



(Supplied photo)

320 private vet establishments registered in 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A total of 320 private veterinary establishments were registered in 2021, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MOAFWR).

The ministry's statistics indicate that of these, 192 were veterinary clinics, 124 pharmacies and four laboratories.

The highest number of veterinary facilities in the sultanate were concentrated North Batinah and South Batinah governorates - 64 each, followed by North Sharqiyah and Muscat - 38 each, 31 in Dhofar, 23 in Dakhliyah and

South Sharqiyah, 19 in Dhahirah, nine in Buraimi, seven in Al Wusta, and four in Musandam.

"These facilities provide comprehensive treatment, diagnostic and laboratory services necessary for the livestock sector to ensure the safety and quality of animal products and raise the economic value of the sector and the groups benefiting from it," a ministry official said.

He informed that the ministry supports private veterinary facilities by providing various services, including issuing and renewing licences, and inspecting and monitoring their activities.

Over 2mn seeds of indigenous trees distributed in 2021



(Supplied photos)

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In line with its efforts to plant 10mn indigenous trees in governorates across the sultanate, Environment Authority (EA) distributed more than 2mn seeds in 2021.

A national initiative commenced in 2020 to plant 10mn wild trees in a 10-year period.

According to an EA official,

"The authority distributed 2.3mn wild tree seeds in 2021. Of these, 1mn were in Al Wusta governorate and 1.3mn in Dhofar. Additionally, the authority has planted 374,069 trees."

In August 2021, EA, in cooperation with Petroleum Development Oman, implemented a project to plant 1mn mangrove seeds in a wetland reserve in the wilayat of Mahout, Al Wusta, using drones for the first time in

such an operation.

Eleven nurseries of the authority and 14 private nurseries are producing wild seedlings for the 10mn wild trees national initiative. The species being planted include ghaf, sumr, sidr, shue, tiq, talh, mitan, sarh and alalan.

According to the official, in December 2021 EA offered a tender to establish three nurseries - one in the wilayat of Hamra in Dakhliyah governorate,



Environment Authority distributed 2.3mn wild tree seeds in 2021 - 1mn in Al Wusta governorate and 1.3mn in Dhofar. Additionally, it has planted 374,069 trees

ENVIRONMENT AUTHORITY OFFICIAL

one in the wilayat of Khasab in Musandam, and the third in Ibbri in Dhahirah.

"The authority has also offered a tender to establish a nursery in the wilayat of Dibba in Musandam governorate. The deadline for submitting bids is February 17, 2022," the official said.

"The authority uses modern technology, including drones, to conduct surveys in various na-

ture reserves and plans to plant more than 1mn wild trees in 2022."

He informed that EA is investing in three nature reserves - Khor Soli, Dahariz, and Qurm Natural Reserve - to set up tourist facilities and boost the national income. It is currently preparing proposals for the establishment of a mountain reserve, a desert reserve and a marine reserve.



(Supplied photo)

Oman International Drifting Championship on Jan 27-28

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Automobile Association has announced the Oman International Drifting Championship to be held on January 27 and 28.

At a press conference held on

The first round of Oman International Drifting Championship will have 54 contestants from 17 nations

OMAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION OFFICIAL

Monday, an official of Oman Automobile Association said, "The first round of the Oman

International Drifting Championship scheduled next week at Arena Muscat will see partici-

pation of 54 contestants from 17 countries."

He also announced the three-day Oman International Rally 2022 starting on January 27. The rally, which includes seven stages, will see participation of 15 contestants from Oman and abroad.

MAFWR to set up outlets for Omani honey at Oman Avenues Mall on Jan 23

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) will launch marketing outlets in Oman Avenues Mall to sell honey produced by Omani beekeepers on January 23, 2022.

An official in the ministry informed that this is the third edition of an ongoing series of events to sell honey and will continue till February 3, 2022.

"These marketing outlets replace the earlier format of Omani Honey Market, which was cancelled in the past few months



(Supplied photo)

due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic," the MAFWR official said.

The number of participating beekeepers in the last edition of

honey market was 55 from various governorates, offering over eight tonnes of honey.

Honey sales jumped by 15.7 per cent in 2019 over 2018.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	28	18
Doha	21	16
Kuwait City	14	5
Manama	19	15
Muscat	28	19
Riyadh	14	8

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.32am
Sunrise	6.51am
Duhr	12.22pm
Asr	3.27pm
Maghrib	5.48pm
Isha	7.02pm

Digital Payment methods - earlier an option, now a need

We are currently witnessing numerous digital transaction options offered by various banks and new platforms that support digitisation in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040. With the aspiration of having a digital footprint in the Arab world, Muscat receiving the title of Arab Digital Capital for 2022, and consistent with Oman Vision 2040 - the slogan 'A digital future that creates opportunities', the future will only encourage everyone to use the banking channels that enable financial transactions from anywhere at any time.

While shifting from traditional banking to digital banking, SECURITY is the most important thing while completing online deals and cashless day-to-day transactions. Digital services such as online bill payments, funds transfer using mobile wallet, mobile top ups etc have enabled easy financial activities.

Here are tips that can help protect your information while taking advantage of online financing/banking:

- Regularly update anti-virus/anti-malware software and applications.
- Avoid the use of public Wi-Fi networks, which are target-rich for cyber thieves.
- Turn off devices when not in use.
- Regularly change passwords, choose strong passwords and have separate passwords for different sites visited frequently.
- Try to recognise and avoid phishing scams and other malware intrusions.
- Install dual-factor authentication/tokens, biometric solutions (eg fingerprint, facial recognition and iris scanning software) and other data encryption software in electronic devices.
- Back up files onto external drive to safely restore, in case of eventuality.
- Only engage with verified social media pages and use official mobile apps linked from an official website.
- Make sure you are dealing with a legitimate banking organisation. Read the 'about us' section to familiarise yourself with the institution.
- Read the privacy policies to find out exactly who has access to your personal information.
- Look for the FDIC symbol. All legitimate

banks are insured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation.

- Keep your computer and access to it secure.
- Look for the secure padlock in the bottom right of your browser to make sure your information is encrypted.
- Don't send any account details or PIN numbers via email.
- Reject any email that asks you for your financial information, especially account, PIN and Social Security numbers. Legitimate financial institutions will never ask you for that information via email or by phone.
- Beware of copycat websites. Thieves can be experts at copying names, URLs and web pages of legitimate institutions.
- Make sure you log out of your accounts each time you leave them, especially when you are using public computers.
- Cancel any credit card that has been used fraudulently.
- Ignore the 'remember my password' options on shopping and banking websites.



Payal Sampat Dutia
Cybersecurity professional
payal.sampat90@gmail.com

- Never share PIN or confidential information over the phone or Internet. Never share these details with anyone.
- Don't click on links embedded in emails/social networking sites claiming to be from bank or financial institutions.
- Don't transfer funds without due validation of the recipient, as funds once transferred cannot be reversed.
- Don't store sensitive information such as credit card details, mobile banking password and user ID in a separate folder on your phone.
- Don't forget to inform the bank of changes in mobile number to ensure SMS notifications are not sent to someone else.
- Be cautious while accepting offers such as caller tunes or dialer tunes or opening/downloading emails or attachments from known or unknown sources.
- As a responsible cybercitizen, it is important to practise basic preventive measures/precautions/cyber hygiene... Safe and cashless banking to you!

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

161-key Avani Muscat Hotel opens in Seeb



(Muscat Daily)

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Avani Hotels & Resorts has entered the Omani hospitality industry with Avani Muscat Hotel, the upbeat, contemporary brand's first property in the sultanate owned by Safari International Group.

Under the auspices of H E Eng Issam al Zadjali, chairman of Muscat Municipality, Avani Muscat marked its official opening with a grand ceremony on Monday.

Zamzam Sulaiman al Rashdi, CEO of Safari International Group, said, "We are so happy that many Omani companies

participated in the construction of the hotel and we have used local materials like Omani marble."

She added, "Our hotel's Omanisation level exceeds 30

Our hotel's Omanisation level exceeds 30 per cent and the cost of the project is around RO23mn

ZAMZAM SULAIMAN AL RASHDI

per cent and the cost of the project is around RO23mn."

"We are excited to kick off 2022 with the debut of the Avani brand in historical Oman, signifying Minor Hotels growth commitment in the Middle East," said

Amir Golbarg, senior vice president of operations, Minor Hotels - Middle East & Africa, the parent company of Avani Hotels & Resorts.

"Avani Muscat Hotel is poised

to hit the sweet spot and balance between leisure and business travellers with the property debuting in the upcoming area of Seeb."

"We are beyond thrilled to have an exciting brand such as

Avani debuting in Oman, adding a new cool destination for those looking to have a Muscat hotel where style and comfort combine. Whether the guests wish to stay for leisure or business, short or long term, Avani Muscat Hotel is the perfect choice," said Rami Farhat, GM of the hotel.

The new property benefits from superb airport and city access, making it a convenient base for business travellers, digital nomads and leisure travellers alike. With 161 guest rooms, the hotel blends heritage, inspired touches and sleek contemporary style created with natural materials, bespoke décor and Omani tones.

Archaeological exhibition kicks off in Al Baleed site

Our Correspondent
Muscat

An archaeological discoveries exhibition, organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT), kicked off on Monday in Al Baleed Archeological Site in the Governorate of Dhofar.

The opening ceremony was held under the patronage of H E Eng Ibrahim Said al Kharusi, Undersecretary for Heritage Affairs in the ministry.

The exhibition, which will be held till February 15, comes in line with the ministry's programmes of promoting the heritage and tourism areas in Oman by shedding light on the prominent archaeological discoveries in various governorates.

The exhibition includes 24 in-



(Supplied photo)

troductory boards and displays 60 archaeological artefacts.

H E Kharusi also inspected the progress of restoration works at the archaeological site of

Samharam (Khor Rori) in Dhofar.

MoHT's restoration works at Samharam and Al Baleed sites are expected to continue till mid-April.

MTCIT detects violations of Land Transport Law

Muscat - The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) has detected various instances of transgression and violation of the Land Transport Law (promulgated by Royal Decree No 10/2016) and taken legal action against the offenders.

The violations include exceeding truck axle weight, manipulating vehicle operation cards and engaging in unlicensed land transport activities. Some of the

offenders also surpassed foreign land transport regulations like transporting goods between two points within the sultanate without obtaining clearance to do so and staying in Oman beyond the seven-day period of stay without a licence.

The violations were discovered during inspection campaigns aimed at spreading awareness and encouraging commitment to the Land Transport Law.

COVID-19 UPDATE

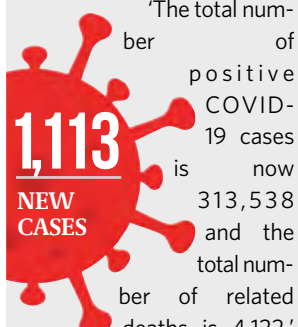
Daily count surges further

Muscat - The Ministry of Health (MoH) registered 1,113 new cases of COVID-19 in Oman on Monday. There were no new related deaths.

The total number of positive COVID-19 cases is now 313,538 and the total number of related deaths is 4,122,' an MoH statement said.

It added that 344 new cases have recovered, taking the total number to 302,522 recoveries.

With the authorities restricting the capacity of visitors to 50 per cent in commercial establishments, citizens and residents are advised to take precautionary measures.



Royal Hospital doctors find new pulmonary genetic disease

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A team of physicians from the Respiratory Diseases Unit of The Royal Hospital, in cooperation with counterparts from the Republic of Germany, have discovered a new genetic disease similar to cystic fibrosis that was

the culprit behind cases of recent pulmonary infection in four children (three of them from one family).

The doctors identified a new gene - AGR2 - which had not been previously described as a cause of any disease.

It took three years to complete the study which was



Dr Maryam al Shehiyah

conducted by a team that included Dr Maryam al Shehiyah, Dr Khoulal al Shidhani and Dr Sumaya al Araimi.

The team applied the study to the gene's effect on infected mice to further establish the symptoms of the recurrent infections.

Dr Maryam said, "A common

genetic defect was discovered in individuals with the disease, and after international cooperation and investigation, the same gene was identified in individuals with the same disease from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt. The effect of the gene was tested and its relationship with the disease was determined in

German laboratories."

Dr Sumaya said it is a scientific achievement to identify the cause of a completely new genetic disease in the world, and it is documented for the first time in a scientific journal.

The discovery will facilitate the diagnosis and treatment of similar rare diseases.

DR. HUSSEIN EL-BERNAWI
Consultant
General and Bariatric Surgeon
Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (FRCSI)
Master of Minimally Invasive Surgery (Msc) Catania - Italy
Diploma of Laparoscopic Surgery - Strasbourg - France

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Send your comments to muscatdaily@apexmedia.co.om

**SULTANATE OF OMAN
MINISTRY OF HEALTH
DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF HEALTH SERVICES
AL DHAHIRAH GOVERNORATE**

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Health - Directorate General of Health Service AL Dhahirah Governorate (DGHS) of Health invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tender: -

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of tender Document	Closing Time/ Day/ Date	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
66/2022	Provision Of Drinking Water For Numbers Of Health Establishments (Muqniat- Yanqul- Qumaira)	Monday 31/ Jan /2022	Before 9 am on Sunday 27/ Feb /2022	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25/= Per set

Notes:-

- All Specialized and interested Companies registered with Tender Board obtain Tender documents from the E. Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.
- Tenders should be submitted on line on the given website signed and sealed. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee issued by a Local bank for not less than One percent (1%) for the Tender value validity for (90) days from the Tender Submission date, addressed to the Tender Committee in the DGHS before one day of date submission.
- The DGHS is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.

(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
Any Clarification, you may contact via
Telephone: 24402200
Email id etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om



MoCIIP announces 22 investment opportunities in industrial sector

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) on Monday unveiled 22 investment opportunities in the industrial sector as part of the 100 Industrial Opportunities initiative launched by the ministry last year.

The ceremony was held under the auspices of H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, in the presence of Eng Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, chairman of the board of directors of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and with the participation of a number of ambassadors, business-

men, and investors at Sheraton Oman Hotel on Monday.

H E Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Undersecretary for Commerce and Industry in MoCIIP, said "The second package is characterised as an integrated package of facilitating procedures, incentives and privileges, and the ministry is committed to making approvals and permits automatic and fast."

"These opportunities enhance the strategic direction that the Sultanate of Oman is working to achieve in terms of economic diversification, and enable the private sector to contribute to raising the local added value and developing national industries. The opportunities will also provide important products to

partners in the private sector," said H E Masan.

He added, "The ministry announced a set of procedures and facilities to enhance the investment environment in the industrial sector, such as automatic licensing and reducing the value of licensing fees, in addition to launching the investor's residence for 5-10 years and investment licensing."

H E Asilah bint Salem al Samamiya, Undersecretary for Investment Promotion in MoCIIP, said, "The ministry took into account that the investment opportunities are distributed over the various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. The initiative aims to contribute to achieving economic and social develop-

ment in each governorate, providing job opportunities for its people, and adding economic and social dimensions related to the development plans set by each governorate."

"The ministry seeks to achieve real development in each governorate by offering attractive opportunities for local and foreign investment, and increasing the volume of investments directed to it. The ministry calls on the government sector and the private sector to find partnerships, and to localise various investment models across all governorates," said H E Asilah.

"The investment opportunities in the second package are represented by 15 opportunities provided by Petroleum Develop-

ment Oman (PDO), with total purchases of products equivalent to RO44mn, five Industrial opportunities from Nama Holding, with total purchases of products equivalent to RO70mn, and two opportunities from Mazoon Dairy, with total purchases of products equivalent to RO600,000, said, Eng Sami al Sahib, Director General of Industry at the ministry.

Sahib explained that these investment opportunities have been launched to enhance the investment environment in Oman by encouraging local and foreign investors to establish national industries and to promote the concept of added value to the industrial sector that contributes to Oman's economy.

MSX board of directors holds first meet of 2022

Muscat - The Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) on Monday held the first meeting of this year for its board of directors.

Mohammed bin Mahfoudh al Ardhi, chairman of the board of directors of the MSX, stated that the board, since its appointment in April 2021, had a great responsibility that required working with all relevant parties to overcome obstacles and transform challenges into opportunities that would enhance the position of the stock exchange on the investment map and meet aspirations and ambitions and achieve the desired goals.

Ardhi added that the strategy that was adopted at the Monday's meeting was derived from basic pillars, namely, the development of the national economy, the attractiveness of the stock exchange, financial technology, the commercial performance of the stock exchange, and the development of the stock's infrastructure and internal affairs.

According to these pillars, a set of goals and initiatives were launched to be achieved during the next five years according to a work plan and timetable with clear performance indicators to assess the extent of their success.

"One of the most important goals that we hope to achieve soon is to upgrade the stock exchange from a frontier stock market, according to the approved rating agencies. And to achieve this, work will be done to raise the liquidity of the listed shares, raise market values, and focus on facilitating the entry of foreign investments and activating some trading features such as short selling, lending and borrowing of securities and other initiatives that enable the Stock Exchange to promote it in global indices," Ardhi said.



Mohammed al Ardhi

Ardhi said, "There is an agreement with the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) to list a number of government companies during this year, which will support the levels of liquidity, increase the depth of the stock exchange and its investment attractiveness. This is in addition to the initiatives related to infrastructure development and inclusion of new investment tools and others related to the technological aspect and projects to improve performance in all aspects in preparation, to transform the stock exchange into a public joint stock company."

The chairman of the board of directors of the MSX, praised the efforts of the board, the executive management and the employees of the stock exchange that were made during the last period.

He stressed that the stock exchange possesses all the ingredients for success and that all parties must join hands to achieve the goals that were set within the strategic plan, which came in line with Oman's 2040 vision, and for the stock exchange, on its part, to contribute to building a diversified economic system with integrated roles, taking advantage of the competitive advantages of the sultanate in order to achieve comprehensive and sustainable development.

Finance Ministry workshop highlights role of audit units

Muscat - The Ministry of Finance organised a workshop to discuss a plan to draft the final version of the quarterly report of internal auditing departments at government units on Monday.

The plan, set to enhance the role of government internal audit units, is being implemented in



association with priorities of Oman Vision 2040, aimed to realise a system of legislation, justice and monitoring of financial activities.

During the workshop, the ministry reviewed the quarterly report's final draft and the best practices endorsed by govern-

ment units to ensure the implementation of the budget and detection of financial breach.

The workshop was attended by Abdullah Salim al Harthi, Undersecretary of the Finance Ministry, and representatives of government units. ONA

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Renault sales fall for third year

Paris, France - French auto giant Renault on Monday said its sales fell for the third year running in 2021 due to electronic chip shortages and the impact of its new commercial policy.

Renault's sales dropped by 4.5 per cent last year even as competitors fared better in a relatively stable market compared with the auto industry's pandemic crisis year of 2020.

The company trimmed costs and its workforce and adopted a strategy of targeting more profitable sales instead of large volumes, contrasting with its record sales of low-cost vehicles in recent years.

Renault's vehicle sales in 2021 almost reached 2.7mn, 1.2mn fewer than in 2018, but Volkswagen, Stellantis, Toyota and Hyundai-Kia have suffered less significant falls or recorded higher sales.

CEO Luca de Meo this month said shortages of electronic components meant around 500,000 cars were not produced. The group's Dacia and Alpine labels recorded higher sales in 2021.

Renault's sales director Fabrice Cambolive said the brand's sales will remain 'stable' in 2022 but could rise due to higher demand.

AFP

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Please email your listing to dailyclassifieds@apexmedia.co.om or call 99104346

MSX falls 0.56%; volumes down

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) fell 0.56 per cent to close at 4,216.88 points on Monday.

While turnover rose 49.15 per cent to RO2.64mn, volumes fell 10.5 per cent to 10.28mn shares.

While Services index marginally rose 0.01 per cent, Financial and Industrial indices fell 0.4 per cent and 0.91 per cent, respectively. MSX Shariah index fell 1.39 per cent at 511.97 points.

Market breadth remained negative as 11 companies closed up, while 13 companies closed down. The rest 23 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Top gainers were Al Madina Investment (8.89 per cent), Dhofar Generating Company (6.35 per cent), Oman National Engineering & Investment Co (3.06

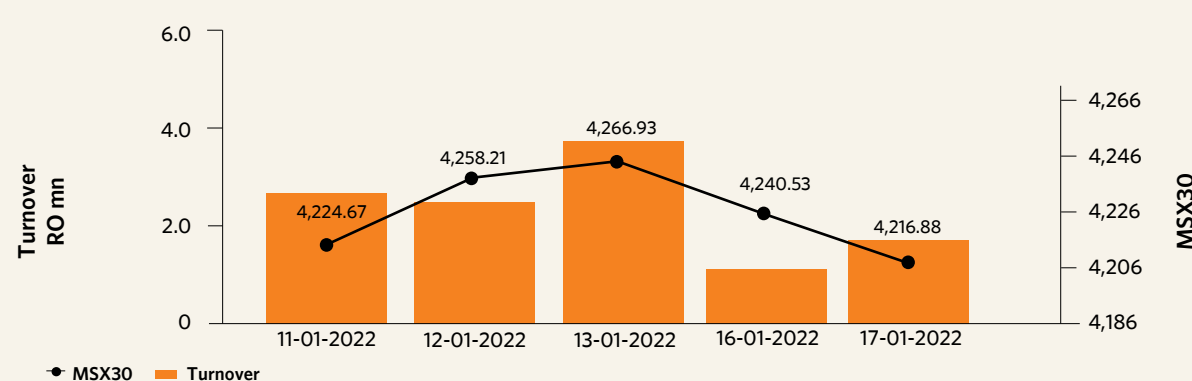


per cent), Construction Materials Industries & Contracting Co (2.38 per cent) and Al Jazeera Steel Products (1.49 per cent).

Top losers were Dhofar Cattle Feed

(-10.0 per cent), Oman Flour Mills (-9.69 per cent), National Aluminium Products Company (-4.43 per cent), Oman Fisheries (-3.51 per cent) and United Finance (-3.33 per cent).

MSX INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



Unilever pursues GSK-Pfizer unit after major £50bn bid rebuffed

London, UK - Consumer goods giant Unilever on Monday said it would press on with a bid for the consumer health care unit owned by pharmaceutical groups GlaxoSmithKline and Pfizer after an offer of £50bn was refused.

British group GSK said at the weekend that it had received three unsolicited offers from Unilever for GSK Consumer Healthcare, but were rejected for being too low. The unit's products include Sensodyne toothpaste, pain relief drug Panadol and cold treatment Theraflu.

'GSK Consumer Healthcare would be a strong strategic fit,' British company Unilever said in a statement on Monday as it brought forward a strategy update in the wake of the takeover news.

'Unilever's future strategic direction lies in materially expanding its presence in health, beauty and hygiene,' it said.

'These categories offer higher rates of sustainable market growth, with significant opportunities to drive growth through investment and innovation, and by leveraging Unilever's strong presence in emerging markets.'

The latest bid was received on December 20, comprising £41.7bn in cash and £8.3bn in Unilever shares.

The offers came as GSK was looking to spin off the consumer health division to concentrate on its main pharmaceutical arm.



"Unilever will have to raise its bid to somewhere around £55bn and move fast... to avoid a bidding war from rival private equity buyers who are likely to be eyeing up counter offers," said Victoria Scholar, head of investment at Interactive Investor.

She noted that an agreement 'would be one of the biggest ever London-listed deals and the largest globally since the start of COVID-19'. GSK owns a majority 68 per cent of the unit with US giant Pfizer the remainder.

'Undervalued'

At the weekend, GSK said its board had 'unanimously concluded' that Unilever's offers 'were not in the best interests of GSK shareholders as they fundamentally undervalued the consumer healthcare business and its future prospects'.

GSK is led by Emma Walmsley, one of only eight women

chief executives running companies on London's benchmark FTSE 100 index.

GSK's share price shot to the top of the index in early Monday trading, climbing 4.8 per cent.

Unilever was the biggest FTSE faller, slumping 6.6 per cent.

Walmsley, who headed the GSK consumer unit before its merger with Pfizer and her promotion to GlaxoSmithKline CEO, has faced severe shareholder pressure over her company's delays in producing COVID jobs and treatments.

The consumer health care business meanwhile had annual sales of £9.6bn last year.

'Major acquisitions'

Purchase of the GSK-Pfizer unit 'would create scale and a growth platform for the combined portfolio in the US, China, and India, with further opportunities in other emerging markets',

Unilever said.

It added that 'major acquisitions should be accompanied by the accelerated divestment of intrinsically lower growth brands and businesses. This would provide funding'.

Unilever in November agreed to sell its global tea business, including brands Lipton and PG Tips, for €4.5bn.

Unilever, whose products include also Magnum ice cream, Cif surface cleaner and Dove soap, recently posted rising sales thanks to price hikes.

The world is experiencing strong inflation as economies reopen from pandemic lockdowns amid supply constraints and strong demand. Costs of raw materials and energy are surging, while a number of sectors are impacted additionally by a need to pay higher wages as they struggle to find staff.

AFP

Pandemic still taking heavy toll on jobs: UN

Geneva, Switzerland - The COVID-19 crisis is continuing to hit jobs hard around the world, the United Nations said on Monday, warning it could take years for employment levels to reach pre-pandemic levels.

In a new study, the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO) revised its previous forecast that the global employment market will make a nearly full recovery from the virus this year.

Blaming the impacts of COVID variants like Delta and Omicron and uncertainty around how the pandemic will evolve, it now projects a significant deficit in working hours in 2022 compared to before COVID-19 emerged. "Global labour markets are recovering from the crisis much more slowly than we previously expected," ILO chief Guy Ryder told reporters, warning that the outlook 'remains fragile'.

"We are already seeing potentially lasting damage to labour markets, along with concerning increases in poverty and inequality."

Monday's report predicted that global working hours would be two percent below the numbers seen in 2019, leaving the world short of the equivalent of some 52mn jobs.

Last May, the ILO predicted the working hour shortage would be just half that this year.

At the same time, the global official unemployment rate remains significantly higher than before the pandemic hit.

207mn unemployed

This year, 5.9 per cent of workers globally, or some 207mn people, are expected to be officially registered as jobless, which is better than in 2021 and especially



A man wearing a face mask walks past a 'Now Hiring' sign in front of a store in Arlington, Virginia, US on January 13 (AFP)

2020, but still up from 186mn in 2019.

The ILO report said the global unemployment rate was projected to remain above the 5.4 per cent rate seen before the crisis 'until at least 2023'. And it cautioned that the overall impact on employment is significantly greater than what these figures would imply, since many people have left the labour force altogether. In 2022, the global labour force participation rate is projected to remain 1.2 percentage points below the level three years ago. That corresponds to a deficit of some 40mn workers worldwide, ILO said.

Ryder warned that the pandemic had already 'weakened the economic, financial and social fabric in almost every country, regardless of development status'. At the same time, the ILO pointed out that differences in vaccine access and in economic recovery measures meant the crisis was impacting groups of workers and countries in vastly different ways.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the report said labour markets in

higher-income countries appeared to be recovering faster, although some were now beginning to face problems related to labour shortages, Ryder said.

Numerous factors appear to be driving the so-called 'Great Resignation' seen in some countries, Ryder said, adding that the crisis clearly 'has led a significant number of people in the workforce to reconsider the employment that they have'.

Shifts in the way we work meanwhile seem to be deepening various forms of inequality, including exacerbating gender inequity, according to the report.

It has been clear from the start that the pandemic was disproportionately impacting women, who have taken on the lion's share of the additional care work, and also more often work in hard-hit sectors, like services and travel. But Ryder cautioned the impact could last well after the pandemic ends.

"There are concerns that the long-COVID effect on gender at work would be a negative one," he said.

AFP

World's 10 richest men doubled wealth during COVID-19: Report

Paris, France - The world's 10 wealthiest men doubled their fortunes during the first two years of the coronavirus pandemic as poverty and inequality soared, a report said on Monday.

Oxfam said the men's wealth jumped from US\$700bn to US\$1.5tn, at an average rate of US\$1.3bn per day, in a briefing published before a virtual mini-summit of world leaders being held under the auspices of the World Economic Forum.

A confederation of charities that focus on alleviating global poverty, Oxfam said the billionaires' wealth rose more during the pandemic more than it did the previous 14 years, when the world economy was suffering the worst recession since the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

It called this inequality 'economic violence' and said inequality is contributing to the death of 21,000 people every day due to a lack of access to healthcare, gender-based violence, hunger and climate change.



Elon Musk (Forbes)



Jeff Bezos

The pandemic has plunged 160mn people into poverty, the charity added, with non-white ethnic minorities and women bearing the brunt of the impact as inequality soared.

The report follows a December 2021 study by the group which found that the share of global wealth of the world's richest people soared at a record pace during the pandemic.

Oxfam urged tax reforms to fund worldwide vaccine production as well as healthcare, climate adaptation and gender-based violence reduction to help save lives.

The group said it based its wealth calculations on the most up-to-date and comprehensive data sources available, and used the 2021 Billionaires List compiled by the US business magazine *Forbes*. *Forbes* listed the world's 10 richest men as: Tesla and SpaceX chief Elon Musk, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, former Microsoft CEOs Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer, former Oracle CEO Larry Ellison, US investor Warren Buffett and the head of LVMH, Bernard Arnault.

AFP



Fried Series







1
Boil Noodles



2
Mix Seasoning



3
Drain Well



4
Mix well, Ready to be served




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ROHM announces upcoming illustrious shows

Following on from the success of the season opening performance by Saber Rebai on January 6 and 7, the Royal Opera House Muscat has announced a host of performances programmed for the coming weeks to delight audiences.

“Our enduringly popular Lunch Music series returns on January 15. Enjoy an informal dip in and out of opera at the Opera Galleria. Grab a coffee or an early lunch and bring the family to enjoy live music in the mall. Free of charge and full of fun. No better way to enjoy a lazy Friday lunch time. Lunch Music starts at 12.30 and will be performed by the Fondazione Arena di Verona,” a press release said.

The exciting new exhibition, delving into the creative inspiration and works of one of the world’s finest stage directors, opens at the Exhibition Hall at the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts. The Artistic World of Franco Zeffirelli is an exhibition curated to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Royal Opera House Muscat, honouring a great artist, whose contribution to the world of opera is consider-



able. The exhibition features details and items from some of his greatest productions, brought together and on display for the first time. The exhibition is open to visitors till March 20.

A world premiere will take place on January 20, with Giuseppe Verdi’s Rigoletto. In a stunning presentation from the master of grand stagings Franco Zeffirelli, the Royal Opera House Muscat’s production of this classical masterpiece will be a feast for opera lovers the world over. Co-produced with Fon-

dazione Arena di Verona and the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre, featuring a host of stars, conducted by Jan Latham Koenig, the glittering production team has created a production of epic proportions and significance. The story of the court jester whose lashing wit makes him the worst of enemies is a riotous production of colourful characters and cunning schemes for revenge. It will be staged on January 20, 21 and 22 at 7pm. A pre-performance talk will take place at 6pm to learn more about the production, the opera and the work behind the scenes.

Giuseppe Verdi is further celebrated on the 23rd January with a concert entitled Verdi’s Masterpieces. A composer known and loved the world over for his incredible canon of work, this concert explores the arias and duets which have captured fans throughout the world for generations. It is sung by artists from the Fondazione Arena di Verona, with the orchestra of the company conducted by Jan Latham-Koenig.

On January 25, Coffee and Dates (7pm) with American artist and star performer Chris Botti, ahead of his concerts on the January 27 and 28, is also the perfect lead into the next fixture of this incredible first month of the 2022 - the ROHM 10th anniversary season: An Evening with Chris Botti. Chris Botti is a musical phenomenon, outstandingly talented as a composer and musician, currently America’s bestselling instrumentalist. Botti presents a programme of his greatest hits and inspired renditions of jazz favourites at the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts.

Finally, January draws to a close with Absolute Music, a concert dedicated to the sound of the accordion with the acclaimed artist Giancarlo Palena. In Out of the Magic Box, patrons can enjoy an hour of soulful sounds of a bygone era in the intimate setting of the House of Musical Arts on January 31, at 7pm.

All performances will take place under the guidelines issued by the Supreme Committee entrusted with taking measures to tackle any developments of COVID-19.

Meethaq Savings Account offers free Life Takaful

Since its launch, Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat has been endeavouring to enhance the role of promoting a healthy savings habit in Oman. Meethaq continues to work to shed light on the importance and benefits of enhancing the saving culture in society for a bright and secure future.



Sami Arfah Bait Rashid

In line with its commitment to meet the customers’ needs, the Meethaq Savings Account is designed with exciting benefits and it offers attractive Shari’a-compliant profit rates that are based on principles of Mudarabah, a press release said.

On this occasion, Sami Arfah Bait Rashid, assistant general manager - Meethaq Personal Banking, said, “I would like to extend my gratitude to people in general and Meethaq’s customers in particular for their trust in the innovative services and products that Meethaq Islamic Banking offers.

We are working constantly towards developing our products in line with global trends and to provide added value to our customers. The Meethaq Savings Account is designed to meet customers’ needs in getting financial benefits that are in line with Shari’a, and based on the Mudarabah contract.”

Sami Arfah Bait Rashid stressed that Meethaq will continue working towards achieving its customer-centric strategy in developing the various products and services that meet customers’ aspirations and based on global Islamic banking trends.

He encouraged customers to enjoy the benefits and banking facilities offered by Meethaq starting from

opening the account to enjoying Meethaq’s unique customer experience.

Customers can open a Meethaq Savings Account via Meethaq’s website or by visiting the branch to earn up to 3.5% per annum, and also avail free life Takaful cover upon maintaining a monthly average balance of RO30,000. Omani customers may visit any Meethaq branch along with their ID card and a copy of any utility bill, while expatriates should provide their resident card, passport and a copy of any utility bill to open their new Meethaq Savings Account.

The Meethaq Savings Account offers profit at competitive rates, which will be credited to the customer’s account on a monthly basis and there is no minimum balance requirement for profit eligibility. Profit will be credited to customer accounts based on the monthly average balance.

All products of Meethaq are designed according to the guidelines set down by the Central Bank of Oman for Islamic banking and they also undergo a thorough process of Shari’a compliance certification by the bank’s Shari’a Supervisory Board.

Atkins appoints new MD-ME programme advisory business

Atkins, a member of the SNC-Lavalin Group, announced the appointment of Andrew Rotteveel as Managing Director for its newly formed programme advisory business in the Middle East, effective January 2022.

As part of his role, Andrew leads the company’s advisory, cost management, project management and site supervision services across the region which

also encapsulate Faithful+Gould brand, a press release said.

Rotteveel is an accomplished executive with more than 20 years’ experience across the UK, Europe, Middle East, and Africa regions. He has a strong background in real estate development with experience in strategic consulting, development management, property management, project management, program



Andrew Rotteveel

management office (PMO) and cost management. Rotteveel has worked for a number of leading global real estate and construction companies. Previously, he was the Chief Operating Officer of King Abdullah Financial District (KAFFD) Development and Management Company.

“As our markets continue to evolve and how our clients’ requirements for consultancy serv-

ices change, we remain committed to adding demonstratable value to their projects, in the most efficient and effective way,” said Campbell Gray, CEO, Atkins Middle East & Africa. “Bringing together our advisory, Faithful+Gould, and Atkins supervision services under one umbrella ensures we focus on out-comes for mutual long-term benefits for clients and ourselves.”

Kempinski Muscat Hospitality Champions

This year, 13 Omani team members at Kempinski Hotel Muscat were announced winners for NHI’s Hospitality Champions of 2021. Participating team members were selected from different

departments, such as administrative roles, to guest facing roles. The award ceremony took place on Sunday, January 9, a press release said.

The purpose of this initiative was to raise awareness of the hospitality sector and encourage Omanis to take advantage of training opportunities with the National Hospitality Institute. In

addition, it was to highlight and show appreciation to Omanis who have chosen the tourism sector as a profession in the sultanate and to celebrate and reward those individuals who excel

in their roles.

General Manager Carsten Wiegandt said, “We extend our sincere thanks to all the partners involved that organised this successful annual competition.”



Dubai chefs together reinvent the cheeseburger

As part of a campaign launched by the French Dairy Board and the European Union, a quartet of Dubai chefs, authors and bloggers visited New York City to undertake various workshops and masterclasses to replicate the original cheeseburger recipe, using a key ingredient, European Cheese. As part of the four-day cheeseburger journey, chefs including Chef Mohamed Chab-

choul from the Grand Millennium Business Bay; Dalia Dogmoch Soubra, renowned chef and blogger; Zahra Abdalla, TV personality and food blogger; and Tiffany Eslick, editor at Spinneys magazine UAE, met with several of New York City’s leading chefs to learn the secrets of how to make the mouth-watering dish, a staple of the New York dining scene.

As part of the programme, each chef was given insights into cheese pairing, courtesy of the French Cheese Board, while also being provided with the basics of making the perfect cheeseburger by Chef Stephen Parker at Black Tap Midtown.

In addition, award-winning chef Harold Moore from the Charlie Palmer Steak Restaurant advised on creating a gourmet

cheeseburger before a culinary tour of the city explained the history and heritage of the burger.

Marie-Laure Martin, international project manager from the French Dairy Board, said, “The cheeseburger is an institution in America - with almost a century of experience creating cheeseburgers, there is no one better to bestow the secrets of how to make it so tasty.

As part of this programme, we wanted to combine our French cheesemaking expertise with that of American chefs and create the perfect cheeseburger!”

Each of the chefs created their unique cheeseburger recipes, adding a Middle Eastern twist to the original recipes, which will shortly be available in their respective restaurants and blogs for anyone to try.

Special deal on Mitsubishi Xpander High-Line offered

To welcome in the new year, General Automotive Company (GAC), the official distributor of Mitsubishi vehicles in Oman, has announced a new special deal on the Mitsubishi Xpander High-Line.

Under the new deal, this versatile 7-seat vehicle will be available at an all-time low price of RO6,995.

This price is not only inclusive of VAT but also includes six years unlimited mileage warranty and roadside assistance, a press release said.

Commenting on the Xpander, Manoj Ranade, general manager of GAC, "The Xpander is quite easily one of the most versatile vehicles in our model line-up, offering practicality, space, and all-round capabilities of an SUV with high ground clearance, together with the ride, comfort and control of a sedan.

Thanks to this New Year Deal, customers can now take home this amazing multi-purpose vehicle at such an attractive price. However, we highly encourage anyone interested in this deal to book their Xpander quickly as stocks are extremely limited and the current price is only valid on limited stocks."

The Xpandersports a futuris-



tic look inspired by the Montero Sport. It features a chrome upper grille and incorporates auto LED headlamps as well as LED positioning lamps, together with Mitsubishi Motors' Dynamic Shield signature look.

The stylish fenders and strong character line flow into the rear quarter and L-shaped rear combination lamps, which then extend into the tailgate, completing the Xpander's strong sculpted

look. On the inside, the Xpander features a spacious cabin designed to reflect Japanese hospitality "OMOTENASHI" and provides comfort for all seven adult passengers thanks to supportive seating, convenient amenities, and high-quality materials.

Power is provided by a spirited and responsive 1.5ltr 16-valve Dual overhead camshaft

engine with advanced MIVEC - Mitsubishi Innovative Valve timing Electronic Control system - making it easy for the Xpander to carry seven adults uphill with ease. Excellent ground clearance for its class provides confidence on rough or flooded roads, while the reinforced suspension, coupled with high-performance shock absorbers and a rigid and lightweight body, ensure stability and comfort.

Alizz Islamic Bank staff begin Etimad programme

Alizz Islamic Bank has enrolled a number of its staff in the National Leadership Development Programme (Etimad) which empowers Omanis in middle and upper management positions in the private sector with leadership skills.

The Etimad programme, which is considered a real turning point for private sector leaders in several vital fields, seeks to extend bridges and build trust between Omani leaders and private sector companies. The well-established programme cooperates with international consultancies and well-known local partners to offer high-quality outputs that reflect a sense of national responsibility, and provide growth opportunities to all parties, whether citizens who receive training, companies that support their human resources with competent Omani leaders or the community that benefits from better job opportunities and private sector capabilities, a press release said.

Etimad aims to train and empower 10,000 Omanis in middle and senior management positions in the private sector over the next few years. However, the programme initially targeted 500 applicants from a number of private sector companies to join a training programme that would last from three to six months.



AIL AL SHAIBANI AMAL AL RAWAHI AHMED AL AAM



NADIRA AAL SAID MANAL AL RAISSI HAMIDA AL SHID

Registration in this stage was exclusively open for companies classified as Excellent, First and International with a workforce exceeding 500 employees to ensure future career paths for graduates of the programme and to increase the percentage of Omanis in middle and senior management positions in the private sector.

Commenting on the enrollment of some of the bank's staff in the Etimad Programme, Mohamed al Balushi head of Human Resources at Alizz Islamic Bank, said, "We are committed to em-

powering our young Omani employees to take the lead in the future, whether in Alizz Islamic Bank or other institutions. We urge the employees that were honoured with being selected to do their best to acquire the necessary skills and fulfil the expected objectives.

"In addition, we will offer them the necessary support and will equip them with the appropriate tools, as a true leader doesn't tell the employee what to do, but rather shows him/her how to do it. I would like to thank those in charge of the programme."

NBO continues to promote many cashless initiatives

National Bank of Oman (NBO) has been on the journey towards cashless for a number of years and, in support of Oman's 2040 Vision to promote nationwide digitalisation, its ever-growing portfolio of smart solutions are helping individuals and businesses alike make the switch.

From QR Codes to mobile wallets, biometrics and NRI (instant remittance), it is tapping into the world's leading technologies, while its cards offer an ever-expanding range of benefits and rewards that not only exceed its customers' expectations but genuinely improve their lives, a press release said.

"Oman is fast moving towards becoming a cashless society, bolstered by the government's recent mandate for private sector businesses to start switching to cashless payment channels. The use of cards has been on an upward trajectory for a while and now digital payment modes are also expected to double in popularity by next year, having skyrocketed during the pandemic"



Maha Saud al Raisi

said Maha Saud al Raisi, AGM, head of Retail Products at NBO. "As we carry this momentum forward, we are ensuring that we are equipped to cater to future demands and at the same time, offer our customers a wholly modern banking experience."

As part of its efforts, NBO has made several additions to its mobile banking app such as a digital remittance service, and a cardless cash service that utilises QR codes for ATM withdrawals. Savvy customers can also take advantage of its

multi-purpose banking kiosk, which enables customers to renew and print out their cards on the spot. More recently, it launched the first-of-its-kind Merchant App to help businesses moving away from cash. The app allows merchants to receive payments simply by scanning a QR Code on the customer's mobile phone, or even remotely by raising a Static QR Code, which will be sent to the customer via email or WhatsApp. They can then log into the app, add the amount, and pay.



Oman Air Granted 'Airline Retailing Maturity' status

Oman Air, the national airline of the Sultanate of Oman, announced that it has been granted 'Airline Retailing Maturity' status under IATA's ARM Index Programme.

The certification recognises that Oman Air uses Shop/Order capabilities compliant with the standard Enhanced and Simplified Distribution message schema, version 18.2 and the ARM index Capabilities Verification Guidance, a press release said.

Commenting on the certification, Umesh Chhiber, senior vice president, Revenue Management, Pricing and Distribution, at

Oman Air, said, "Receiving this status is a proud moment for Oman Air as we now join the first few airlines to have attained the ARM Index certification. Airline retailing has been one of the biggest industry disruptors in recent years and Oman Air is working towards developing additional enhanced retailing capabilities on our NDC channel. These new capabilities, once developed and verified by IATA, will be published in our ARM Index Registry."

Oman Air's new strategy is focused on becoming an omnichannel airline that gives its customers the freedom to choose

when and how they interact with the airline.

"As a customer-centric airline, Oman Air is committed to providing greater freedom of choice to our customers," Chhiber said, adding, "This is irrespective of whether or not they choose traditional GDS distribution channels, OTAs, aggregators or the cost-optimal NDC Channel, which will help Oman Air reduce its distribution costs significantly. I commend IATA and other airlines who alongside Oman Air are fully committed to the NDC journey by offering more freedom of choice to the customer."



Rejoy Penacerrada

Medlab ME to educate blood donors during the pandemic

Research from the World Health Organisation (WHO) states that, blood donations were reduced by between 20 - 30% globally during the initial onset of the pandemic.

Addressing this decline and educating donors on safe practices will be a key theme of Medlab Middle East when it returns to the Dubai World Trade Centre from January 24 - 27, a press release said.

The importance of continued blood donation in a safe environment was highlighted by the recent announcement by the Red Cross, declaring a national blood crisis in the US due to declining blood drives across the country. The organisation, which provides 40% of the United States' blood, has had less than a one-day surplus of critical blood types and has limited blood product distributions to hospitals.

As part of Medlab Middle East's Blood Transfusion Medicine Conference, which takes place live and in person on January 27, discussions will centre on topics including donor eligibility criteria with vaccinated and non-vaccinated individuals, the challenges of finding donors, etc.

Rejoy Penacerrada, Conference Director for Informa Markets, said, "The onset of COVID-19, and the impact of the various variants associated with the pandemic, has severely impacted blood donations across many countries."

GCC's internet users soar over 98 per cent

GCC countries achieved significant shifts in ICT use during the past two decades, making a huge difference in the services provided to users as they advance their digital infrastructure, according to the GCC ICT Use Index 2021.

This report, recently released by Orient Planet Research (OPR), an independent unit of Orient Planet Group (OPG), in collaboration with independent researcher and information and communications technology (ICT) expert Abdul Kader al Kamli, stated that GCC countries had strengthened their leading position at both regional and international levels with an increase of more than 98 per cent of internet users in 2021 and regional mobile subscribers now accounting for 137.66 per cent of its total population.

According to the report, the continuous entry of more private mobile service providers to the region has accelerated the rapid development of ICT services in the GCC countries, leading to a significant increase in users. Further, the region's ICT development has helped strengthen its digital economy, enhanced the level of productivity and competitiveness, and created new methods to ensure direct access to



Nidal Abou Zaki

the government e-Services, while keeping pace with the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT).

Nidal Abou Zaki, managing



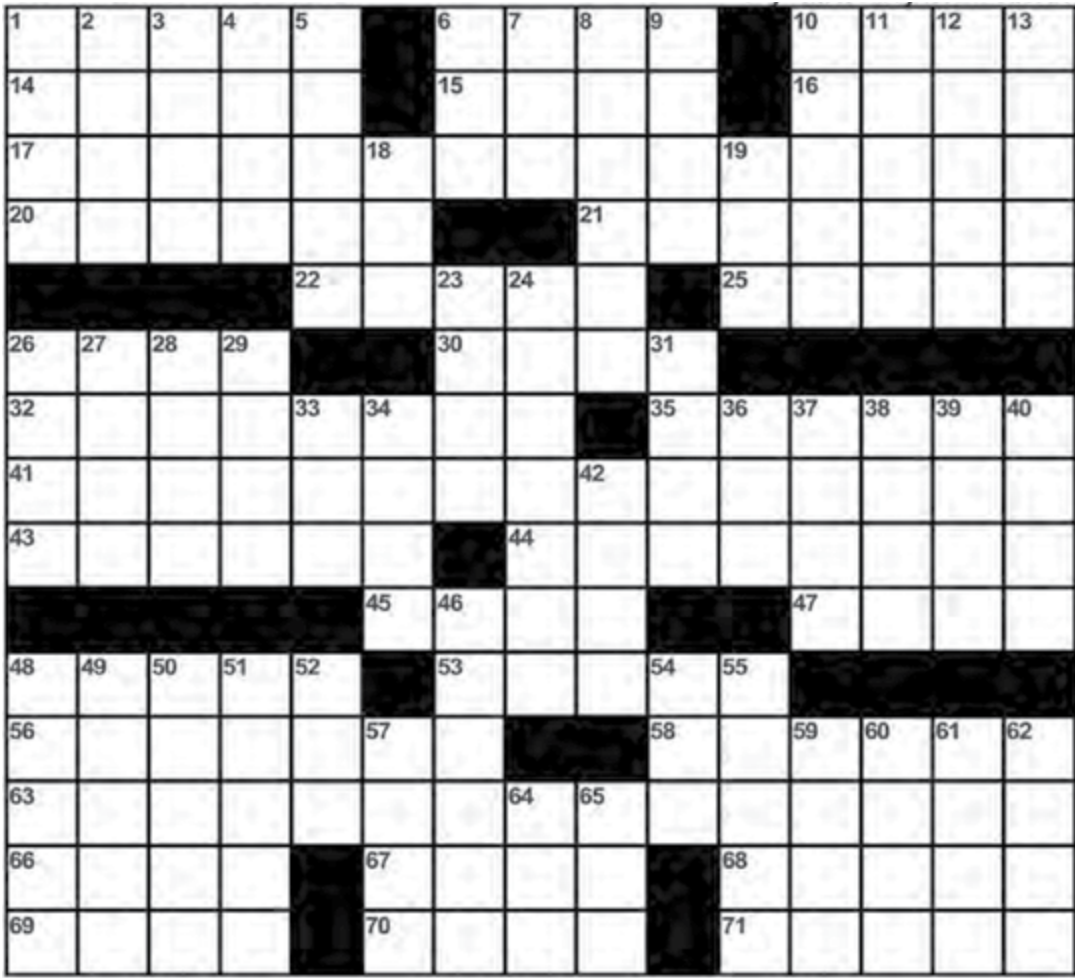
Abdul Kader al Kamli

director, OPR, said, "The GCC countries have an advanced ICT infrastructure, making them highly competitive at the regional and global levels. Their robust digital transformation efforts and

high scores in key ICT indicators show that the region is well-equipped to adapt to the changes brought about by the global ICT revolution that has been taking place since the 1990s. Moreover, the progress made in terms of the wide use of ICT created a positive impact on enhancing the lifestyle of citizens, strengthening the role of the digital economy, and positioning the Gulf countries as global ICT leaders, backed by a vision to keep pace with future developments and the implementation of economic diversification strategies for a post-oil era."

Abou Zaki emphasized that the GCC countries are determined to accelerate their digital transformation and provide 100 per cent digital government services to the public. He added that the GCC region continues its efforts to offer digital government services which are shaping the future of governments and are utilising the full potentials of the digital economy whether at the level of individuals, companies, or governments. These services enable the seamless exchange of data and information, increase productivity, boost competitiveness, and enhance human capacity development.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Sparkly headgear
6) City map
10) Acknowledges ap-
plause
14) Pugilist
15) "No... luck!"
16) By mouth
17) Three types of cheese
20) Congregation leader
21) Built, as a house
22) Civil Rights gp. since
1909
25) Game with kings and
queens
26) Off-white hue
30)_tat-tat
32) Frees
35) "... Know?" (trivia
heading)
41) Three types of cheese
43) Mexican nap
44) Wrote, as a novel
45) Bachelor homes of
old
4 7) "Why are hard on
ourselves?"
48) Woodworking
grooves

53) Recovery prog.
56) Snobbish quality
58) Worst, needwise
63) Three types of
cheese
66) Hathaway or Archer
of
Hollywood
67) Film projector need
68) Feeling of boredom
69) Use a branding iron
70) Catchall abbr.
71) Gridiron opponents

DOWN

1) Baker's meas.
2) Corn Belt state
3) X or Y line
4) It is what's left
5) Heated felony?
6) "... Love You" (Beatles
tune)
7) Carry laboriously
8) Receive willingly
9) Odin's thunderous son
10) Mess up
11) Publicly hold forth
12) Many are minimum
at McDonald's
13) Goes downhill in the

winter
18) Women's undergar-
ment
19) Sleuth, in potboilers
23) Plane surface
24) Fall like Niagara's
waters
26) "The Lord of the
Rings" soldiers
27) First name in the
"Frasier" cast
28) Opposite of
aweather
29) Expansive pastures
31) Just_ on the map
33) Quantity (Abbr.)
34) _ , Crackle and Pop
36) "Sort of" ending
37) Arab ship with a tri-
angular sail
38) Easily handled, as a
ship
39) Mined rocks
40) Sweeping hairstyle
42) " Be quiet!"
46) Band on a sleeve
48) French Impressionist
Edgar
49) Companionless
50) "Candle in the Wind"
princess
51) Weasel kin
52) Card in a mobile

phone
54) Do the math, in a
way
55) Fancy bathroom fix-
ture
57) Dehydrated, as land
59) Ancient alphabet
character

60) Europe's largest
lava-spewer
61) Undesirable thing on
ponds
62) What you're looking
at
64) Lipton product
65) 90-degree angle

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

No one ever accused you of being shy or unwilling to speak your mind or let everyone nearby know exactly how you arrived at the opinions you express. This is you being true to your self and others around you. You're showing the world how it's done right now, but as usual you're doing it so charmingly that not only does no one mind, they're actually gathered around wishing they had more time.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

If only you could foretell the future! That way, you would know which cause or opportunity needed the bulk of your attention right now. But since you don't have a crystal ball, you'll have to deal with this indecisive phase in another, more logical way. Ask the people you trust what they would do if they were in your shoes and why. You'll gain some valuable insight.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

It's definitely time for you to stop working on behalf of others, daydreaming about what you'd rather doing with your life, or helping your friends get their plans off the ground. Give more time for yourself. You need to get out there, meet the new people you're sure to run into, and get ready for a long run of that special brand of good fortune you're so famous for. One you set your course, you will definitely rise above all others.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You may not literally hit the jackpot, but it's still hard to beat the streak of good luck that is coming your way. It's not just in one area of your life either. You can expect good fortune in love, money, and your career path. You do need to be careful about signing anything irrevocable for the time being. Just enjoy your run of luck and keep watching. All good things are worth the wait. It's going to be an extraordinary day.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

For most of the day, things should move along quite well for you, especially with a certain work project you've been dealing with constantly, long after quitting time. Your attention to detail should see you through it all, so keep an eye on every single tree in that legendary forest. Don't let petty power struggles interfere with your sense of accomplishment when all is said and done.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

If you thought the recent turn of events was crazy and a burden on your tight schedule, expect today to be even more so. The good news is that these days are also quite delightful, so much so that you might rethink the importance of sticking to the same schedule day in and day out. Once you've taken a walk on the wild side, it can become incredibly enticing to keep on walking.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You're at your very best when dealing with conversation, communication, and travel, all of which could be in play today. Your energy flow should help you quite a bit when dealing with other people in almost any way. Expect every encounter and conversation to be informative, perfectly timed, and quite welcome. Get up as early as you can to enjoy every moment. You are going to shine at every moment of the day.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Though some believe otherwise, balance by itself isn't what you crave the most. In fact, you often find yourself enjoying extremely unbalanced situations (and people) for a time. Restoring balance is what you're best at, a talent you'd never have picked up if you weren't constantly moving back and forth between one and the other. Today's power struggles don't bother you nearly as much as others might fear.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

When the going gets a little bit tough today, just reach out to your friends. They might not be able to directly help you with whatever issue is vexing you, but they'll at least be able to make you smile. Your thoughts have been taking you to some depressing places lately, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. Happiness and sadness are both important parts of life. Try to face all challenges with a smiling face.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Just one thing can be counted on in your world today: Nothing you've planned, not even to the smallest detail, turns out as you'd imagined it. That's even more true for some secret relationship you've been monitoring from a distance. If you can't stand it any more and you must spill the beans, choose the one person you're completely sure you can trust. You will get some relief after sharing this heavy burden of a secret with that one person.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

When it comes to emotional closeness, you're absolutely without parallel. You can make almost anyone feel quickly comfortable, whether it's through conversation or a spontaneous hug. Right now, though, before you get a chance to work your magic, you need to let a recent conflict go. If you can do so, the rest should almost take care of itself. Holding grudges will not help in bonding with family and friends.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You're getting more in sync with the world around you, and you'll probably start to feel the need to be socially useful, to be with people you don't see often, and to deal with controversial or serious issues. Listening to your serious side doesn't mean you're losing your ability to have fun, though. This is a temporary phase that will teach you a lot about how to relate to others.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Thomas Cup is associated with

 - a. badminton
 - b. billiards
 - c. lawn tennis
 - d. table tennis
2. Vitamin B12 is most useful for combating

 - a. anemia
 - b. goitre
 - c. night blindness
 - d. rickets
3. To prevent loss of weight plants reduce transpiration by

 - a. shedding of leaves
 - b. reducing the size of leaves
 - c. developing hair around stomata
 - d. All of the above

Answers: 1. a 2. a 3. d

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

E	T	R	N
J	O	A	S
K	E	R	E
S	C	R	S

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

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

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

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

Iran arrests Khamenei niece for praising shah's widow: Activists

Paris, France - Iran has arrested a niece of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, her brother and activists said, months after she took part in a celebration praising the widow of the ousted shah.

Farideh Moradkhani, who has gained prominence as an anti-death penalty activist, was detained by security forces on Thursday, her brother Mahmoud Moradkhani told London-based Iran International TV on Sunday.

"We are very worried, we did not have news... we now know she is in Evin prison" in Tehran and under the control of the ministry of intelligence, he said.

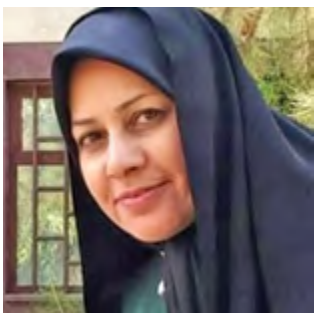
The Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) said she was arrested on her way home and security forces then proceeded to search her house and confiscated her belongings.

It said she is now in the notorious section 209 of Evin which is run by the ministry of intelligence. There were no details over why Moradkhani, the daughter of Khamenei's sister, had been suddenly arrested.

However social media users pointed to a recent appearance in October 2021 on video conference where Moradkhani lavishly praised Farah Diba, the widow of shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi who was ousted by the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Moradkhani addressed the



Farideh Moradkhani, the daughter of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's (top) sister, has been arrested months after she took part in a celebration praising the widow of the ousted shah (AFP)



Farideh Moradkhani (Twitter)

former empress, who was known as the shahbanu during her husband's rule, as 'dear

Moradkhani was arrested on her way home and security forces then proceeded to search her house and confiscated her belongings. She is now in notorious section 209 of Evin which is run by the ministry of intelligence

HRANA

queen' and called for her to return to the country to lead a 're-birth' of Iranian culture. The

video conference was held to mark the 83rd birthday of Farah, who is now based in France.

Moradkhani is the daughter of Khamenei's sister Badri who fell out with her family in the 1980s and fled to Iraq as the peak of the war with Iran's neighbour, to join her husband, the dissident cleric Ali Tehrani who was born Ali Moradkhani Arangeh. Khamenei has three brothers while one of his sons Mojtaba, is believed to be one of the most powerful figures in Iran due to his work at the office of the supreme leader. AFP

Iran sentences 'boxing champ' to death for role in 2019 protests

Paris, France - Iran has sentenced to death a local boxing champion over his role in 2019 protests, activists said, expressing fear that another athlete risks execution after a wrestler was put to death.

The death sentence issued against Mohammad Javad Vafaei-Sani comes just over a year after the execution of wrestling champion Navid Afkari in September 2020, which prompted an international outcry and calls for Iran to be barred from sporting events.

The Norway-based Iran Human Rights (IHR) NGO said that Vafaei-Sani (26) was sentenced to death after being convicted of arson and destruction of government buildings.

He had been detained in February 2020 and one of the charges against him was taking part in protests on November 2019 sparked by a sudden fuel price rise, it said.

His lawyer Babak Paknia confirmed the verdict on Twitter and announced plans to appeal to the supreme court.

IHR described Vafaei-Sani as a 'champion' boxer in the eastern city of Mashhad where he was currently being held.

Social media users urged the authorities to save his life, with the hashtag #SaveMohammadJavad trending on Twitter.

The exiled National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the political wing of the People's Mujahedin (MEK) opposition group, both outlawed in Iran, said in a statement that the charges against him included supporting the MEK.

It described him as a junior boxing champion.

Navid Afkari, a 27-year-old wrestler who had won national competitions, was hanged in September 2020 in the southern city of Shiraz after being convicted of committing murder during protests that rocked the city two years before.



Mohammad J Vafaei-Sani

Vafaei-Sani was sentenced to death after being convicted of arson and destruction of government buildings. He had been detained in February 2020 and one of the charges was taking part in 2019 protests

IRAN HUMAN RIGHTS

Vafaei-Sani had complained of being tortured into confessing, with methods that included beating and having alcohol squirted up his nose.

His brothers Habib and Vahid meanwhile remain in jail in solitary confinement, according to activists.

The United for Navid group of his supporters has called on USA Wrestling to cancel a planned invitation next month for Iranian wrestlers to take part in a friendly match.

Iran executes more people annually than any nation other than China and activists have expressed concern that the numbers hanged appeared to have increased again in 2021 after a recent downward trend.

AFP

Turkish activist trial resumes ahead of European deadline

Istanbul, Turkey - Western diplomats packed a Turkish courtroom on Monday to observe the latest stage of a trial of a civil society leader whose detention has set off a confrontation with Europe's top human rights body.

Businessman and philanthropist Osman Kavala, who has been held without conviction since October 2017, has become a symbol to supporters of the purges President Recep Tayyip Erdogan unleashed after surviving a coup attempt in 2016.

The Turkish leader accuses the 64-year-old of financing a wave of 2013 anti-government protests and playing a role in the coup plot.

An appeal in October last



Businessman and philanthropist Osman Kavala

year from 10 Western countries - including the United States and major European powers - for Turkey to release Kavala stirred up a diplomatic standoff that nearly saw Ankara expel their ambassadors.

The Council of Europe has

given Turkey until Wednesday to either free Kavala or 'submit in concise form' its justification for detaining him.

The Strasbourg-based rights body could decide on February 2 to move ahead with rare disciplinary proceedings against Ankara.

An AFP reporter in court on Monday saw diplomats representing the European Union and nine Western countries attend the latest stage of the marathon trial in Istanbul.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) first ordered Kavala's release in 2019, saying that he was being held to silence his defence of human rights.

Ankara's failure to comply with Wednesday's deadline could see the Council decide to send the case back for further action to the ECHR.

The lengthy infringement procedure could ultimately see Turkey lose its voting rights or even get kicked out of the pan-European rights body it first

joined in 1950.

Turkey's Foreign Ministry said it views the Council's actions - only launched once before against any of its 47 member states - as 'interference' in domestic Turkish affairs.

But government critics say Turkey's standoff with the body underscores the profound erosion of human rights under Erdogan's two-decade rule.

Human Rights Watch last week warned that Erdogan 'has set back Turkey's human rights record by decades', highlighting the country's withdrawal last year from a convention protecting women against domestic violence and singling out Kavala's case.

AFP

Gaza TV studio produces Hamas response to Israeli hit shows

Gaza City, Palestinian Territories - In a Gaza TV studio of the ruling Islamist movement Hamas, a set features Israeli flags, Hebrew documents and a portrait of Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism.

The make-believe office of enemy state Israel's security service is being used to shoot a 'pro-resistance' television series on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It is Hamas' answer to Israeli hit shows such as the special forces drama *Fauda* that have gained millions of viewers on platforms such as Netflix, HBO and Apple TV+.

Fauda, which in Arabic means chaos, portrays a military unit led by commander Doron Kavillio that launches raids inside Palestinian territories.

Admitting to having watched *Fauda*, though, is not a good idea in Gaza, the Palestinian coastal enclave blockaded by Israel, said local director Mohammed Soraya.

To watch any Israeli TV series means supporting the 'normalisation' of relations with the Jewish state, argued Soraya, who is directing Hamas' own TV series

on the conflict.

He charged that such shows 'support the Zionist occupation' because their plots 'criminalise the Palestinian people', speaking with AFP in the Gaza City studio.

"We want to flip the equation, to show the Palestinian point of view, to broadcast a drama about the spirit of our resistance."

Hamas controls the Gaza Strip, an impoverished territory of 2.3mn people.

It also runs the Al-Aqsa channel, and has been investing in series inspired by Hollywood, and by Turkish soap operas that are popular across the Middle East.

'Fist of the Free'

The series now in production, *Qabdat al-Ahrar* (Fist of the Free), revisits a 2018 Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip that resulted in the deaths of seven Hamas fighters and an Israeli officer.

The protagonists are the fighters of Hamas, which has fought four wars against the Jewish state since 2008.

Budgets are meagre, actors' salaries are low, sets are basic and deadlines are tight, with the production team expected to de-



Palestinian actors and crew shoot a scene of *Qabdat al-Ahrar*, in Gaza City last week (AFP)

liver some 30 episodes by April, in time for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

While Israeli series often feature local actors from the country's Arab-Israeli minority, produc-

tions in Gaza do not use any Israeli actors.

This forces studios to recruit local actors to play Israelis - a job that, the performers say, can expose them to real-world hostility

and danger.

One of them is Jawad Harouda, aged in his early sixties and with a husky voice, who portrays the head of Israel's Shin Bet domestic security service in the

new TV series.

To get into character, Harouda said he 'soaked up the script', but added that being too convincing can lead to trouble.

"Some women look at me and pray that I die," he said, leaning back in his boss' chair in the fake Shin Bet office.

"I'm happy when people insult me. It means I've succeeded ... The actor is a chameleon, he must be able to act out all colours."

'No love'

In Gaza productions, Israeli characters speak in Arabic. And, at the request of the Hamas mufti, or Islamic jurist, women wear their headscarves even if they play Jewish characters.

"In one series, I played a Jewish woman," said one actress, Kamila Fadel, who added that she may have been just a little too convincing for her own good.

"After the series was broadcast, a woman tried to strangle me," she recounted.

"She told me: 'I hate you, you are hurting us so much'. On another day a 13-year-old boy

threw a stone at my head thinking I was Jewish... This means I played my part well."

Not everyone is a fan of the Hamas productions, which are firmly focused on the conflict.

"There is no love" in the dramas, argued Palestinian director and critic Jamal Abu Alqumsan, who expressed regret that the rare local productions served primarily as a 'tool of resistance'.

Abu Alqumsan said the potential for such productions to tell Palestinians' stories was huge, but the challenges were many.

"In Gaza, we live under a blockade, it's a unique situation in the world," he said, speaking in his art gallery, which he hopes to turn into a small film library.

"So we need producers to invest in quality series and tell the rest of the world our story. We have good actors, they just need good directors and means."

For now, Abu Alqumsan said he was unsure of the impact such shows would have.

"TV dramas are a weapon, but in the face of Israel, local productions are of a low level," he said.

AFP

Millions hunker down as storm hits eastern US

The winter storm hit with heavy snow and ice knocking power out for approx 190,000 customers

Washington, US - Millions of Americans hunkered down as a major winter storm hit the eastern United States with heavy snow and ice knocking power out for an estimated 190,000 customers as of early Monday.

The National Weather Service (NWS) said the storm was bringing a miserable combination of heavy snow, freezing rain and high winds, impacting the southeast and coastal mid-Atlantic before moving up to New England and southern Canada.

A swath from the upper Ohio Valley north to the lower Great Lakes region could expect more than 30cm of snow on Monday, it warned.

‘Heavy snow and ice accumulations are likely to produce hazardous travel, downed trees, and power outages through Monday for portions of the eastern US,’ it said.

In all, more than 80mn people fell under the winter weather alerts, US media reported.

About 190,000 customers were without power early on Monday, according to the website PowerOutage.US.

The storm spawned damaging tornadoes in Florida and flooding in coastal areas, while in the Carolinas and up through the Appalachians icy conditions and



Pedestrians cross a street as motorists drive through the snow in Greenville, South Carolina on Sunday (AFP)

blustery winds raised concerns.

Transport was seriously disrupted, with thousands of flights canceled, and a portion of busy interstate highway I-95 closed in North Carolina.

More than 3,000 flights

within, into or out of the United States were canceled on Sunday.

Charlotte Douglas International Airport in North Carolina was the worst-affected with 1,200 flights, or more than 90 per cent of its scheduled serv-

ices, cancelled, according to the FlightAware website. A further 1,200 flights nationwide had been cancelled early on Monday.

Drivers were warned of hazardous road conditions and major travel headaches from

Arkansas in the south all the way up to Maine, on the Canadian border.

State of emergency

Georgia Governor Brian Kemp had declared a state of emer-

The storm was bringing miserable combination of heavy snow, freezing rain and high winds, impacting the southeast and coastal mid-Atlantic before moving up to New England and southern Canada

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

gency on Friday, and snowplows were at work before noon on Sunday to clear the roads.

Virginia and North Carolina also declared states of emergency. More than 35cm of snow had fallen in parts of North Carolina by late Sunday night, the NWS tweeted, with areas of Georgia and Tennessee also seeing 25-28cm.

Virginia State Police said on Twitter they had responded to almost 1,000 crashes and disabled vehicles on Sunday.

“Mostly vehicle damage. No

reported traffic deaths,” the force said.

A ‘multi-vehicle backup’, along with minor crashes, had earlier stopped traffic on a major interstate in the southern part of the state.

North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper said on Twitter that up to a foot of snow had fallen in some areas by midday, and that ‘significant icing is causing trouble in the Central part of the state’ as he reminded people to stay inside and avoid travel if possible.

Also in North Carolina, students were shaken up after the storm caused the roof of a college residence hall to collapse, according to a local ABC news station, though no one was hurt.

“Very scary,” Brevard College sophomore Melody Ferguson told the station. “I’m still shaking to this moment.”

The NWS even reported some snow flurries in Pensacola, Florida, while usually mild Atlanta, Georgia also saw snow.

The northeastern United States already experienced snow chaos earlier this month. When a storm blanketed the northeast, hundreds of motorists were stuck for more than 24hrs on the I-95, a major highway linking to the capital Washington.

AFP

Texas hostage-taker named as British citizen; two held

Colleyville, US - The man who held four people hostage at a Texas synagogue was identified by US authorities as a British citizen on Sunday, while UK police later arrested two teens over an attack that President Joe Biden called an ‘act of terror’.

The captor, who died in the 10-hour siege in the small town of Colleyville on Saturday, was named by the FBI as 44-year-old Malik Faisal Akram.

Hours later, Britain’s counter-terrorism police arrested two people and were questioning them in connection with the incident.

‘Two teenagers were detained in South Manchester this evening. They remain in custody,’ the Greater Manchester Police said in a statement.

The FBI’s field office in Dallas had earlier said there was ‘no indication’ that anyone else was involved in the attack on the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue. The four hostages - including a respected local rabbi, Charlie Cytron-Walker - were all freed unharmed on Saturday night, prompting relief in the United States, where the Jewish community and Biden renewed calls to fight anti-Semitism.

‘There is no question that this was a traumatic experience,’ Cytron-Walker said in a statement on Sunday. ‘We are resilient and we will recover’.

A man identifying himself as Akram’s brother Gulbar said in a Facebook post that the suspect had suffered from mental health problems.

“We would like to say that we as a family do not condone any of his actions and would like to sincerely apologise wholeheartedly to all the victims involved in the unfortunate incident,” Gulbar said in the post to a Muslim community Facebook page in Blackburn, in northwest England - where British police said Akram was from.

Biden declined to speculate on the motive but appeared to confirm reports that the hostage-taker was seeking the release of convicted terrorist Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist known as ‘Lady Al-Qaeda’.



Joe Biden speaks about the hostage incident at a synagogue in Texas, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on Sunday (AFP)

‘This was an act of terror’ committed by an assailant who apparently ‘insisted on the release of someone who’s been in prison for over 10 years’, Biden told reporters during a visit to a hunger relief organisation in Philadelphia.

Britain’s foreign minister Liz Truss likewise on Sunday condemned the hostage-taking as an ‘act of terrorism and anti-Semitism’.

Siddiqui, the first woman to be suspected by the United States of links to Al-Qaeda and a cause celebre in Pakistan and in South Asian circles, was detained in Afghanistan in 2008.

Two years later she was sentenced by a New York court to 86 years in prison for the attempted murder of US officers in Afghanistan. She is being held at a prison in Fort Worth, Texas - about 32km from the synagogue which Akram attacked.

Siddiqui’s lawyer has said she ‘has absolutely no involvement’ in the hostage situation and condemned it. Any links she may have to Akram remained unclear.

FBI special agent Matthew DeSarno told reporters in Colleyville after the standoff that the investigation would ‘have global reach’. He said the suspect’s demands were ‘focused on one issue that was not specifically threatening to the Jewish community’. On late Sunday night, however, the FBI said the Jewish community had been targeted.

“This is a terrorism-related matter, in which the Jewish community was targeted, and is

being investigated by the Joint Terrorism Task Force,” the FBI statement said.

‘Belligerent and threatening’

Cytron-Walker in his statement credited his congregation’s previous security training from the FBI and others with their survival from a harrowing ordeal.

“In the last hour of our hostage crisis, the gunman became increasingly belligerent and threatening,” the rabbi said.

“Without the instruction we received, we would not have been prepared to act and flee when the situation presented itself.” At one point the standoff involved 200 local, state and federal law enforcement officers massed around Colleyville.

A Facebook livestream of the congregation’s Shabbat service appeared to capture audio of a man talking loudly, but did not show the scene inside the building. One hostage was freed early in the standoff.

Hours later, after what police said were extensive negotiations, an elite SWAT team burst into the synagogue and the remaining three hostages were freed.

Journalists nearby said they heard a loud bang - likely a flash-bang grenade used as a distraction - and shots.

The siege sparked an outpouring of concern from Jewish organisations. Biden pledged to ‘stand against anti-Semitism and against the rise of extremism in this country’.

AFP

Iranian diplomats in Saudi for Islamic bloc

Tehran, Iran - Iranian diplomats are in Saudi Arabia to start work at a global organisation representing Muslims, a first since the two rivals cut ties in 2016, Iran’s Foreign Ministry announced on Monday.

“The delegation is now in Jeddah to start its work at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation,” Foreign Ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh said in his weekly press conference.

This “can be a good prelude for the two sides to send delegations to visit their embassies,” he added.

Shiite-majority Iran and the Sunni Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are both members of the pan-Islamic body of 57 member states. The two regional rivals have so far held four rounds of



An Iranian delegation is in Jeddah to work at the OIC, said Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh (Anadolu Agency)

talks since April aimed at improving relations.

“We have given our written points of interest to the Saudi delegation at the fourth round of

negotiations in Baghdad and we are awaiting the responses,” Khatibzadeh stressed.

Riyadh and Tehran support opposite sides in several conflict

zones across the region including in Syria and Yemen.

In 2016, the kingdom’s execution of revered Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr saw protesters attack Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran. Riyadh responded at the time by cutting ties with Tehran, while OIC foreign ministers condemned the violence.

Khatibzadeh reiterated Iran’s position that Tehran is ‘ready to open its embassy’ but that depends on what ‘practical steps’ Saudi Arabia takes.

In December, foreign ministry officials in both countries said the kingdom had granted visas to three Iranian diplomats to the OIC. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation describes itself as the collective voice of the Muslim world.

AFP

Taliban stage show of strength with parade

Maymana, Afghanistan - Taliban fighters paraded through a northwest Afghan city in a show of strength at the weekend, days after reinforcements were sent to quell unrest over the detention of a popular commander.

Protests erupted last week in Maymana, capital of Faryab province, after an Uzbek Taliban commander was detained for alleged links to a kidnapping plot.

The unrest sparked fears of tensions between Uzbek and Pashtun civilians and Taliban fighters, with unconfirmed reports that members of both ethnic groups had been killed in isolated clashes.

“We deployed hundreds of forces from neighbouring provinces and the situation is under control now,” Latifullah Hakimi, a senior defence ministry official, told AFP at the weekend.

Sunday’s parade included columns of masked fighters clad in matching white shalwar kameez tunics, khaki combat vests, and headscarves inscribed with the Muslim declaration of faith.

Dozens more heavily armed fighters in jungle camouflage rode on the back of pick-up trucks and armoured vehicles,



Taliban fighters take part in a military street parade in Maymana, the capital of Faryab province on Sunday (AFP)

seized from Afghan government and US forces during the Taliban’s lightning-fast summer takeover.

Residents of Maymana lined the route, many stony-faced as they filmed the parade with their phone cameras.

“Two days ago the situation was not good because of the demonstration, but now the situation is normal,” said Rohullah, a 20-year-old shopkeeper.

“The only problem we have is that people don’t have jobs... but

they are very happy with the security.”

The show of force comes as Afghanistan’s new rulers struggle to evolve from an insurgency to a governing power in a country on the brink of economic collapse, with the United Nations estimating more than half the population is facing acute hunger.

Discipline among the rank and file - particularly in remote areas - is becoming a problem, with local commanders ignoring

edicts from Kabul or implementing orders to their own whim.

Promising a softer rule than their 1996-2001 regime, the Taliban have launched a commission to identify members flouting regulations - dismissing almost 3,000 people.

“We had a military parade in the city to assure the people that we will not let anyone interrupt security,” said Jaweed, a Maymana commander who like many goes by only one name.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

China virus cases highest in nearly two years as weeks left for Games

Beijing, China - The number of COVID-19 cases in China reached its highest level since March 2020 on Monday, as Beijing races to smother outbreaks just three weeks before hosting the Winter Olympics.

With growing fears about the highly-transmissible Omicron strain challenging China's stringent approach to virus control, a senior health official told residents of the capital to 'avoid buying goods from overseas' after saying a local case could have been infected by international post.

China, where the virus first emerged in late 2019, has stuck to a strict policy of targeting zero COVID cases even as the rest of the world has reopened.

But its approach has come under sustained pressure in recent weeks with multiple clusters in key cities just as the Games are about to get underway in Beijing.

On Monday there were 223 more cases reported, including another 80 in the virus-hit port city of Tianjin, and nine more - including cases of the highly



A medical worker takes a swab sample from a man at a market in Beijing on Monday (AFP)

transmissible Omicron variant - in the southern manufacturing hub of Guangdong.

Athletes and officials have already started to land in the capital ahead of the Games, immediately entering a tightly controlled bubble separating them from the rest of the popu-

lation. But after a local Omicron case was detected in Beijing over the weekend, authorities also tightened regulations for arrivals from elsewhere in China.

The city is now demanding a negative test before travel and a follow-up test after entering, with residents urged not to leave the capital for the upcoming Lunar New Year holiday.

Some tourist sites have also been closed.

Strain on economy

The infected woman in Beijing had not travelled or had contact with infected people, authorities

said, as they tested some 13,000 people living or working in the same area.

Health official Pang Xinghuo told reporters the virus had been found on the surface of a letter the infected person had received from Canada, as well as inside the unopened letter.

Dozens of letters from the same batch were tested, and five showed positive traces of COVID-19, she said, including samples from inside unopened letters.

The strain was different from Omicron cases in China, and similar to strains identified from North America last month, she added.

"We come to the conclusion that the possibility of virus infection through inbound objects cannot be ruled out," she said.

Therefore, residents should 'try to avoid buying goods from overseas during outbreaks'.

"If you receive overseas mail, you should wear masks and disposable gloves to reduce direct contact," she said, advising people to 'open the packages outdoors'.

Beijing's theory that the virus did not originate in China but was imported in frozen food was judged 'possible' but very unlikely in last year's report from World Health Organization-appointed international experts.

China has linked a number of its virus clusters to products imported from overseas. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US says on its website it is 'possible' for people to be infected through contact with contaminated surfaces or objects - but the risk is low.

Within three days, there should be a 99 per cent reduction of virus traces left on the surfaces.

Analysts have warned China's ongoing zero-COVID approach - which includes targeted lockdowns and travel restrictions - will increasingly weigh on the economy.

Another 68 cases were reported across central Henan province, where partial lockdowns and mass testing have been rolled out for millions of residents.

AFP

Paris attacks trial halted

Paris, France - The trial over the deadly November 2015 terror attacks in Paris has been suspended after a second suspect tested positive for COVID-19, sources close to the case told AFP on Monday.

Ali el Haddad Asufi, accused of helping prepare the massacres that killed 130 people, began showing symptoms at hearings last Friday, the presiding judge in the marathon trial Jean-Louis Peries, wrote to lawyers.

'That means the coming week is in jeopardy because a new test will not be carried out until Friday,' he wrote.

That would postpone key testimony expected from Salah Abdeslam, the only survivor among the 10 assailants who targeted the Stade de France stadium, the Batacran concert hall and several bars and restaurants in the capital on Friday November 13, 2015.

Abdeslam was scheduled to begin two days of questioning from Thursday.

He tested positive for COVID-19 at the end of December, delaying the hearings for several days.

Abdeslam's 10 co-defendants are answering charges ranging from providing logistical support to planning the attacks, as well as supplying weapons.

The trial is to last until May.

AFP

Malaysian Hindus mark Thaipusam fest under strict curbs

Kuala Lumpur - Malaysian Hindus carried offerings up hundreds of steps to a major temple on Monday to mark the annual *Thaipusam* festival in celebrations that were scaled back due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The event sees Hindus, a sizeable minority in multi-ethnic Malaysia, show their devotion to the deity Lord Murugan.

Hundreds headed to the Batu Caves temple complex outside Kuala Lumpur and walked barefoot up 272, multi-coloured steps to reach the site, carrying offerings such as milk pots.

But celebrations were muted



Hindu devotees perform a religious ritual ahead of the Thaipusam festival outside a temple in Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur on Monday (AFP)

compared with the years before the pandemic, when huge crowds would throng the site, with officials limiting numbers to cut the risk of COVID-19.

Once a common sight at *Thaipusam*, 'Kavadis' - ornate metal structures that devotees affix to their bodies with sharp metal spikes - were also banned this year.

Hindu devotee Krishnan Karuppan told AFP that he arrived at the temple before dawn.

"Many people are afraid (to come)," he said.

"My own children didn't

come - they're all at home."

Another worshipper at the temple, Ariyenthiran T Somasundram, added that 'to be on the safe side, it is better' to limit numbers.

But, he said, "I'm really sad... because the crowd of millions of people are not here".

Local media reported that authorities were limiting attendance at the temple to several thousand over *Thaipusam*, which officially falls on Tuesday.

Malaysia faced a serious coronavirus outbreak last year, and has reported more than 2.8mn cases and 31,000

Tonga cut off by volcanic blast; fears grow for coastal towns

Sydney, Australia - The Pacific Island nation of Tonga was virtually cut off from the rest of the world on Monday, after a massive volcanic blast that crippled communications and stalled emergency relief efforts.

It is two days since the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano exploded, cloaking Tonga in a film of ash, triggering a Pacific-wide tsunami and releasing shock waves that wrapped around the entire Earth.

But with phone lines still down and an undersea internet cable cut - and not expected to be repaired for weeks - the true toll of the dual eruption-tsunami disaster is not yet known.

Only fragments of information have filtered out via a handful of satellite phones on the islands, home to just over 100,000 people.

Tonga's worried neighbours are still scrambling to grasp the scale of the damage, which New Zealand's leader Jacinda Ardern said was believed to be 'significant'.

Both Wellington and Canberra scrambled reconnaissance planes on Monday in an attempt to get a sense of the damage from the air.

And both have put C-130 military transport aircraft on standby to drop emergency supplies or to land if runways are deemed operational and ash clouds allow.



People watch big waves in the breakwater in Venice beach in Los Angeles, California, where a tsunami advisory was in effect on Saturday (AFP)

There are initial reports that areas of the west coast may have been badly hit.

Australia's international development minister, Zed Seselja, said a small contingent of Australian police stationed in Tonga had delivered a 'pretty concerning' initial evaluation.

They were "able to do an assessment of some of the Western beaches area and there was some pretty significant damage

to things like roads and some houses," Seselja said.

"One of the good pieces of news is that I understand the airport has not suffered any significant damage," he added.

"That will be very, very important as the ash cloud clears and we are able to have flights coming into Tonga for humanitarian purposes."

Major aid agencies, who would usually rush in to provide

emergency humanitarian relief, said they were stuck in a holding pattern, unable to contact local staff.

"From what little updates we have, the scale of the devastation could be immense - especially for outlying islands," said Katie Greenwood, IFRC's Pacific Head of Delegation.

Even when relief efforts get under way, they may be complicated by COVID-19 entry restrictions.

Tonga only recently reported its first-ever coronavirus case.

'Immediate need'

What is known is that Saturday's volcanic blast was one of the largest recorded in decades, erupting 30km into the air and depositing ash, gas and acid rain across a swathe of the Pacific region.

The eruption was recorded

around the world and heard as far away as Alaska, triggering a tsunami that flooded Pacific coastlines from Japan to the United States.

The Tongan capital Nuku'alofa was estimated to be cloaked in 1-2cm of ash, potentially poisoning water supplies and causing breathing difficulties.

"We know water is an immediate need," New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told reporters. After speaking to the New Zealand embassy in Tonga, she described how boats and 'large boulders' washed ashore.

Wellington's defence minister said he understood the island nation had managed to restore power in 'large parts' of the city.

But communications were still cut. The eruption severed an undersea communications cable between Tonga and Fiji that operators said would take weeks to repair.

"We're getting sketchy information, but it looks like the cable has been cut," Southern Cross Cable Network's networks director Dean Veverka told AFP.

"It could take up to two weeks to get it repaired. The nearest cable-laying vessel is in Port Moresby," he added, referring to the Papua New Guinea capital more than 4,000km from Tonga.

Initially, it was believed the fault was due to power failure

following the powerful eruption, but further testing once power was restored indicated a break in the cable.

Tonga was isolated for two weeks in 2019 when a ship's anchor cut the cable.

A small, locally operated satellite service was set up to allow minimal contact with the outside world until the cable could be repaired.

'No communication'

Crippled communications left Tongans outside the country desperate for news of loved ones.

"There is no communication," Filipino Motulalo, a journalist with Pacific Media Network, told AFP.

"Our home is among those close to the area that was flooded already, so we don't know how much damage there is," Motulalo said many Tongans abroad were worried.

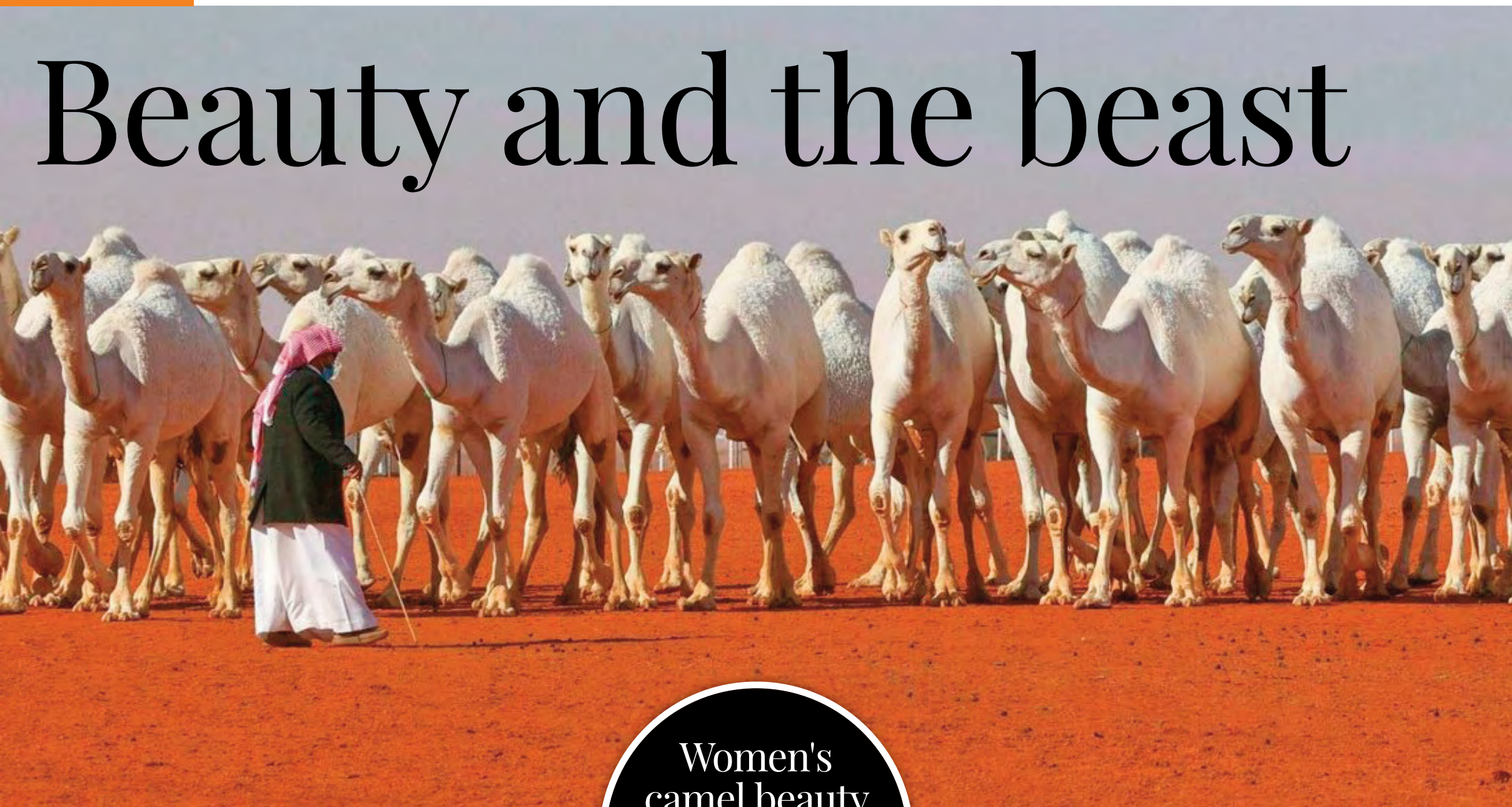
"I think the worst part is the blackout and the fact that we know nothing," he added.

Many fretted about elderly relatives coping in volcanic dust-filled air. New Zealand's Met Service said that a vast 'veil of ash' was now 'drifting westward across to northern Australia'.

Several airlines reported flight disruptions as a network of Volcanic Ash Advisory Centres issued an aviation 'code red'.

AFP

DROMEDARY



Women's camel beauty contest makes debut in Saudi

Saudi women, in a first for the conservative kingdom, have paraded their camels in a beauty pageant for the prized 'ships of the desert'. "I hope today to reach a certain social standing, inshallah (God willing)," said Lamia al-Rashidi, 27, who participated at the weekend contest in the Rumah desert north-east of the capital Riyadh. The event, part of the prestigious King Abdelaziz Festival, was previously a men-only affair.

"I've been interested in camels ever since I was little," said Rashidi, whose family owns 40 camels.

"Once this event was opened to women, I decided to participate," said the young woman, wearing a black face covering and with a colourful shawl over her shoulders.

The top five in the field of about 40 participants in the women's event went home with total prize money of one million riyals (about US\$260,000).

The camels' beauty is judged on several criteria, but the shape and size of the lips, neck and hump are the main attributes. In December, several participants were disqualified because their animals had undergone botox injections.

In a parade at the event on the red sand track of Rumah, women in black on horseback rode ahead of men in white robes on

camels as male musicians, some with swords, danced to the beat of drums.

The oil-rich Gulf state adheres to a rigid interpretation of Islam, but since the rise to power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2017, some restrictions on women have been lifted as the country opens up with sweeping reforms.

Saudi Arabia is seeking to diversify its



This will increase enthusiasm for the festival and increase the value of the camels

ENAD BIN SULTAN

economy away from oil, investing heavily in the tourism, entertainment and sports sectors.

The shift has enabled women to get behind the wheel and take part in mixed-gender settings, even as a rigorous crackdown on dissent remains in place.

"Women have always been an integral

part of Bedouin society. They owned and looked after camels," said Mohammed al-Harbi, a manager of the festival. Women's participation was in keeping with the historical heritage of Saudi Arabia, he said.

Munira al Mishkhas, another participant, chimed in, "Camels have been a part of us for a long time, but staging a contest for us (women) is a big step forward."

At just seven years old, Malath bint Enad was the youngest contestant and her animal won third prize. Her proud father, a 35-year-old camel dealer who said he owns more than 200 beasts, was very pleased with the entrance of women.

"This will increase enthusiasm for the festival and increase the value of the camels," said Enad bin Sultan, clad in traditional costume and red-and-white keffiyeh headress.

The 40-day festival, which kicked off last month, is an annual Bedouin event that lures breeders from across the Gulf with total prize money of up to US\$66mn.

AFP

Hot milk and grooming

With heated stalls and hot milk, life couldn't get more glamorous for Saudi Arabia's most beautiful camels when they stay at a luxury compound near Riyadh.

For 400 riyals (just over \$100) a night, the camels are trimmed, scrubbed and pampered before taking part in beauty contests, where millions of dollars are at stake.

The camels, many of which are rented, are checked closely for Botox and other illegal enhancements which could see them thrown out for cheating.

And it's all done in a Covid-safe environment to prevent any disruptive outbreaks.

The Tatman, described as the first hotel for camels, is an open-air desert compound near the annual King Abdelaziz Festival, which has prizes totalling US\$66.6mn. It's a logical step for the lucrative industry in the well-heeled Gulf, where camels are prized as a symbol of traditional life.

The animals are judged on attributes including their lips, necks, humps and colouring, and wins are highly prestigious for their owners.

Money is no object for some attending the festival, which features well-appointed buildings and tents in the middle of the desert, and booths for luxury car-makers Rolls-Royce and BMW.



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PARIS FASHION WEEK

PARIS DESPITE COVID

The city may still be deep in the throes of the Omicron surge and adapting to the latest COVID-19 restrictions, but Paris Fashion Week will nevertheless begin today (January 18).

The industry is determined to get back on the catwalks after nearly two years during which most brands were forced to retreat online.

Despite the complications caused by the pandemic, the fashion community is stepping out regardless. Most fashion houses are returning to live shows as the menswear week kicks off, followed immediately by haute couture shows.

Some 17 of the 76 brands of the official Paris menswear calendar - including big names like Dior, Hermes and Rick Owens - will be back on the catwalk, up from just six last summer.

And nearly 30 others are opting for other types of in-person event -- inviting journalists, buyers and other taste-makers to less formal gatherings around the French capital.

There will be a bittersweet taste to the first week, however, as Louis Vuitton presents the final collection from US designer Virgil Abloh, who died in November at the age of 41 after a private battle with cancer.

Such is the interest around Abloh, a close partner of Kanye West who helped break through glass ceilings for black designers, that Louis Vuitton is presenting the show twice on Thursday.

Many are also excited to see what streetwear veteran Nigo does as the new artistic director of Kenzo.

And there is hype, too, around French label Egonlab, launched two years ago with a series of arty videos and now making its first foray in the official calendar.

"To present your work alongside the big houses that influenced us - it does something to you," said co-founder Florentin Glemarec.

Nonetheless, like many fashion newcomers, Egonlab is embracing both the live and online worlds, with a line of NFTs and Metaverse dig-



EgonLab founders Florentin Glemarec and Kevin Nompex epitomise the new mix of physical and digital creations.

ital clothing that it is developing in partnership with footwear brand Crocs.

Caught in the crossfire

Haute couture designers are also returning to the catwalk, with 18 of 29 houses planning live shows - albeit with the now-common caveat that the virus might throw a last-minute spanner in the works.

Some changes have already been announced: the Sidaction charity evening to raise money for AIDS research, that traditionally marks the end of the haute couture week, has been postponed until July.

Giorgio Armani cancelled his menswear show in Milan and haute couture show in Paris over the latest surge in COVID-19 cases.

That decision sparked a sense of deja-vu as it was the 87-year-old Italian maestro who was first to cancel his catwalk shows in early 2020.

"It's their choice," said Pascal Morand, head of France's Federation for Haute Couture and Fashion. He said the federation makes several recommendations including the use of FFP2 masks, but he was happy to see brands returning to the live sphere.

"We have learned to live with the virus," he said. "Digital enriches the physical, but it can't replace the sensory side of the runway shows."

AFP

Paris fashion gets physical notwithstanding the Omicron surge and other social concerns



The menswear Fall/Winter 2022-2023 edition of Paris Fashion Week will be composed of 17 physical shows, 29 physical presentations and 30 digital-only events beginning on January 18.



Post-pandemic wardrobes

Fitted frock coats, bow ties and exuberant colours graced the runway as Dolce & Gabbana and Fendi both imagined more glamorous, post-pandemic wardrobes for their fall/winter collections at the Milan Men's Fashion Week.

Designer Silvia Venturini Fendi took inspiration from the 1920s dandy at her fashion house's show on Saturday, punctuating refinement with touches of eccentricity. Blazers were transformed into capes, knitwear featured sizeable chest cutouts and the accessories veered towards the flashy.

The collection also aimed for a more fluid interpretation of typically gendered clothes, with wide-leg pants ballooning into half-skirts.

"We women wear men's jackets, I do not see why they could not take inspiration from our wardrobe," said the designer, the granddaughter of the Italian fashion house's founders.

At Sicilian duo Dolce & Gabbana's show, casual and sartorial styles mixed in a celebration of returning to the great outdoors.

Tailored to appeal to a younger generation, the show featured rap and punk music orchestrated by Machine Gun Kelly.

Models wore loose-fitting coats with leopard or zebra prints, white suits embroidered with pearls or tight-fitting pants and tuxedos with wide shoulders and a cinched waist. Others were wrapped up in

thick, oversized down jackets in bold colours or eco-friendly furs, ready to face the winter cold during post-Covid excursions.

And like at Fendi, the skirt featured as part of the male wardrobe, with the designer duo citing young people's ability to choose their clothes freely, without worrying about gender.

Meanwhile, after Giorgio Armani announced its withdrawal, the number of physical shows was reduced from 23 to 16. Eighteen brands opted for a purely virtual presence, while others presented their collections by appointment. Still, those that went ahead, like Dsquared2 on Friday, embraced the return to the catwalk.

Zimbabwe hope to salvage pride despite early exit from AFCON

Douala, Cameroon - Zimbabwe are already eliminated from this year's Africa Cup of Nations even before their final group game against Guinea on Tuesday but the Warriors are hoping to sign off with an overdue victory at the tournament.

They also went out at the group stage in their last two appearances at the finals, in 2017 and in 2019, both times without registering a victory.

Indeed the Warriors have not won any of their last eight matches at the finals since a Benjamin Mwaruwari strike saw them defeat Ghana in Egypt in 2006, although even that was just a consolation victory and they have yet to reach the knockout phase.

"We are disappointed massively to be out of the tournament after two games," said defender Jordan Zemura of Bournemouth, who are currently competing for promotion to the English Premier League from the second-tier Championship.

Zimbabwe only lost to Africa's top-ranked team Senegal in their first Group B match to a Sadio Mane penalty in the seventh minute of injury time.

They then went in front in their second match against Malawi only to be pegged back and lose 2-1.

"In the first game we worked very hard and deserved something from it, but football doesn't always work like that, and then in

the second game it came down to being clinical, and unfortunately we weren't," added Zemura ahead of the meeting with Guinea in Yaounde. "To come away with a victory in the last game is the least we deserve."

The 22-year-old Zemura did not play against Senegal after arriving in Cameroon later than planned due to the COVID-19 situation at his club, and he then appeared off the bench against Malawi. Born in London to Zimbabwean parents, the promising full-back made his Warriors

We are disappointed massively to be out of the tournament after two games

JORDAN ZEMURA

debut in November 2020.

However, his hopes of establishing himself at international level have been hampered since then by the ongoing pandemic, while Zimbabwe also changed coach in September, with Norman Mapeza now at the helm.

"The squad have been brilliant with me and very welcoming. We all have the same goal, and it's special to share that same pride playing for your nation," said Zemura.

AFP



Zimbabwe's forward Tino Kadewere (left) fights for the ball with Malawi's midfielder Yamikani Chester during their Group B match, at Stade de Kouekong in Bafoussam (AFP)

Runner-up finish for Oman's Shonal

Round Four of UAE Rotax Max Challenge disrupted by rains

Muscat - Oman's Shonal Kunimal's excellent run in the ongoing 2021-22 UAE Rotax Max Challenge (RMC) continues as the ten-year-old finished second in the fourth round of the series at the Dubai Kartdrome on Sunday.

The two-day fourth round was disrupted by incessant rains with the organisers finally declaring the top-three finishers based on the performances of the day one action that comprised three heat races.

Shonal, a fifth-grade student of Indian School Ghubra (ISG), has displayed good form since the start of the season and his second-place finish on the weekend ensured that he remains among the top-three on the overall standings with 314 points.

Dubai-based Russian Maxim Bobreshov, who won the fourth round honours, leads the overall standings (385) while Dubai-



Ten-year-old Shonal Kunimal competes at the UAE Rotax Max Challenge at the Dubai Kartdrome on Sunday

based Greek racer Leonidas Peruzzi, who came behind Shonal on Sunday, is placed overall second (336).

Shonal stood second behind Maxim in all the three heats to deservedly take the runner-up slot.

The podium result is a boost to Shonal's confidence ahead of the highly competitive Dubai O'Plate race, scheduled next weekend.

Speaking after the latest re-



Shonal with the trophy at the podium (Supplied photos)

sults, Shonal said, "I am satisfied with my speed and was second in all the three heats. I was hopeful of a strong show in the final race but then rains forced the abandonment of the final day's action."

Mentored by former Oman international go-karting racer Sanad al Rawahi, Shonal said, "I would like to thank my dad [Shojai Kunimal] and coach Sanad for all their guidance and trust in me. Their support has been instrumental in my development as a racer."

"I also owe my good results to my team's technical assistants - Carlo John Bariquit and Mark Rose. My efforts would be to now win races that have eluded me. Though I have been on podiums, I need to improve to win races consistently."

Speaking about his son's recent showing, Kunimal said that 'Shonal has the talent to grow into a top-class go-karting champion but needs a lot of support.'

Kunimal thanked OAA managing director Suleiman al Rawahi for his continuous backing and believed that with proper support, Shonal will be winning races at regional level regularly in the near future.



Gabon's forward Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang (AFP)

Gabon's Aubameyang leaves Cup of Nations, returns to Arsenal

Yaoundé, Cameroon - Arsenal striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang has been allowed to leave the Gabon squad at the Africa Cup of Nations in Cameroon and return to his club to continue his recovery from COVID-19, his national team coach said on Monday.

Midfielder Mario Lemina of French side Nice has also been sent back to his club, with neither having played a minute in Gabon's two matches so far at the Cup of Nations, against the Comoros and Ghana.

"Given the medical problems that Pierre-Emerick and Mario have had, in agreement with the

doctor, the president of the federation and the players, we have taken the wise decision to send them back to their clubs so they can be looked after there," said Gabon coach Patrice Neveu at a press conference in Yaounde.

News of Aubameyang's positive test, and that of Lemina, emerged on January 6, just four days before his team's opening AFCON group game.

The duo then tested negative ahead of Gabon's second match, a 1-1 draw against Ghana on Friday, but both were again left out of the team after some residue from their infection was detected.

AFP

Guardiola hails Man City's mental strength

London, UK - Pep Guardiola has praised the way his Manchester City players have dealt with adversity on and off the pitch after they strengthened their grip on the Premier League title race.

City, who beat Chelsea 1-0 on Saturday, are 11 points clear of second-placed Liverpool after 12 straight league wins and closing in on a fourth English title in five years.

Guardiola cited the example of full-back Joao Cancelo, who

suffered facial injuries in an attack at his home last month.

Cancelo has started all three of City's games since, helping them come through a tough period in which they have been badly hit by a coronavirus outbreak.

"In this season there are personal problems for the players," said Guardiola. "They are human beings, they have families, there are problems sometimes."

"For example Joao - he had an

incredible episode a couple of weeks ago with the family at home. How should you react in that situation?

"The way he reacted was exceptional. He said he wanted to play against Arsenal, in the cup (against Swindon) and play Saturday."

Guardiola said he was satisfied more by the continuing success and high standards of his side than the trophies they win.

"These guys, every single

game, give everything for this club and this is so hard to find in modern football," he said.

"We are humble enough to run without the ball and try to do our best every single game. This is my - our - biggest achievement as a club, as a team, by far. To win and win after four years, in this country, in this league, this is outstanding. This, for me, is the best title I have or will have when I leave Manchester City."

AFP



Pep Guardiola during the match against Chelsea at the Etihad Stadium, in Manchester on Saturday (AFP)

Nadal, Barty impress but Djokovic looms over Australian Open

Melbourne, Australia - Rafael Nadal and Ashleigh Barty made devastating starts to their Australian Open title campaigns on Monday as the Grand Slam attempted to move on from the Novak Djokovic visa saga.

Naomi Osaka launched the defence of her women's crown with victory but Coco Gauff was an early big-name casualty, the American 17-year-old dumped out in straight sets by Wang Qiang, who is ranked outside the top 100.

The only Australian Open champion in the men's draw after nine-time winner Djokovic's deportation, Nadal started his quest to become the first male to win 21 Grand Slams by sweeping aside 66th-ranked Marcos Giron, 6-1, 6-4, 6-2.

The draw has opened up for the Spanish great with defending champion Djokovic out of the picture and the other member of the 'Big Three', Roger Federer, not at Melbourne Park because of injury.

But the 35-year-old Nadal said he was just relieved to be playing tennis after Djokovic's refusal to get vaccinated against COVID-19 overshadowed the first Grand Slam of the year right up until the last moment.

Although Djokovic's absence is good news for Nadal's tilt at men's tennis history, he said he would rather the world number one from Serbia was playing.

"The ideal situation in the world of sport is that the best players are on court," said Nadal, who plays Germany's Yannick Hanfmann in the second round.

He may not be there, but



Ashleigh Barty hits a return against Lesia Tsurenko during their match, in Melbourne on Monday (AFP)

Djokovic still looms over the tournament.

Nadal was all guns blazing at Rod Laver Arena, showing no apparent ill effects from a foot injury he suffered last year and then being 'very sick' with COVID-19 in December.

"Today is one victory in the first Grand Slam. Happy for that. One month ago situation had been different - looks very ugly in some way

Today is one victory in the first Grand Slam. Happy for that. One month ago situation had been different - looks very ugly in some way

The Italian defeated American Brandon Nakashima in four sets despite tummy trouble.

Also through was third seed Alexander Zverev in the night match, but 12th-seeded Briton Cameron Norrie lost in three sets to Sebastian Korda, the son of 1998 Australian Open champion Petr Korda.

There was to be no fairytale run for 'lucky loser' Salvatore Caruso.

The Italian had earned a place in the main draw when Djokovic was deported but he fell at the first hurdle.

Also through are French Open champion Barbora Krejickova, Greek fifth seed Maria Sakkari and reigning Olympic champion Belinda Bencic.

But there was heartbreak for Tunisian ninth seed Ons Jabeur, who did not even make it onto court and withdrew because of injury before her match.



Rafael Nadal serves against Marcos Giron during their match, in Melbourne on Monday (AFP)



Serena Williams drops out of WTA top 50

Paris, France - Serena Williams has dropped out of the world's top 50 for the first time since 2006, the US tennis great sitting 59th in the WTA rankings released on Monday.

The 40-year-old played just six tournaments in 2021 and none since her tearful Wimbledon first-round exit with a leg injury ended the 23-time Grand Slam champion's latest bid to equal Margaret Court's all-time record.

Williams has dropped 12 places in the rankings which are led by Ashleigh Barty.

Zverev wins all-German tussle to cruise into round two

Melbourne, Australia - World number three Alexander Zverev won an all-German battle to successfully launch his bid for a first Grand Slam title at the Australian Open on Monday.

Zverev encountered stiff resistance from the 87th-ranked Daniel Altmaier before prevailing 7-6 (7/3), 6-1, 7-6 (7/1) in a night match on Rod Laver Arena.

Zverev's power from the baseline gradually wore down the plucky Altmaier, who earned the acclaim from the crowd for his spirit.

"It's the first round of hopefully a very long Grand Slam, you are not always going to play your best tennis, except if you are Roger (Federer) or Rafa (Nadal), I'm not like them," Zverev (24) said on court.

"It was a good match for me to get into the tournament, hopefully in the next one I'll be better."

Zverev will next face Australian John Millman, who got past veteran Spaniard Feliciano Lopez in four sets.



Germany's Alexander Zverev celebrates after beating Germany's Daniel Altmaier in their match, in Melbourne on Monday (AFP)

With the deportation of nine-time winner Novak Djokovic on the eve of the tournament, the men's draw has opened up.

Zverev is among the leading contenders along with world number two Daniil Medvedev, fourth-seeded Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas and 20-time Grand Slam champion Nadal.

Zverev, who is yet to win a major, had a 63-minute struggle

ing forehand winner.

Altmaier refused to be daunted by his high-profile opponent and broke in the third set when Zverev's crouching volley found the net.

But the underdog played some loose shots and handed back the break to 4-4.

Zverev held three match points in the 12th game but Altmaier fought them all off and a fourth with a strong serve to force a tiebreaker.

Zverev steamed through the tiebreaker to hold five more match points before taking it out in two hours 38 minutes.

Zverev, who reached the semi-finals in Melbourne in 2020 before bowing out to Dominic Thiem, won six singles titles last year along with the Olympic Games gold medal in Tokyo.

Zverev also reached the semi-finals of the French Open and the US Open, losing in five-set matches to Tsitsipas and Djokovic.



ONLY
WHAT'S
ESSENTIAL



USA's Sebastian Korda serves against Britain's Cameron Norrie during the match, in Melbourne on Monday (AFP)

Norrie becomes biggest casualty against Korda

Melbourne, Australia - Sebastian Korda - whose dad Petr won the 1998 Australian Open - bounced back on Monday from COVID-19 isolation to make British 12th seed Cameron Norrie the biggest casualty so far in Melbourne.

The 21-year-old American, ranked 43 and one of the ATP Tour's brightest prospects, won convincingly 6-3, 6-0, 6-4 in just over 100 minutes on day one of the opening Slam of the year.

It was a remarkable effort by

Korda, who was forced to withdraw from two warm-up events in Adelaide after testing positive for COVID-19 and was confined to his hotel room.

"I tested two days before I came to Australia, day before I came and then on arrival I had a positive test," Korda said.

"Luckily no symptoms, which was great for me, and Tennis Australia gave me a couple of



gym equipment in the room so I wouldn't just sit around and kind of do nothing."

Korda had too much for Norrie in only their second encounter, having beaten the Briton in the semi-finals at Delray Beach in the United States last year.

He broke Norrie's serve five times, fought off three break points on his own serve and hit 25 winners with just 27 unforced

errors. "I didn't get a lot of preparation, didn't get any matches under my belt," Korda said of his disrupted build-up.

Korda, who comes from a family of sports stars, faces Frenchman Corentin Moutet in the second round.

"A lot of history in the family here in Australia, my dad winning here and then both my sisters (Jessica and Nelly) winning the Australian women's golf tournament," Korda said.

"So it's lots of success in Australia and I'm always super happy to be here."

Norrie admitted he wasn't in the fight against Korda.

"Korda is a great player. He was too good for me today," Norrie said.

"I was just disappointed with my performance and the way I executed, but I had a great attitude and tried as hard as I could, and right to the last point."

AFP



Naomi Osaka serves against Camila Osorio during their match, in Melbourne on Monday (AFP)

More comfortable in my skin after tough year, says Osaka

Melbourne, Australia - Naomi Osaka said on Monday she is 'more comfortable in my skin' after a difficult year in which she revealed she had suffered depression, and vowed to have more fun and challenge herself on court in 2022.

The Japanese former world number one opened the defence of her Australian Open title with a battling 6-3, 6-3 win against Colombia's Camila Osorio, remaining calm even through a mid-match stumble.

Four-time major champion Osaka beat American Jennifer Brady in last year's Melbourne Park final, but then withdrew from the French Open and Wimbledon over personal issues.

She said her problems were exacerbated by speaking to the media after matches and she made a tearful early exit at the US Open in September, then took an indefinite break.

But the 24-year-old says that she is in a better place now and determined to adopt a more positive mindset.

"I would say I feel more comfortable in my skin, if that makes sense. Like there's always the human nature to feel uneasy, to want to please everyone and stuff like that," she said.

"I feel like there was a time after the French Open where I felt like everyone was judging me and I couldn't go outside."

AFP

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Sakkari hopes 'strong mind' will take her far at Australian Open

Melbourne, Australia - Maria Sakkari said on Monday dispelling 'negative thoughts' helped propel her to two Grand Slam semi-finals last year - and she hopes to go even farther at the Australian Open.

The Greek fifth seed battled past Germany's Tatjana Maria 6-4, 7-6 (7/2) to kick-start her campaign as she looks to build on a breakout 2021.

The 26-year-old made the semis at both the US Open and French Open to telegraph her intent and is seeded in the top 10 of a Slam for the first time at Melbourne Park.

She said she felt she belonged at the top, which she put down to a new-found belief.

"I think that's why I got to play two semi-finals in Slams last year," said Sakkari, who played the first match on the main Rod Laver Arena to launch the season's opening Grand Slam.

"I started working a lot in my mind on how I can get all these negative thoughts and all this pressure away from me.



Maria Sakkari of Greece reacts on a point against Germany's Tatjana Maria during their match, in Melbourne on Monday (AFP)

"Of course, you can never do like a hundred per cent what you're trying to do, trying to achieve, but you can improve. I proved myself that I have a strong mind. I proved it on court actually."

She took time to settle against Maria but soon found her groove to break for a 5-4 lead and serve out the opening set in 44 min-

utes. But the 287th-ranked German refused to give up and made Sakkari work hard, taking the match to a tiebreaker before her resistance was broken.

"We all know how hard first rounds can be and that wasn't easy," said Sakkari, who also made the semi-finals of the season-ending WTA Finals last year.

AFP

Error-strewn Gauff stunned by China's Wang

Melbourne, Australia - American 18th seed Coco Gauff was dumped out of the Australian Open first round on Monday in a blaze of unforced errors, losing 6-4, 6-2 to China's Wang Qiang in a huge upset.

Gauff, the youngest player in the draw at 17, was dominated by the world number 110 in just 73 minutes of action on Margaret Court Arena.

Gauff's only bright spot in a one-sided second set came as she saved four match points from 5-0 down.

She was comprehensively beaten by Wang for the first time in three meetings between the pair, melting down to make 38 unforced errors.



"You know I lost two times against her last year so I just tried my best to focus on court," said Wang.

The former Chinese number one, who famously knocked out Serena Williams en route to the fourth round at Melbourne Park two years ago, has dropped outside the top 100 since reaching a career-high singles ranking of 12 in September 2019.

Wang is coached by Australian great Pat Cash, but joked that the 1987 Wimbledon champion has not forced her to wear his trademark checkered headband during matches - not yet anyway.

AFP

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