain</b> - Roberto Bautista Agut, Pablo Carreno Busta, Albert Ramos-Vinolas, Alejandro Davidovich Fokina, Pedro Martinez | <b>GROUP B</b><br><b>Russia</b> - Daniil Medvedev, Andrey Rublev, Aslan Karatsev, Evgeny Donskoy, Roman Safiullin<br><b>Italy</b> - Matteo Berrettini, Jannik Sinner, Fabio Fognini, Simone Bolelli, Lorenzo Sonego<br><b>Austria</b> - Dominic Thiem, Dennis Novak, Philipp Oswald, Lucas Miedler, Oliver Marach<br><b>Australia</b> - Alex de Minaur, James Duckworth, Max Purcell, John Peers, Luke Saville | <b>GROUP C</b><br><b>Germany</b> - Alexander Zverev, Jan-Lennard Struff, Yannick Hanfmann, Kevin Krawietz, Tim Puetz<br><b>Canada</b> - Felix Auger-Aliassime, Denis Shapovalov, Brayden Schnur, Peter Polansky, Steven Diez<br><b>Britain</b> - Cameron Norrie, Daniel Evans, Liam Broady, Joe Salisbury, Jamie Murray<br><b>USA</b> - Taylor Fritz, John Isner, Brandon Nakashima, Rajeev Ram, Austin Krajicek | <b>GROUP D</b><br><b>Greece</b> - Stefanos Tsitsipas, Michail Pervolarakis, Markos Kalovelonis, Petros Tsitsipas, Aristotelis Thanos<br><b>Poland</b> - Hubert Hurkacz, Kamil Majchrzak, Kacper Zuk, Jan Zielinski, Szymon Walkow<br><b>Argentina</b> - Diego Schwartzman, Federico Delbonis, Federico Coria, Maximo Gonzalez, Andres Molteni<br><b>Georgia</b> - Nikoloz Basilashvili, Aleksandre Metreveli, Aleksandre Bakshi, Zura Tkemaladze, Saba Purtseladze |

## Suhail clinches ISC Men's Singles title

**Muscat** - Suhail Khan proved unbeatable as he won the Men's Singles title defeating Shanawas K in straight sets scoring 6-2, 6-3 in the Annual Tennis Tournament conducted by the Indian Social Club Oman.

After a tough opening service game, Suhail's consistent, deep returning generated a 2-0 lead in the first set. Suhail was impeccable throughout the set; he struggled at times with his injured forehand and Shanawas' defence forced him ample errors.

However, he played the match on his terms, dictating from inside the baseline, and he served well in most tight moments. After maintaining the



Suhail Khan (left) and Shanawas K (Supplied photo)

opening break throughout the set, Suhail conceded the first set

in his favour scoring 6-2. Suhail gained an early break

and a 2-0 lead in the second set before losing two games in a row, but he remained calm throughout. The decisive game of the match followed at 3-3, the intensity skyrocketing as Suhail controlled the exchanges and Shanawas counterpunched efficiently.

In the end, it was Suhail who stood firmly inside the baseline, munching a series of crosscourt backhands to finish the second set in his favour scoring 6-3.

In other matches of Mens Singles, Ganesh beat Arun Ganesh 8-4; Hareesh J beat Rathish 8-2; Junaith K beat Hemachandran 8-1 while Shanawas beat Ganesh scoring 6-0; 6-1 in the semifinals.

## Forget steps down as director of French Open Grand Slam

**Paris, France** - Guy Forget is to step down as director of both the French Open and the Paris Masters at the end of the year when his contract ends, the French Tennis Federation (FFT) announced on Tuesday.

The reasons for his departure are not specified. According to the sports daily L'Equipe, Forget, 56, presented his resignation to the president of the FFT Gilles Moretton on Tuesday morning.

'Guy Forget, whose contract ends on December 31, 2021, is stepping down as director of the Roland-Garros tournament and of the Paris Masters. His successor for the Grand Slam will be announced in the coming days,'



A file photo of French Open director Guy Forget

said the FFT in a statement.

The announcement comes just a month after Forget was cleared of any wrong-doing by

the FFT's ethics committee following his naming in an investigation into a tax avoidance scheme in the tax haven of the

British Virgin Islands.

Forget's name was cited in early October in the Pandora Papers, an investigation by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), according to which he had benefited from tax packages in the British Virgin Islands.

The FFT's ethics committee cleared Forget on November 5 'in the absence of established tax evasion or other criminally reprehensible behaviour'.

The former French number one took over as director of the Masters in 2012 adding the French Open to his portfolio four years later.

AFP

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# Follow-on looms for Bangladesh after Sajid Khan's six-wicket haul

Hosts will fight for survival on the final day after yet another batting collapse

Dhaka, Bangladesh - Sajid Khan's maiden six-wicket haul left Bangladesh in danger of being made to follow-on with one day of the Dhaka Test to go. It remains to be seen if the weather will halt Pakistan's push for full WTC points, though.

On Tuesday, play was called off at 4.30pm, an hour before scheduled close. Conditions continued to remain murky all day. Yet, it was better than on the three previous days where heavy rain allowed just 63.2 overs to be bowled in the Test.

Pakistan got busy as soon as play commenced at 10.50am. They first declaring on 300 for four, with half-centuries from Mohammad Rizwan and Fawad Alam. Then, despite being hamstrung by the umpires' dictat that play wouldn't continue if they operate with fast bowlers, Pakistan made inroads with spin.

Debutant Mahmudul Hasan Joy tried to charge off spinner Sajid, only managing to edge to

| SCOREBOARD                          |                                                                     |    |  |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----|--|
| Pakistan 1st Innings 300 for 4 decl |                                                                     |    |  |
| BANGLADESH 1 <sup>ST</sup> INNINGS  |                                                                     |    |  |
| S Islam                             | c H n Ali b S Khan                                                  | 3  |  |
| M Hasan Joy                         | c B Azam b S Khan                                                   | 0  |  |
| N H Shanto                          | lbw b S Khan                                                        | 30 |  |
| M Haque                             | run out                                                             | 1  |  |
| M Rahim                             | c F Alam b S Khan                                                   | 5  |  |
| L Das                               | c & b S Khan                                                        | 6  |  |
| S Al Hasan                          | not out                                                             | 23 |  |
| M H Miraz                           | b Sajid Khan                                                        | 0  |  |
| T Islam                             | not out                                                             | 0  |  |
| Extras:                             | (b 5, lb 2, nb 1)                                                   | 8  |  |
| TOTAL:                              | 76/7 in 88 overs                                                    |    |  |
| Fall of wickets:                    | 1-1, 2-20, 3-22, 4-31, 5-46, 6-65, 7-71                             |    |  |
| Bowling:                            | S S Afridi 1-1-0-0, N Ali 12-2-33, S Khan 12-3-35-6, B Azam 1-0-1-0 |    |  |

slip. Then, Hasan Ali made his presence felt at point, first with a simple catch to dismiss Shadman Islam before running out Mominul Haque with a direct hit.

Mushfiqur Rahim was the next to go, one ball after surviving a close lbw call, as he tried to swing Sajid across the line with Fawad taking the catch at short midwicket.

Then, Liton Das, sent ahead of Shakib al Hasan, tried to attack



Bangladesh's Shakib al Hasan plays a shot during the fourth day of the second Test against Pakistan at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, in Dhaka on Tuesday (AFP)

Sajid but only hit one back to the bowler as Bangladesh slipped to 46 for 5.

Sajid then completed his five-for when he trapped Najmul Hossain Shanto for 30.

Shanto couldn't capitalise on his reprieves, first being dropped

on 13 and later when he was caught behind off a Nauman Ali no-ball.

Shakib tried to bristle his way for runs, but Bangladesh kept losing wickets. Mehidy Hasan Miraz became Sajid's sixth victim. Shakib and Taijul Islam then sur-

vived 5.2 overs before play was called off.

Pakistan had earlier declared their first innings on 300 immediately after Fawad reached his second Test half-century. Rizwan made an unbeaten 53 off 94 balls, with the pair's unbroken

fifth-wicket stand worth 103.

Rizwan endured slices of luck; he was dropped on 30 apart from surviving two lbw calls from the on-field umpires, both reversed through DRS.

Bangladesh had started well with pacers Ebadot Hossain and

Khaled Ahmed bowling well in tandem, with the wickets of Azhar Ali and Babar Azam respectively. It was Khaled's first Test wicket, having bowled 69.4 overs over three Tests since his debut in November 2018.

Cricinfo

## England's Anderson out as Cummins warns Australia 'tough to beat'

Brisbane, Australia - Bowling great Jimmy Anderson was on Tuesday left out of the England team for the first Ashes Test as Pat Cummins warned his Australian side boasting some of 'the all-time greats' would be tough to beat.

The home team head into the Ashes opener in Brisbane on Wednesday defending the hallowed urn and with their arch-rivals having a dismal record in Australia, losing nine of their last 10 Tests.

The task for Joe Root's side was made harder on the eve of the Ashes when veteran Anderson - Test cricket's most prolific fast bowler with 632 wickets - was not named in England's 12-man match squad for the opening clash at the Gabba.

Anderson was not risked after reportedly suffering a minor calf problem, although England did not give any reason for his omission. But wicketkeeper Jos Buttler told the BBC: "Jimmy's not going to play but he is fit. It's just precautionary."



England coach Chris Silverwood (left) and injured England bowler James Anderson talk during training, in Brisbane on Tuesday (AFP)

England are keen to manage the 39-year-old's workload for what will be a gruelling five-match series, with the second Test starting in Adelaide in just nine days' time.

### Root targeted

His absence leaves England to choose four bowlers from Chris Woakes, Mark Wood, Ollie Robinson, Stuart Broad and Jack Leach to form the attack alongside returning all-rounder Ben

Stokes, who has barely played since July.

England were already without injured pacemen Jofra Archer, who is recovering from an elbow injury, and Olly Stone who has undergone back surgery.

A decision on whether to include spinner Leach or go for an all-seam attack will be made after a last look at the Gabba wicket before the toss on Wednesday morning.

Higher up the batting order,

Haseeb Hameed won the race to open the innings with Rory Burns ahead of Zak Crawley, while Ollie Pope was preferred to Jonny Bairstow at number six.

"He's obviously a great player and it's a shame that he won't be out there tomorrow, but it doesn't change what we are going to do," said new Australian captain Cummins of Anderson.

Cummins, who took the reins when Tim Paine quit over a text-messaging scandal, nominated Root, the world's number one Test batsman, as the key wicket for Australia.

"He's going to be right up there as the biggest wicket, he's had a really good last 12 months or so, but I wouldn't necessarily say he's going to make it or break it for them," he said.

Cummins did suggest England could struggle against an Australia side that includes superstar batsmen Steve Smith and David Warner and bowling giants Josh Hazlewood and Nathan Lyon.

AFP

## Olivier returns to South Africa squad for India series

Johannesburg, South Africa - Fast bowler Duanne Olivier was on Tuesday named in a 21-man South African squad for a three-Test series against India, starting in Centurion on December 26.

The 29-year-old signed a Kolpak deal with Yorkshire in 2019 and declared that he wanted to qualify for England.

He spent three seasons with the English county.

The strongly-built fast bowler returned to the South African domestic system this season and in four first-class matches for the Johannesburg-based Lions team has taken 28 wickets at an average of 11.10.

Olivier took 48 wickets in 10 Tests before signing for Yorkshire, including a man of the series performance of 24 wickets at an average of 14.70 in 2018/19.

Olivier's success was built on hostile, short-pitched bowling on helpful pitches in Centurion, Johannesburg and Cape



Duanne Olivier

Town - the venues for the upcoming series against India.

He had a relatively modest return of 75 wickets at an average of 32.42 in 25 first-class matches for Yorkshire.

The 21 players named by Cricket South Africa provide cover in all departments in case of injuries.

The players will go into a bio-secure environment for the duration of the Test series.

There are six uncapped players in an expanded squad, including three fast bowlers in

Glenton Stuurman, Marco Jansen and Sisanda Magala.

Other uncapped players are batsmen Sarel Erwee and Ryan Rickelton and off-spinner Prenelan Subrayen.

### SQUAD:

Dean Elgar (capt), Temba Bavuma, Quinton de Kock (wkt), Sarel Erwee, Beuran Hendricks, Marco Jansen, George Linde, Sisanda Magala, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Anrich Nortje, Duanne Olivier, Keegan Petersen, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Glenton Stuurman, Prenelan Subrayen, Rassie van der Dussen, Kyle Verreynne (wkt).

### FIXTURES:

December 26-30, first Test, Centurion  
January 3-7, second Test, Johannesburg  
January 11-15, third Test, Cape Town  
AFP

## Australia's spin stocks hit again with Sophie Molineux ruled out of Ashes



Sophie Molineux

Sydney, Australia, - Australia have suffered yet another blow ahead of this summer's Women's Ashes series after star spinner Sophie Molineux was struck down by a stress fracture in her right foot.

Molineux suffered the injury during the last week of the WBBL, and has been ruled out of the entire multi-format series.

Australian team doctor Pip Inge said Molineux is currently in a moon boot, but it's hopeful the 23-year-old will be able to play in March's ODI World Cup

in New Zealand.

"Sophie's focus now shifts to her rehabilitation plan which means she'll be unavailable for any upcoming domestic matches as well as the Ashes in January," Inge said.

"At this stage we are aiming to have Sophie available for the ICC Women's World Cup in New Zealand in March."

The injury to Molineux comes less than two months after legspinner Georgia Wareham ruptured the ACL in her left knee, ruling her out of the World Cup,

Ashes, and Commonwealth Games campaigns.

This summer's Ashes series comprises of one Test, three one-dayers, and three T20s. The Test match starts on January 27 at Manuka Oval in Canberra.

Molineux has excelled in her two Tests, nine ODIs, and 27 T20s for Australia, and her absence combined with that of Wareham is a big blow to the team's spin stocks.

But Australia still have Jess Jonassen, Amanda Jade-Wellington, and the uncapped

Alana King to call upon in the spin department. Offspinner Molly Strano has also been part of recent squads.

Molineux carried her injury into Melbourne Renegades' Challenger final loss to the Adelaide Strikers late last month. She didn't bat despite her team's early collapse, and returned expensive figures of 0 for 22 from two overs with the ball. It was revealed during the match that Molineux had been in a moon boot in the lead-up to the clash.

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