

► NEWS BRIEF

'NIGHTINGALE OF INDIA' DIES AGED 92

Mumbai, India - Bollywood superstar Lata Mangeshkar, known to millions as the 'Nightingale of India' and a regular fixture on the country's airwaves for decades, died on Sunday morning at the age of 92. Lata's high-pitched melodies were an instantly recognisable feature of Indian cinema, with her work appearing in more than 1,000 films.

She passed away in a Mumbai hospital after being admitted to its intensive care unit several weeks ago with COVID-19 symptoms.

Indian authorities declared two days of national mourning for the singer.

Her body was publicly cremated in a Mumbai park on Sunday evening with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and others laying flowers on her funeral pyre.

"Coming generations will remember her as a stalwart of Indian culture, whose melodious voice had an unparalleled ability to mesmerise people," Modi said.

News of her death prompted an outpouring of grief from film industry luminaries.

See also [Page 12](#)

14 deaths in 3 days

COVID-19

RISE IN ICU ADMISSIONS AMONG CHILDREN

6,146

new cases in 3 days

87

new hospitalisations in 24 hours

373

in hospitals

60

in intensive care units

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Sunday announced 6,146 new infections registered in 72 hours - Thursday, Friday and Saturday - taking the total number of COVID-19 cases in Oman to 352,187. There were 14 more deaths in this period.

'The total number of COVID-

19 related deaths reported in the country now rises to 4,172,' an MoH statement said.

It added that 6,640 new cases have recovered, accounting for a total of 325,860 recoveries.

'Eighty-seven patients were hospitalised in the past 24 hours, accounting for a total of 373 COVID-19 patients currently in health institutions, including 60 in intensive care units,' it stated.

The rising number of cases includes children who need hospitalisation. "We have children, one month to 16 year old, who have been infected with COVID-19 and are in ICU. Some children have chronic diseases, while others have severe pneumonia caused by COVID-19," Dr Raghda Mohammed al Obaidani, ICU consultant at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital, said in an in-

terview with Oman TV.

According to Dr Hashim Ahmed, infectious disease consultant in the same hospital, "there is an increase in people infected with COVID-19 in Oman in general. Most are infected with the Omicron variant because of its rapid spread".

Dr Ahmed urged people to adhere to the precautionary measures to control the surge.



(Supplied photo)

Over 3,000 jobseekers register for ASMED's on-the-job training

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A total of 3,236 jobseekers have registered for an on-the-job training initiative, according to Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED).

A statement issued by ASMED said that the authority and the Ministry of Labour have announced the end of the registration period for the training initiative to employ jobseekers in small and medium enterprises.

'The Ministry of Labour approved 3,236 training opportunities for varying academic qualifications - 53.4 per cent have Bachelor's degrees, 15.5 per cent for university diplomas and 31.1 per cent have General Education Diploma.'

In 2021, ASMED launched the initiative to provide training to 3,000 Omani jobseekers. The Ministry of Labour will bear the cost of training. In the first year, 100 per cent of the trainees' stipend will be subsidised. Bachelor's degree holders will receive RO500 a month, university diploma holders RO400 a month and General Education Diploma holders RO300 a month. In the second year, the ministry will bear 50 per cent of the training grant.

According to ASMED, on-the-job training packages offered to SMEs have been launched in response to their demand to receive subsidised-pay manpower. The programme aims to provide employment for the largest number of jobseekers possible and provide them the required vocational skills.

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Are you happy with the decision to reduce electricity tariffs and standardise bills of expats and citizens?

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Asila al Naamani
Private sector employee

Reducing electricity tariffs and having a standard rate for citizens and expats is a welcome move. It will certainly make everyone happy. The move reflects the appreciation of the contribution of expats in Oman. Moreover, most bills are in the names of Omani property owners.



Dr Halima Jamal
Dentist

Everyone in Oman is affected by higher electricity bills, and the move to reduce tariffs is good. I don't see any reason why expats and citizens should pay a different price for the same service.



Jay Prakash
Private sector employee

This is a welcome development. There should be no discrimination between citizens and expatriates when it comes to electricity tariffs. Oman is progressing and is in transition. Additionally, the introduction of electricity spot market will encourage the culture of saving electricity which in the long term will benefit the agriculture sector and SMES.



Mohan Anandan
Banking sector employee

The reduction in tariffs will certainly make everyone happy, especially at a time when people are reeling under the pandemic. The removal of distinction between expatriates and citizens shows the magnanimity of the nation and reflects its concern and appreciation of the contribution of its expats community towards nation building. This is heartwarming.



Reema Bhatia
Teacher

The residents and citizens have welcomed the reduction in power tariffs for all consumers. These policies aim to achieve and redirect the electricity subsidy to more eligible categories.



Rukseen S
Sales manager

A reduction in electricity charges has been a long-standing demand. And the decision on removal of different tariffs and having a standard rate for citizens and expatriates alike is a welcome move.



? **NEXT ON YOUR SAY**

Is it time to ease COVID-19 restrictions? Should we learn to live with the coronavirus as just another flu?

The views stated here are those of the respondents and not endorsed by *Muscat Daily*. If you feel strongly about the issues discussed here, you can email your comments to muscatdaily@apexmedia.co.om Log on to our Facebook page or tweet us your comments on the issue



More public car parks to be paid parking from March 6

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat Municipality has announced that effective March 6, many car parks in the capital will be converted to paid parking spaces. This is in pursuance of an administrative decision (No 151/2016) issued to regulate the use of public parking lots in Muscat, streamline the flow of traffic and maintain order.

'Car parking lots around Sultan Qaboos Mosque in Ruwi; car parks adjacent to Sultan Qaboos Street and opposite commercial buildings in South Al Khuwayr; and new car parks and those behind Ooredoo store in Al Khoud Souq will now be paid parking,' Muscat Municipality stated.

The measure aims to make the most appropriate use of parking lots in Muscat, and to meet the growing needs of the urbanised population, which is

marked by an increasing number of vehicles.

'The initiative will also address the phenomena of abandoned vehicles which hinder traffic flow and affect the aesthetic appearance of modern urban facades,' the civic body stated.

Paid parking will be applicable everyday from 8am to 1pm and 4pm to 9pm, except Fridays, Saturdays and public holidays.

Those who wish to reserve a parking slot can do so by sending an SMS to 90091 containing the car number, alphabetical code, and the duration (in multiples of 30 minutes to a maximum of 300 minutes). This can be extended following the same steps.

Users also have the option of reserving parking space through the Baladiyeti app or via Muscat Municipality website - <http://www.mm.gov.om/> - to obtain or renew a parking permit or inquire about/pay fines.

Omantel showcases innovation tech, facilities at its HQ in Airport Heights

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Telecommunications provider Omantel recently organised a media tour of its headquarters in Airport Heights in Muscat.

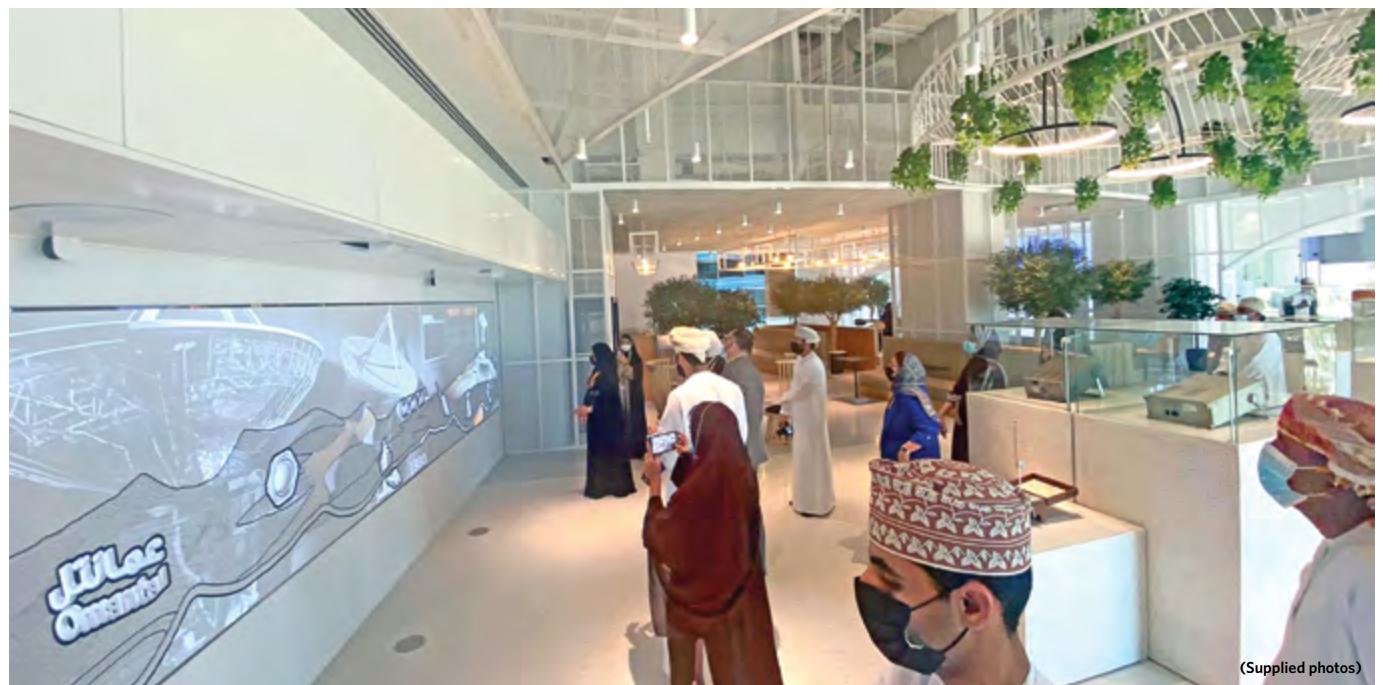
Media personnel visited the Omantel Innovation Labs, Omantel Museum, Innovation Oasis, and Smart Store.

The tour aimed to showcase Omantel's expertise, partnerships, reach and access to technology to contribute to Oman Vision 2040 and promote innovation and entrepreneurship in new and emerging technologies namely 5G, Internet of Things, Cybersecurity, Customer Experience Technology and Big Data.

The reporters were acquainted with companies running their businesses from the Omantel Innovations Labs. They were also introduced to Omantel Museum which has on display telecommunication devices used earlier in the country and the region, and briefed about a smart store - E-Dukaan - a contactless shopping platform.

On the occasion, Mohammed al Zadjali, building manager of the Omantel headquarters, said, "The innovation labs is a platform to channelise the company's resources for the growth of Oman's tech entrepreneurial domain."

He added, "We want the world to know that 5G has more applications than perceived. E-Dukaan is an initiative that Omantel is very proud of as it is the first smart store in the entire Middle East. The store is equipped with in-store cameras that capture shoppers' movements in the aisles, while the smart shelf sensors track products that shoppers put in their baskets. Items chosen by shoppers keep getting added to their virtual cart through an app, which Omantel is developing. The price



of items purchased will be debited from customers' mobile wallets as they walk out of the store and a receipt sent to them electronically."

According to H H Sayyida Ghada Jaifar al Said, senior manager, Omantel Innovation Labs aims to leverage the company's expertise, partnerships, reach and access to technology to contribute to Oman Vision 2040 and promote innovation and entrepreneurship in new and emerging technology.

"Omantel Innovation Labs will support startups through multiple programmes, including a six-month accelerator that offers mentoring, office space, knowledge transfer, funding, and access to customers, markets and investors."

Currently, several Omani startups are honing their market preparedness under Omantel Innovation Labs' Accelerator Programme designed in collaboration with local and international partners.

"The programme is tailored to the needs of each participating startup to ensure that they commercialise, grow rapidly, and scale effectively, while ensuring the technical feasibility, market desirability, and financial viability of their products and operations," Sayyida Ghada said.

These startups include Auto-plant - an AI and IoT solutions

provider for the agriculture sector; Lamma, Oman's first super app - a unified communications platform with payment integration; Mamun - an embedded credit, payments and insurance platform; Pixel Tech - a subscription-based tool that allows sellers in the GCC to set up digital stores and sell their products online; and Remedy.om - a platform that connects patients with clinics and therapists.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	22	15
Doha	21	13
Kuwait City	20	11
Manama	20	14
Muscat	23	15
Riyadh	20	7

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.28am
Sunrise	6.45am
Duhr	12.26pm
Asr	3.38pm
Maghrib	6.02pm
Isha	7.14pm

Tragic death of Moroccan boy sparks wave of sympathy in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In an outpouring of grief on the tragic death of a five-year-old boy, who was trapped in a well in a small Moroccan town for four days, people in Oman expressed heartfelt condolences for the bereaved family on social media.

The rescue operation of the boy, named Rayan, gripped the country and people around the world, with hundreds of well-wishers gathered at the well and millions following the incident online. The boy had been retrieved by a rescue team on Saturday but shortly later declared dead.

An Omani graffiti artist painted a portrait of the child in North Batinah, while the Grand Mufti of Oman, His Eminence Sheikh Ahmad bin Hamad al Khalili issued an emotional statement condoling the tragic death of the boy.

Rayan's ordeal, since he fell into a well on Tuesday afternoon, had sparked an outpouring of sympathy online, with the Arabic hashtag #SaveRayan trending.

His Eminence Sheikh Khalili said, "We were very upset by the accident of the Moroccan child who fell into the well, and we were praying and praying to God to bring him back to his family safely, but God chose what is best for him. We thank all those



Portrait of Rayan created by Omani artist Abdulmajeed al Mamari in Harmul, Liwa (Supplied photo)

We were very upset by the accident of the Moroccan child who fell into the well, and we were praying and praying to God to bring him back to his family safely, but God chose what is best for him

HIS EMINENCE SHEIKH AHMAD BIN HAMAD AL KHALILI

who sympathised with the child. God does not waste the reward of the doers of good."

Sayyid Khalid Hamad al Busaidi, former chairman of Oman Football Association, said, "We share with the brotherly people of Morocco the feelings of sadness and sympathy over the death of the child - Rayan - who captured the hearts of all Arab people. We pray to God with them to bless his pure soul with mercy and that he dwells in the highest heavens. We ask God to grant his family patience and solace."

Omani artist Abdulmajeed Mohammed Salim al Mamari told *Muscat Daily*, "I did a portrait of Rayan during the rescue operation to save him. It took me three-and-a-half hours to complete it. I painted the portrait on a wall in Harmul in the wilayat of Liwa, North Batinah, to express the solidarity of the people of Oman with the people of Morocco."

H E Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, tweeted, "We have followed with great interest and sympathy the tremendous efforts made by our brothers in the Kingdom of Morocco to save the child - Rayan. The solidarity and sympathy shown by the Omani people and others in the world in this accident is heart-warming."



CDAA launches home ambulance service in six governorates

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) launched a home ambulance service in six governorates on Sunday. The service aims to provide emergency medical care for critical cases arising at home and transfer them to the nearest health institutions.

In the first phase, the home ambulance service will be available in Musandam, Buraimi, Dhahirah, Al Wusta, South Sharqiyah and North Sharqiyah, through CDAA's current centres.

Col Dr Hamad Abdullah al Hammadi, Director General of Ambulance, said, "The home ambulance service comes in implementation of Royal Decree No 39/2021 to be one of the new services provided by the authority. It is an important addition - supportive and complementary to the healthcare sector in the sultanate in providing emergency medical care before reaching health institutions."

According to Col Dr Hammadi, the new service targets emergency medical cases such as critical respiratory diseases, heart diseases, injuries, severe fractures, sudden loss of consciousness, sudden general and partial paralysis, severe bleeding, severe pain, critical nervous system diseases, severe electric shock, severe poisoning, drowning, obstructed childbirth and



The new service targets emergency medical cases such as critical respiratory diseases, heart diseases, injuries, severe burns etc

COL DR HAMAD AL HAMMADI

severe burns.

"The service provides patients and critically injured people emergency medical care and transfers them in the correct way - in accordance with approved medical protocols - to healthcare institutions. Our medical personnel use the latest methods and modern medical technology. The ambulances are fitted with medical equipment and medicines necessary for emergency medical interventions," he added.

To avail the services of CDAA home ambulance service, the ROP Operations Centre (9999) or the authority's Operations Centre (24343666) can be contacted.

Municipality working on permanent solution for waterlogging in Amerat

Muscat - The waterlogging problem on the service lane leading to Q&S Shopping Centre in Amerat will be solved soon with a temporary channel being dug by Amerat Municipality to divert the water. A permanent solution is also in the planning stage.

Waterlogging on the road is causing severe inconvenience to residents and business owners operating near the service lane.

A business owner said, "We have been facing this waterlogging problem for many years. It is damaging our vehicles and it gets even more difficult when it rains."

An Amerat resident, on condition of anonymity, said, "It is very inconvenient for the residents, especially when the service lane is closed due to waterlogging. It would be great to have access to the service lane, especially during peak hours when the main road is full of traffic. This service lane would be an alternative to the main road to avoid the peak hour rush."



We have been facing this waterlogging problem for many years. It is damaging our vehicles and it gets even more difficult when it rains

BUSINESS OWNER

"We are creating a channel to divert the water towards the Wadi Adai water stream. This is a quick and temporary solution."

The official also informed that Amerat Municipality is planning an underground culvert as a permanent solution to the ongoing waterlogging problem.

(Text and photo by Syed Fasiuddin)

Muscat Daily witnessed a municipality team digging a channel

and an Amerat Municipality official present at the site said,

EA launches 'Oman Without Plastic' campaign

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Environment Authority (EA) launched a campaign called 'Oman Without Plastic' in Buraimi governorate on Sunday. The campaign aims to intensify supervision and raise awareness among companies, institutions and shops to prevent the use of single-use plastic bags to preserve the Omani environment.

The campaign will continue until the end of April.

Said bin Suleiman al Hosni, Director of the Environment Department in Buraimi gover-



(Supplied photo)

norate, said, "Specialists from the Environmental Authority in Buraimi governorate con-

duct field visits to plastic bag manufacturing factories and large shopping centres to verify the specifications of plastic bags.

"Plastic is an essential element in life for its ease of use and abundance, in addition to its low price. The campaign aims to spread awareness among members of society of its danger and limit its use."

Hosni reminded that single-use bags are difficult to recycle, do not degrade easily, pollute water and roads and threaten many organisms. "We hope everyone cooperates to reduce single-use plastic production,

avoid its use, and move towards sustainable solutions," Hosni added.

Ahlam Rashid al Muqbaliya, a media specialist in the Environment Department in Buraimi governorate, said, "There is a law that prohibits the use of single-use plastic. The fine is not less than RO100. The law will make everyone commit to finding environmentally friendly alternatives.

"I hope that all members of society and institutions will take the initiative to protect the planet through proper and correct habits such as the use of alternative cloth bags."

Turkey offers scholarships

Muscat - The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) has announced scholarships - undergraduate and postgraduate levels - for Omani students offered by the Turkish government for the academic year 2022.

The last date for registration is February 20. To apply, visit <http://www.turkiyeburslari.gov.tr>

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GCC economy seen to rebound with over 6% growth in 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

On the back of higher oil prices, increased oil production and robust momentum in non-oil economic activity, the GDP growth in the GCC countries will see a surge of 6.1 per cent in 2022, according to one of the world's leading financial services groups.

This growth in 2022 will be the fastest pace of cyclical expansion in the GCC countries since 2011 and is higher than other emerging markets peers, Tokyo-based Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group said in a research report last week.

According to Ehsan Khoman, head of Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group's EMEA emerging markets research team, a supportive oil market, robust momentum in non-oil activity, stronger balance sheets, and easing geopolitical tensions are driving a compelling GCC story in 2022.

The GCC authorities' unabated drive to realise their National Vision strategies of structural transformation away from hydrocarbons will also continue to gain traction, he said.

Khoman further explained, "The GCC countries' 2022 outlook is markedly skewed to the upside this year. The robust vaccination programme, ongoing reopenings and higher oil prices as well as production, is spurring a real GDP growth forward in the



With rising oil prices and a bounce back in economic activity, the GCC countries are expected to record this year first fiscal surplus since 2014, at US\$27bn, according to Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group

region."

Following several years of having fiscal deficits, the GCC countries will rebuild their buffers in 2022, he noted.

"Higher government revenues and the rationalisation of expenditure in 2022 budgets will strengthen the countries' balance sheets and offer greater fis-

cal capacity to navigate towards a post-pandemic equilibrium," Khoman added.

Surplus to hit US\$27bn

This improved situation will lead to an aggregate GCC fiscal surplus in 2022 of US\$27bn, the first since 2014, Mitsubishi UFJ

Financial Group noted. It added that the surge in oil prices and austerity measures will support sovereign balance sheets, with the GCC's financing needs remaining limited at only US\$2.8bn in 2022 and its debt capital markets' needs at only US\$4.8bn.

According to the report, the economic growth in the GCC will also outperform all emerging market peers in 2022, except Asia.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it said, will be leading this recovery, given their impressive bounce back in non-oil GDP, a rebound in their domestic demand, their

higher investment levels in line with National Vision strategies, as well as being best-positioned to respond to the global economic recovery.

GCC inflation is rising According to the Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group's report, the GCC inflation has not been immune from sharply higher inflation levels across most economies with Qatar being pressured the most.

Higher GCC inflation, it said, has the risk of reversing capital flows, driving sovereign spreads higher and squeezing public financing.

"Notwithstanding the notable increases in import prices in recent months, the GCC inflation has so far remained moderate, reflecting lower non-tradable inflation, as demand for non-tradables remains subdued," the report said.

It further noted that the GCC inflation is much more subdued than elsewhere in the emerging and developed world.

"Even in Qatar, where annual inflation of 6.1 per cent in November was the highest in the region, the annual gains reflect the low base after three years of deflation rather than underlying price pressures with average inflation for the previous 12 months close to zero," Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group said in the report.



Samail Industrial City localises 19 projects in 2021

Muscat - Samail Industrial City witnessed dynamic investment activity in 2021 as 19 projects were localised in the city on a total leased area of 122,549sqm, according to the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn).

Over 300 direct job opportunities will be provided by these projects in the coming period, Madayn said in a press release.

These localised projects are specialised in mining and natural resources industries including metal products, doors and windows, tubes for ammunition, firefighting tools and equipment, marble and cement, and food industries such as meat products, dairy products, poultry, dates, in addition to medical and carton industries.

Madayn is currently executing the design and implementation of infrastructure

complementary project in the Samail Industrial City. This includes a dual lane road spanning 1.4km from the roundabout at the main entrance of Samail Industrial City to the roundabout near Al Sharqiyah expressway.

The project also includes designing and executing sewage pipe linking phase 3 with phase 1 of Samail Industrial City.

The completion rate of the project has reached 48 per cent and is expected to be completed in April this year.

Samail Industrial City is divided into several sectors including food industry, plastic materials industry, steel industry, marble industry, building materials industry, in addition to other industries such as furniture, petrochemicals, and supporting services sector (e.g. warehouses).



Over 7mn visited Dubai in 2021 tourism turnaround

Dubai, UAE - More than seven million foreign tourists visited Dubai last year, marking a "remarkable turnaround", the government of the Gulf city state hosting the Expo world fair announced.

The figure was up 32 per cent on 2020, the first full year of the coronavirus pandemic, Dubai's economy and tourism department said in a statement.

It hailed the recovery as "a remarkable turnaround amid continuing global challenges".

This year, however, missile attacks since last month by Yemeni rebels on the United Arab Emirates of which Dubai is a member have prompted US and UK travel warnings.

Missile and drone attacks by

Huthi rebels in Yemen, in whose war the UAE is a military supporter of the government, have rattled the Gulf state's image as a haven of stability in the turbulent Middle East.

Dubai, home of the world's tallest tower, super-luxury hotels and swanky nightclubs, has since October 1 hosted Expo 2020 which runs until March 31.

The glitzy emirate, a trading and leisure hub for which tourism is a pillar of the economy, attracted a massive 16.7mn tourists from the East and West in 2019, before COVID-19 restrictions. It has recorded a total of more than 850,000 cases of coronavirus, including over 2,250 deaths.

AFP

Shell reports huge profit as oil surges

London, UK - Shell swung back into massive profit last year, the energy giant revealed Thursday, as oil and gas prices rocketed on recovering demand and geopolitical unrest.

Shell said in a statement that net profit stood at US\$20.1bn after a loss after tax of US\$21.7bn in 2020, as economies reopened from pandemic lockdowns.

"2021 was a momentous year for Shell," said chief executive Ben van Beurden, noting that the group also simplified its name and structure and outlined plans to slash greenhouse gas emissions.

Following the bumper earnings, Shell said it planned a share buyback programme totalling US\$8.5bn.

"Following the pandemic squalls which decimated the oil price and indeed profits, Shell has returned to form as it finds itself awash with cash," said Richard Hunter, head of markets at Interactive Investor.

As lockdowns spread in 2020, oil prices dropped off a cliff, even briefly turning negative.

Prices have since rebounded sharply, with the benchmark Brent North Sea oil contract trading above US\$90 per barrel, weighing on business costs and



individuals' spending power as inflation worries mount worldwide.

Shell revenue jumped 45 per cent to US\$261.5bn last year, the group said. Soaring prices are hugely boosting also the incomes of oil-producing nations.

The 23-nation OPEC+ group, led by Saudi Arabia and Russia, announced Wednesday a modest increase in output.

It will increase production by 400,000 barrels per day in

March, the same amount as in previous months.

Oil prices hit seven-year highs in January, with Brent topping US\$90, with tensions between Moscow and Western allies at their highest point since the Cold War after Russia massed troops on its border with Ukraine.

Strong fourth quarter

Shell's annual performance was largely helped by a net profit of

almost US\$11.5bn in the fourth quarter, the result also of asset sales.

The group had suffered a loss after tax of US\$447mn in the third quarter of last year after a big accounting write-off.

European gas prices have also blazed a record-breaking trail over the past year on strong winter demand and the unrest between key supplier Russia and consumer nations.

Electricity prices have addi-

tionally seen massive gains.

Shell shareholders backed plans in December to switch the oil giant's headquarters from the Netherlands to Britain after a century - and to drop Royal Dutch from its name.

That has meant also a switch of its tax residence to Britain as well as top executives including Beurden to London.

Shell is however keeping 8,500 staff in the Netherlands.

AFP



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Ukraine crisis: Invasion or not, economy is already paying price

Kyiv, Ukraine – In his open-plan office in the centre of Kyiv, tech executive Dmytro Voloshyn lists off the tricky questions he's dealt with over the last weeks as fears have soared over a possible Russian invasion. What will happen if things escalate? What to do with foreign staff? What will happen if martial law is declared? What if the banking system collapses? What if the internet gets cut?

"We've basically had to prepare a contingency plan with answers to all of these questions," he told AFP, showing a chart on his laptop detailing different options for different scenarios.

Preply, the company co-founded by Voloshyn in 2013, bills itself as one of the main on-line platforms connecting language students to teachers across the world. It employs some 400 people in Kyiv and Barcelona.

With its sleek office design, plants creeping up the walls, cafe for employees, it looks like a Silicon Valley start-up and is considered one of the successes of Ukraine's high-tech sector.

But like the rest of the Ukrainian capital it is currently living a strange double life. Work is going on as normal, people are carrying on with everyday tasks, and nothing seems out of the ordinary. At the same time – as Western leaders warn about the threat from Moscow's troops massed on the border – some people are bracing for the worst.



An elderly woman walks past a closed shop window with a placard reading 'Discounts 70%' in the center of Ukrainian Capital Kyiv on February 2 (AFP)

According to a survey by the European Business Association, which includes many multinationals operating in Ukraine, 40 per cent of its members have already prepared emergency plans and 40 per cent intend to do so.

"We have a plan, but we don't execute it because we are very confident the situation will stay as it is," Voloshyn, 34, says.

Voloshyn points out that

Ukrainian businesses, like the broader population, have got used to living in a state of heightened alert since the Kremlin seized Crimea in 2014 and began fuelling a separatist conflict in the east that has killed over 13,000 people.

"We are not panicking because we know that this situation lasts for eight years already for us," he says.

"It was always that kind of tension here in Ukraine, and now it's more immediate and it escalates obviously, but we are not in a panic mode."

In fact, the crisis in 2014 spurred his company on. It pushed them to grow the business abroad as Ukraine's economy melted down and they sought to protect themselves from the turbulence.

Weak currency, inflation

The risk of a Russian invasion, which Moscow denies it is plotting, has not yet caused such catastrophic consequences as it did back then.

But it is already having a very real impact, freezing projects and scaring off some investors.

The central bank has lowered its growth forecast for 2022 to 3.4 per cent from 3.8 per cent.

It has also had to spend more than US\$1bn since the beginning of the year to keep the local currency, the hryvnia, afloat as worried investors have moved money out of the country.

Despite that, the currency has still fallen to its lowest level in four years, fuelling inflation and undermining the purchasing power of households in one of Europe's poorest countries.

The situation has pushed President Volodymyr Zelensky to try to counter some of the more alarmist warnings coming from the West, insisting the priority was to stabilise the economy rather than stir "panic".

For Sofya Donets, an economist at investment firm Renaissance Capital, Ukraine is currently in a stronger position than in 2014 to withstand financial pressure.

It has more than doubled its reserves and is due an influx of Western assistance, with the European Union pledging a further 1.2bn euros and talks ongoing to unlock new funds from the Inter-

national Monetary Fund.

"However, this only works to smooth the effect of the prolonged turbulence, but not the full-scale military conflict," she said.

'Permanent threat'

Currently unable to borrow on international markets, the Ukrainian state remains dependant on its international donors.

The government complains the country is suffering from a geopolitical situation beyond its control despite economic "fundamentals" that it insists are solid. "We have been living since 2014 in a state of permanent threat from Russia, and now this is becoming news to the world," Finance Minister Sergiy Marchenko said in an interview with the Ekonomichna Pravda website. "Tension cannot increase permanently," he insisted in a bid to reassure. In the meantime, companies like Voloshyn's are getting ready. But even if the worst does not happen, economists warn that the spike in tensions further dents the country's longer-term prospects.

"The risk premium for doing business in Ukraine has certainly increased," Lilit Gegvoryan, an economist at IHS Markit. "This risk perception will not significantly come down unless tangible progress is made between Ukraine and Russia to solve the conflict. Chances of the latter are slim."

AFP

Fitch lowers Ukraine's outlook

Washington, US – Credit rating agency Fitch Ratings downgraded Ukraine's long-term debt outlook from positive to stable on Friday due to tensions with Russia, while maintaining its rating at B.

"Expectations of a more protracted period of heightened tensions with Russia, an increased downside risk of conflict, constrained financing conditions, moderate capital outflows and weakening international reserves, have increased external financing risks since our previous review in August," the rating agency said.

Though downgraded from positive to stable, the outlook is not negative, as the agency believes "full-scale military conflict with Russia will be avoided."

The agency is counting on a "somewhat greater availability of IFI [International Financial Institutions] and bilateral finance, Ukraine's credible macro-policy framework and strengthened fiscal and foreign exchange reserves position coming into 2022," which it said "will help mitigate impacts."

The IMF on Wednesday urged a peaceful resolution to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, stressing that it was already having an impact on energy prices and posed a threat to global growth.

Since the end of 2021, Russia has massed up to 100,000 soldiers on the border with Ukraine. Western states accuse Moscow of preparing to attack.

AFP



Amazon's Q4 profit doubles to \$14bn

San Francisco, US – Amazon on Thursday reported its profit doubled to US\$14bn in the crucial holiday quarter or fourth quarter of 2021, giving a boost to jittery markets that expected less due to higher labour, sourcing and delivery costs.

The e-commerce colossus said its net sales climbed to US\$137bn, and its profit benefited greatly from a return on investment in electric vehicle maker Rivian, which went public in November.

Amazon has been a big pandemic-era winner but it is particularly exposed to the supply chain headaches, labour churn and inflation that have come to weigh on people's lives and business' ability to make money. "Despite these short-term challenges, we continue to feel optimistic and excited about the business as we emerge from the pandemic," CEO Andy Jassy said in an earnings statement.

Amazon said it had its "biggest-ever Black Friday to Cyber Monday holiday shopping weekend." The company

also noted that its Amazon Web Services unit had inked big cloud computing deals with Nasdaq, Meta and others.

AWS generated US\$17.78bn in revenue in the period, 40 per cent more year-on-year.

This came as Google parent Alphabet and Apple have posted whopping profits this earnings season, although Facebook was battered by markets – losing some US\$200bn in value – after disappointing results that cast doubts about its future.

Analysts remained subdued on the earnings, which included an US\$11.8bn boost from Amazon's Rivian investment.

"Amazon managed to beat on the earnings, which included an US\$11.8bn boost from Amazon's Rivian investment. "Amazon managed to beat on the top and bottom lines despite softer growth trends for e-commerce this holiday quarter, which also weighed on growth in the high margin ads business," said Insider Intelligence analyst Andrew Lipsman.

Uneven earnings

"The one clear bright spot for the core business was the continued acceleration in AWS to

help bolster a bottom line," he added.

In the fourth quarter, Amazon's operating profit, a key indicator of profitability, came in at US\$3.5bn, half what it was a year ago. In the coming months, news is expected on the efforts of workers to organize unions at sites in New York and Alabama, either of which would be the first at an Amazon US warehouse.

Also, consumers will see the price go up for Amazon's Prime membership in the United States from US\$12.99 to US\$14.99 per month with the annual rate going from US\$119 to US\$139 – the first increase since 2018.

It has been an uneven earnings season, with great hits and misses.

Google's parent firm Alphabet announced quarterly profits Tuesday that beat expectations and nearly doubled in 2021 – after a booming holiday season for the online ads giant facing anti-trust regulation scrutiny.

The Silicon Valley giant's

dominance online has powered it to new heights during the pandemic period, but has also left it in the sights of regulators around the world.

For its part, Apple reported record US\$124bn quarterly revenue last week, despite a global chip pinch and shifting impacts of the pandemic that have weighed down other big tech players.

The supply chain mess that has disrupted the making and delivery of products to consumers is not disappearing, but Apple said it expected less impact in the coming months.

But Facebook's parent firm Meta suffered on Thursday a plunge in stock value that was comparable to the size of New Zealand's economy.

In addition to costs of big investments on its metaverse vision for the internet and trouble for its core ads business, the firm predicted slower growth and even reported its first dip in daily users globally on the signature Facebook platform.

AFP

UK to support consumers as energy price cap rises 54%

London, UK – The UK government stepped in to help the hardest-hit households struggling with the rising cost of living, announcing a £9bn package to offset soaring energy bills.

It followed an announcement by that energy regulator that the price cap on how much suppliers can charge consumers will jump by 54 per cent due to soaring wholesale gas prices.

The annual price cap for consumers not on a fixed deal with their supplier will rise by £693 to £1,971 in England, Wales and Scotland from April, Ofgem said.

Northern Ireland has a separate regulator and has also announced sharp hikes in average household gas bills.

UK inflation rose to a near 30-year high in December and more costly household bills are further stoking fears about a cost-of-living squeeze, with government tax rises looming.

The government, under pressure due to lockdown-breaching parties but also struggling to claw back eye-watering pandemic spending, is being urged to get tackle the issue.

Finance minister Rishi Sunak said electricity customers will get a £200 discount on their bill in October, to be repaid over five years, while lower and middle-income households will see a £150 rebate on local taxes in April.

"For me to stand here and pretend we don't have to adjust to paying higher prices would be wrong and dishonest," Sunak told MPs in parliament.

"But what we can do is take the sting out of a significant price shock for millions of families by making sure the increase in prices is smaller initially and spread over a longer period," added the minister, saying it amounted to £9bn and would help 28mn households.



Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak hosts a press conference in the Downing Street Briefing Room in London (AFP)

Rate rise

Soaring wholesale prices are blamed on a cold European winter in 2020-2021, which put pressure on supplies, increased demand from Asia for liquefied natural gas and a number of broader geopolitical issues, including uncertainty on the Russia-Ukraine border.

The cap is reviewed every six months, and the new regime will come into force from April 1.

Ofgem chief executive Jonathan Brearley said that "we know this rise will be extremely worrying for many people, especially those who are struggling to make ends meet, and Ofgem will ensure energy companies support their customers in any way they can."

"The energy market has faced a huge challenge due to the unprecedented increase in global gas prices, a once in a 30-year event," he added.

"Ofgem's role as energy regulator is to ensure that, under the price cap, energy companies can only charge a fair price based on the true cost of supplying electricity and gas."

Adding to potential household overheads, the Bank of England on Thursday raised interest rates from 0.25 per cent to 0.5 per cent as it attempts to tame rampant inflation.

Richard Walker, managing director of supermarket chain Iceland, told BBC radio that 2022 "is probably set to be the hardest year ever for many UK families".

"We are talking about energy prices and costs directly affecting consumers but that is also going to have a huge knock-on effect for businesses too."

"In terms of grocery retail, every supermarket will be raising its prices."

Sunak's announcement came just hours after energy giant Shell announced net profits in 2021 of US\$20.1bn due to oil and gas price rises due to increased demand and uncertainty.

Instead of discounts and rebates on household gas and electricity bills, Britain's main opposition Labour party has proposed a windfall tax on energy companies.

AFP

Omantel signs deal with A'Namaa Poultry to provide ICT solutions

Oman Telecommunications Company (Omantel) and A'Namaa Poultry Co, one of the subsidiaries of Oman Food Investment Holding Company (OFIC), signed a key agreement to bring world class technology solutions that will enable A'Namaa Poultry to digitalise its processes for efficient operations and business management.

As per the agreement, which was signed by Eng Yaqoob bin Mansoor al Ruqaiishi, CEO of Al Namma Poultry Company, and Talal bin Said al Mamari, Omantel CEO, Omantel will provide end-to-end ICT solutions, meeting A'Namaa Poultry project's long term goals, to include unique state-of-the-art Technology solutions that are implemented for the first time in the region, through Omantel's technology partner 'SAP'.

The work on project is being built in Al-Safa area in the wilayat of Ibri at a total cost of RO100mn, which is amongst the latest food security projects in the Sultanate. The project aims to contribute in achieving a self-sufficiency in poultry's industry, and it is considered to be one of the mega projects in the region aiming to produce 60,000 tonnes (per annum) of poultry meat, with the highest technical specifications and using the latest technologies.

Commenting on the signing of the agreement, Mamari, said, "We are pleased to sign this agreement with Al Namma Poultry Co and are proud of the trust placed on us as the main provider of integrated telecommunication and ICT services in



the sultanate. There is no doubt that a national project of this size using the latest production technologies will require specialised and cost-effective solutions that would meet the specific and customized needs of such project".

"The solutions that we will provide to this project includes new and first of its kind in this region ICT solutions for hatchery and meat management. At Omantel, we seek to capitalise on our experience, global and local partnerships, the latest

technologies and communication solutions to meet the needs of our customers", he added.

On his part, Ruqaiishi, said, "The signing of this agreement reflects a key milestone in the progress of A'Namaa Poultry project, which is nearing completion. Through this agreement, we seek to utilise the latest technologies and ERP systems to ensure efficient and reliable commercial and technical operations. We also seek to emphasise on the importance of

collaboration and partnerships between Omani companies, an objective that we have always sought to achieve through all our previous agreements".

Waheed al Hamaid, managing director of SAP Oman expressed his gratitude for the role played by SAP Oman in providing Omani companies with state-of-the-art technologies through its partnership with Omantel saying, "We look forward at SAP Oman and Omantel to deliver tailored solutions that enhance productivity and efficiency of the

daily operations of A'Namaa Poultry Company".

Omantel is the sultanate's first and leading integrated telecommunications services and ICT solutions provider, enabling the digital society to flourish, allowing new ways of doing business and delivering a world of information. While striving to ensure optimum customer satisfaction, Omantel plays a key social role to provide the required support and subsidy to all sectors of the Omani society.



Microsoft launches new Surface devices in Oman's market

Microsoft announced the general availability of Microsoft Surface Laptop Studio and Surface Pro 8 for organisations across industries in Oman. Built to be modern and essential devices for today's hybrid workforce, the new Surface products protect productivity, promote innovation, and prioritise accessibility, while ensuring the safety and security of all users.

"All sectors have gone through exceptional circumstances and major changes over the past two years. To empower the workforce to further leverage technology to overcome challenges, Microsoft has designed new 'Surface' solutions that enable the workforce to enhance their experiences and drive productivity," said Finn Morris, Surface Business Group director at Microsoft Middle East and Africa.

"We believe these 'Surface' devices will be key enabler of the Sultanate of Oman's ongoing digital transformation. Surface devices integrate seamlessly with Windows 11, ensuring

that collaboration between employees is enhanced with a high level of security," Morris added.

Designed in concert with Windows 11, the new devices reflect Microsoft's commitment towards designing technology that fosters productivity and creativity, while also bringing inclusion and accessibility to the fore. Each new version of Windows unlocks the next generation of hardware innovation. And for the last decade, Surface has been at the forefront - challenging convention, pioneering new experiences and creating entirely new categories of devices.

In addition to ensuring productivity and innovation in the modern workplace, Microsoft is launching the Microsoft Ocean Plastic Mouse as a step forward in Microsoft's larger sustainability journey. In keeping with the organisation's goal to have 100 per cent recyclable devices and packages by 2030, the new mouse is made with 20 per cent recycled ocean plastic and its packaging is 100 per cent recyclable.



Top leaders from IBM, Pepsico and global media groups to headline ABLF Talks on Feb 8

The increasing digitisation of media and the opportunities and challenges it presents will be at the core of the discussions at the fourth hybrid edition of the ABLF Talks, the powerful monthly leadership series organised by the Asian Business Leadership Forum (ABLF). Held at the Dubai Cares Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai, on February 8, this month's edition will also feature insights and opinions from prominent business leaders on technology and the economy.

The ABLF Talks, held under the patronage of Sheikh Nahyan Mubarak al Nahyan, UAE Cabinet Member and Minister of Tolerance and Co-existence in UAE and in association with the UAE Ministry of Economy and Dubai Cares, a UAE-based global philanthropic organisation, has been bringing together top Asian leaders in discussions around crucial socio-economic issues for the last 17 months which will continue till the end of the Expo 2020 Dubai in March.

At the conclave on February

8, the first session will feature Saad Toma, general manager - Middle East and Africa, IBM who will shed light on the company's strategies to aid organisations in their digital journey through the pandemic. His observations and experiences, especially over the past couple of years, will provide some valuable insights into the cutting-edge technology deployed by IBM and others in the industry to adapt to an ever-changing environment.

The long road to economic recovery in a pandemic-ravaged world will be at the core of Aamer Sheikh, CEO - Middle East Business Unit, PepsiCo's session. Sheikh will not only share his thoughts on the way ahead for the industry but also spotlight the role of the Expo 2020 Dubai in bolstering investments in the UAE.

A key highlight of this edition of the ABLF Talks will be a panel discussion on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in the wake of the digitisation of media. With the pandemic accelerating digitisation, there has been a huge im-

pact on traditional as well as new media and this session of the conclave, featuring some of the top leaders from media and finance in the region, will explore the new trends in depth. The panel will have Mohammed Y Burhan, CEO, CNBC Arabia, Alan Griffin, CEO of Khaleej Times, Manoj Mathew, Executive VP, territory head (MENA, Turkey and Pakistan), Zee Network and Olivier Crespian, CEO and co-founder of Zand.

As always, the event will be streamed virtually to an audience of 30,000 through the ABLF City, the cutting-edge virtual platform.

The ABLF is brought to you by a powerful line-up of partners including the US\$45bn Indian conglomerate Aditya Birla Group, leading digital bank Zand, Etisalat along with CNBC Arabia (broadcast partner) and Hindustan Times, Khaleej Times, Muscat Daily, Al Bayan, Zee TV, WION (media partners) and UNICEF.

To attend the ABLF Talks Conclaves virtually, register for free at www.ablf.com

2022 Renault Koleos: Engineered to demand attention, make heads turn

Renault's first SUV the Koleos remains a favourite among customers and those looking for something different, which speaks volumes about the innovativeness that the car was built on.

Well-defined edges make the overall profile of the 2022 Koleos appear solid and athletic and is one of the most prominent features in this new version. A great combination of power and refinement, the Koleos makes its presence felt with large shoulders and muscular side panels that are further enhanced by a robust frontend; broad, smart-looking tires; and a distinctly large wheelbase.

A spokesperson for Renault Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles, said, "The 2022 car is engineered to demand attention and make heads turn. Offering off-road capability with its all-wheel drive transmission, Renault Koleos stands out with its assertive exterior design and enhanced interior comfort. With its athletic profile, robust front end, roomy seats, taut lines underscored with chrome, Renault Koleos allows owners to take their journey with confidence. Featuring a powerful and efficient new engine and more on-board technologies Renault Koleos fully embodies the values of the top of the Renault line-up."

The all-mode 4x4-i transmission results in a car that promises owners all the power and comfort they would require on the road. The engine can be switched between two- and four-wheel driving giving drivers the liberty and flexibility to choose their own experience.

The car is engineered to mirror the comfort of being home,



with spacious leg space, ventilated memory seats, a breathable cabin. With a choice of colours for the seats, owners can choose what defines them the best - for a roomier feeling, one can opt for lighter shades, while darker ones can be picked for more assertive looks. The 2022 Koleos also comes with all-new black titanium trims that replace its predecessor's wooden trims. The car's ambient lighting, Apple CarPlay/Android Auto connectivity, R-LINK 2 all make for a memorable drive each time. The 2022 Renault Koleos is certainly a notch above when it comes to contemporary SUVs that set out to offer a bit of everything to cater to all customers, no matter their drives.

The 2022 Renault Koleos also comes with additional features, such as rich acoustics with the BOSE audio system, lighting options, multimedia, navigation, Bluetooth and driving assistance

systems in addition to easy park assist.

Renault Koleos has been capturing everyone's attention in Oman with its charismatic, features rich and packed with safety attributes. If you are looking for a spacious SUV with elegant styling and unparalleled four-wheel drive technology, Renault Koleos is the car to buy.

Sabeel al Mashari from Muscat, said, "Renault Koleos stands out with its assertive exterior design and enhanced interior comfort. The wide-ranging suite of driver-assistance systems and infotainment options it offers make it a top brand."

Afrah al Kharusi from Nizwa is fascinated with the brand's easy trunk access and hand-free function. She said, "With a sensor located under the bumper, all you need is a simple gesture with your foot to open the boot with ease. It is very practical when your hands are full when return-

ing from office or shopping. I also like its 8.7" touchscreen navigation with R-Link2 system & Bose sound, 5 colour ambient lighting."

Sameer Zedjali from Rusayl likes Renault Koleos for its strong and high-end design, comfort and outstanding performance. He said, "Koleos extends a variety of features that are among the most capable in the market. I particularly like its blind spot warning, auto park assists and remote start engine with timer option."

The model's spacious cabin inspired Taamir al Hinai from Muscat into buying a Renault Koleos. "Renault Koleos has a 2,705 mm wheelbase - for a total vehicle length of 4,673mm - counts amongst the longest in the class and allows Koleos to boast record-breaking interior space to position itself as a D-segment SUV," Taamir said.

Bank Muscat named Best Private Bank in Oman

Bank Muscat Private, the Sultanate's premier banking service targeted at exclusive high net-worth individual customers, has once again won the prestigious 'Best Private Bank in Oman' award from *Global Finance* for 2022. The accolade adds to a number of other international awards received in the past and is yet one more feather in its cap in delivering exceptional wealth management solutions to a highly-discerning client base over the past two decades.

Speaking on the occasion, Amjad Iqbal al Lawati, deputy general manager - customer segments, said, "Bank Muscat is delighted to win this prestigious award from *Global Finance* once again, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all our valued customers for their trust and strong confidence in the bank. By repeatedly winning ac-



Amjad Iqbal al Lawati

colades, Bank Muscat has highlighted the highest standards of professionalism achieved by conforming to international norms, standards and practices. Going ahead, our customers can continue to expect outstanding customer-centric services and products that will take care of their financial and wealth management needs."

Bank Muscat Private's offerings are powered by its knowl-



edgeable and well trained base of relationship managers (RMs), who work closely with each client to offer highly customised financial and wealth management services and solutions. Pri-

ivate banking clients have access to a complete suite of investment options in global asset classes through its wealth management platform and tie-ups with international counter par-

ties. The range of solutions offered to its clients includes stocks, bonds, ETFs and mutual funds across global markets. Bank Muscat Private Banking also offers selective exposure to

private equity funds, real estate funds and commodity ETFs; offshore banking and portfolio management through globally reputed counterparties. Private Banking clients also receive regular research reports and briefings covering investment ideas, global macroeconomic outlook and updates on key economic and geographic events impacting performance of various asset classes.

An exclusive Private Banking VISA Infinite credit card, a VISA Platinum debit card, luxury car finance and yacht finance are available for Private Banking clients along with competitive rates for deposits, loans and foreign exchange.

Clients also enjoy 1 per cent cashback rewards on all transactions made through the Private Visa Infinite credit card. The Infinite credit card also facilitates

unlimited access to 1,000+ airport lounges globally, complimentary chauffeur service to and from Muscat International Airport, special offers at over 900 luxury hotels around the world, multi-trip travel insurance and access to a Global Concierge Service. With the innumerable features and benefits on offer, Bank Muscat Private clients can look forward to a highly personalised financial journey.

Bank Muscat remains committed to further expanding its innovative services for Private Banking clients and providing an exclusive and unmatched banking experience. It must be noted that earlier in 2021, Bank Muscat's Private Banking won 3 prestigious awards for being the Best Private Bank in Oman from EMEA Finance, Professional Wealth Management and *Global Finance*.

Khimji's House of Travel chooses Sabre to fuel its growth, expansion

Khimji's House of Travel, one of the leading travel management companies in the Sultanate of Oman, has signed a multiyear agreement with Sabre Corporation, the leading software and technology company that powers the global travel industry, to expand its operation and fuel its growth.

The agreement has reaffirmed more than a decade of partnership between the two companies.

Under this agreement, Khimji's House of Travel will leverage Sabre's broad portfolio of technology solutions, and deploy its industry leading platform, Sabre Red 360, to deliver an intelligent and consultative service to travellers and create highly personalised offers for its customers. It will utilise its management solutions, such as automated exchanges and refunds, to drive operational efficiency and excellence.

"This challenging travel landscape has not deterred us from moving forward," said Cashio Vettom, general manager, Khimji's House of Travel. "Our renewed partnership with Sabre will help us enable our growth and expansion plans, while deploying intelligent solutions to



respond to the evolving market trends." Sabre has been working to realise its long-term vision for a personalised travel marketplace and have announced last year the development of Sabre Travel AI, an industry-first technology that will utilise state-of-the-art artificial intelligence and machine learning capabilities to deliver highly relevant and personalised content that better meets the demands of today's traveller.

"The current traveller demands a new level of personalisation, increased choice, control and flexibility. We believe that Sabre has the experience, technology, innovation and support to help us better respond to these expectations".

Vettom added.

Khimji's House of Travel operates in both leisure and corporate sectors and will use Sabre's marketplace of more than 400 airlines, 750,000 hotel properties, and hundreds of tour operators, rail, car and cruise providers, to sell customised travel packages from suppliers around the world.

"Our extensive global network, niche expertise and innovative technology have positioned us as the 'go-to' partner in Oman during the pandemic," said John Matthew, Oman country manager, Sabre Travel Network Middle East. "We are committed to support Khimji's House of Travel growth and expansion strategy."

NBO signs agreement with Muscat Bay to provide customer mortgage financing

National Bank of Oman (NBO) has signed a strategic partnership with Muscat Bay to provide finance facilities for buyers interested in purchasing a property within the luxury integrated development.

Starting at just 4.55 per cent for three years and 4.99 per cent for longer, NBO's mortgage and housing loans come with easy approvals, no maximum cap and special rates on life and property insurance.

Tariq Atiq, chief retail and digital banking officer at NBO, said, "Adding to a growing number of tie-ups with leading developers and real estate marketing agencies, we're delighted to be partnering with Muscat Bay. Offering a prime location and a range of highly sought-after properties, buyers are provided plenty of options to make their dream home a reality, while accessing the unbeatable benefits that come with our home loans."

Paul Jessup, senior vice president at Muscat Bay, said, "We are pleased to partner with the National Bank of Oman to facilitate attractive financing options for prospective buyers and residents looking to purchase their luxury home here at Oman's unique resort village."

"By offering favourable home loans to Omanis and expats,



NBO is the perfect complement to our growing sophisticated community, both from Oman, the GCC and beyond," Jessup added.

"Now is the perfect time to invest in Muscat Bay because the launch of our 5 Star Jumeirah beach hotel will open our offer to a global market, creating more demand for the final few units to

be sold in phase 1. Muscat Bay's residential offering will also benefit from the Jumeirah Residents Club, which will allow the community to receive a range of luxury services and promotions from the 5 Star operator; a unique concept in the market which will help consolidate Muscat Bay's position as Oman's truly world class integrated re-

sult," he said.

NBO's personal and housing loans are part of the bank's commitment to delivering hassle-free, competitive financial solutions to fit all. Processed quickly and efficiently, the bank also provides borrowers a host of benefits including flexible payment terms, additional financing, and much more.



3-day deal with double credit on Ooredoo's Hala recharges

Because everyone loves a freebie, Ooredoo is offering up to 100 per cent bonus credit on Hala recharges. Available for three days only, from February 6-8, users opting for RO10 credit will get RO10 absolutely free, while those paying RO5 will get RO2.5 free, with credit valid for 30 days.

Redeemable on a wide-range of services including prepaid plans, add-ons, streaming, and pay-as-you-go, all prepaid customers are spoiled for choice with a mix of data, voice and social data. There's never been a better time to chat, surf, play and browse, so say 'Hala'

and don't miss out.

Making it an even more amazing deal that should not be missed, Ooredoo's Hala SIM is absolutely free. All new and existing customers have to do is select their plan of choice and enjoy data with voice, data only, or straightforward credit, from as little as RO2. Combining great connectivity and an awesome user experience, it's the latest way Ooredoo is enriching its customers' digital lives.

Customers can access the bonus credit by dialling *115*2*Recharge code, or at any Ooredoo Store or certified dealer.

OCS Infotech organises open day for employees

Oman Computer Services Company, 'OCS Infotech', recently held an 'Open Day' event for its employees at Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Hotel.

The event included several recreational activities such as team building activities, competitions among employees and the honouring of the company's high-performance employees for the year 2021.

The event was attended by over 80 employees.

Commenting on this event, Sharifa Said al Houti, human resources and administrative affairs manager of OCS Infotech said, "This event aims to enhance the institutional values of OCS Infotech staff, develop them and refine their skills through a set of activities organised during the event."

"In order to enhance the spirit of teamwork, many group competitions and entertainment also took place. Conducting this event is aligned with the framework of celebrating the results achieved by the company during 2021 and urging all staff to achieve even



more positive results during this year," she added.

In turn, the employees of OCS Infotech expressed their happiness with this initiative.

They showcased their appreciation of the company's role in

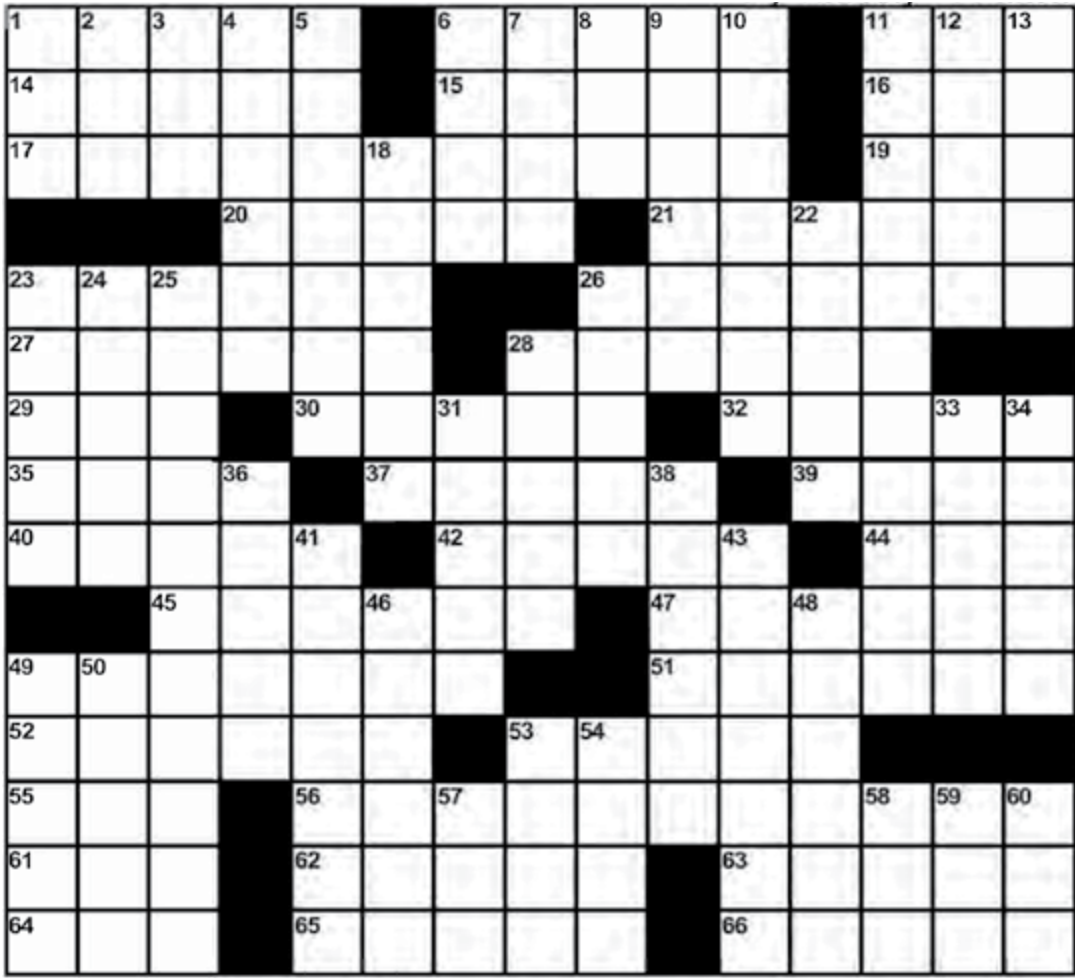
holding such events, which aim to enhance and develop the spirit of cooperation among employees.

OCS Infotech is one of the first Omani establishments in the technical field and one of the key

companies of The Zubair Corporation. It hosts over four decades of experience in developing technology solutions for data storage, virtualisation, network solutions, cybersecurity, data centre and infrastructure

management, disaster recovery, business continuity and other related services. The company also provides clients with integrated consulting services for comprehensive technical transformation.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Comments that sting
6) "Donna" or "vera" opening
11) Infant's soft food
14) Become waterlogged
15) Continental cash
16) The whole shootin' match
17) Littering thieves?
19) Lead-in for "Bravo"
20) Functioning currently
21) Worthy of holy veneration
23) Units of light flow
26) Nerve cells
27) Negative battery terminals
28) Card carrier
29) French vineyard
30) One of Satan's minions
32) Feline nickname
35) Show of affection
37) Kind of typing
39) Metric weight
40) Type of grain
42) Trousers fold
44) Thanksgiving dinner request
45) Checked IDs

4 7) Core groups?
49) More saline
51) Catches on to
52) Up and at 'em
53) Cancel, as a liftoff
55) Bird in the "Arabian Nights"
56) Like delicious chow for a chow?
61) Seek an answer
62) Not perfectly round
63) Piano specialist
64) Various guys
65) High times?
66) One for the books?

DOWN

1) Network on the telly
2) "Mode" lead-in
3) Become decayed
4) Mollycoddled
5) Astounded
6) Cribbage needs
7) _of thumb
8) CP A's nest-egg suggestion
9) Food tidbit
10) Battery's partner in crime?
11) Payments for some high-maintenance

birds?
12) "Men in Black" creature
13) Walks laboriously
18) Autumn apple
22) Haunted house noise
23) Is deficient
24) Tear open, ironically
25) What the rodent match-making club wants?
26) John _ Gamer (FDR's first veep)
28) Is willing to
31) One with a long, sad face
33) Censor's insertion
34) Lotus position instructors
36) They prevent matress sags
38) Rescuer's shout
41) Used the fitting room
43) Castle features
46) From the beginning
48) Racket-stringer's material, once
49) Silverman of comedy
50) Left one's seat
53) Once more, country-style?

54) Physiques, informally
57) Baby's first word, sometimes
58) Ms. Yoko
59) " ... _ the fields we go
60) Empty, as a well

NOTE PAD

ALERT AWASH VIE
DEBAR FOLIO AND
SUBDISTRICT TAI
NEED FAINT
REBUKER SCONCES
EVOKED CORONA
CARET DONUT NEO
ODDS WINED ACER
NEE SAVES WEIRD
RAMROD SORTIE
DISRUPT ANNOYER
ANTED KNIT
CPA GOINGTOTOWN
HUT ERROL NOVAE
ATE SKATE START

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

If there's one thing you really hate, it's being told to slow down or stop. You constantly need to take action, sometimes forgetting whether it's right or wrong. Feeling stalled or delayed just doesn't sit well with you, but for now there's simply no other course of action. While you wait, don't just think of this as another lost afternoon biding your time while others procrastinate. You might be stalled for a good reason!

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Stop dwelling on your past, or at least the painful parts of it! You've done your share of that before, and how has it worked out for you? Take a good look at your future instead, and think about all the positive things that lie ahead. Find someone you can talk to who can remind you of what you've dealt with before that was pretty worthwhile. It's also a good time to just act like you were born yesterday.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

If you've got plans to get out of town (or just head out for a good time), you need to be especially on your toes right now. It's just one of those days when anything could happen. Sadly, it might be a Murphy's Law kind of day, in which whatever can go wrong, will, and in the silliest way possible! Your mission is to plan for any eventuality and understand that it's all temporary. You need to take all precautions to safeguard your leisure.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You're hardworking and diligent, some would say stubborn, but there's much more to life than simply making sure you take care of your responsibilities. Try another kind of responsibility like the dues you owe your family and friends. Remember the people who complain because they haven't seen you in so long? Give yourself (and everyone) a break. Take some time for yourself.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You're likely to become somewhat more interested than usual in your physical body. You may decide that it's time to get serious about your health or run into someone who's so alluring that you start thinking about how to make them interested in you. Either way, that means you're going on a self-improvement kick! It's likely to take a while, so don't worry about losing interest in it in a few weeks or months.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You're not quite sure what to do about your latest financial issue, especially when it comes to sharing resources. Since you don't have enough data to work with yet, your best bet is to find the one person you're sure can help thanks to their trustworthiness and their experience with similar financial matters. For now, you need to sit tight. Times like this aren't made for action; they're made for careful thought.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Once you get your work situation back under control, it's time (past time, really) for you to tend to more emotional matters. There's good news: the person you want to speak with is just as eager to let you know what's going on. Tonight is something of a reward, so try to forget about anything other than just enjoying their company and making sure they enjoy yours. You should be glad you did!

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You've got plenty of friends from all walks of life collected from school, work, and your neighborhood, not to mention random strangers who were lucky enough to bump into you at the right time. Someone you haven't heard from in far too long is just about due to reconnect soon, and it should happen in a splendid, even lavish style. You'd better clear off your agenda just in case it comes in the next few minutes.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

It's really not like you to air your feelings in public, whether positive or negative. You're not crazy about letting the rest of the world in on your deepest emotions, and that's perfectly understandable. You do feel the need to talk with someone about how you're doing, though, but don't worry that you might choose the wrong person. You can home in on the right one unerringly.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

If you don't know how to deal with a financial issue that's been bugging you, try not to make any changes just yet. Just keep doing what you've been doing until you figure out what you've been doing wrong. In the meantime, just wait and ask a lot of questions. You've got friends who can advise you, and actually know what they're talking about. Ask for help before you make any big decisions.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You've got so much to do and so little time to do it! Of course, if anyone can manage to take care of it all, it's you, because you're used to handling this kind of stress on a semi-regular basis. You need to get an early start, though, and plan on staying up late. You might not be able to rest until it's all over. You've been here before, so you know that it should all work out.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Someone comes to you asking to let them confide in you, and you're more than happy to oblige. You might want to suggest that they avoid bringing it up with anyone else, since it's likely sensitive and you're not sure about the recent gossip levels. It's highly probable that you're the only one they can really trust to keep quiet for the time being! Aferall they know that you are the perfect listner and you won't judge them.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Blue Mountain Coffee, noted for its mild flavour and lack of bitterness (the beans of which are the flavour base of Tia Maria coffee liqueur), is grown in which country?
A. Spain
B. Cuba
C. Brazil
D. Jamaica

2. The French word 'toque' is the name given to which of these?
A. Horse-drawn taxi
B. Marijuana cigarette
C. A type of small hat
D. Cooked lobster

3. Swedish physician, global health expert, data visionary and public speaker Dr Hans Rosling is associated with extensive research into the cause of what paralytic disease?
A. Bell's palsy
B. Konzo
C. Sickie cell disease
D. Lyme disease

Answers: 1. D 2. C 3. B

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

N	C	L	S
P	S	U	S
K	E	P	A
O	G	H	A

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

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

WORD BUILDER

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Morocco mourns ‘little Rayan’ after daring well rescue bid fails

Ighrane, Morocco - Morocco was in shock on Sunday after emergency crews found Rayan Oram, a five-year-old boy dead at the bottom of a well in a tragic end to a five-day rescue operation that gripped the nation and the world.

The ordeal of ‘little Rayan’ since he fell down the 32-metre well on Tuesday gained global attention and sparked an outpouring of sympathy online, with the Arabic Twitter hashtag #SaveRayan trending.

“The fall of a child who reminded the whole world of the values of humanity,” read one Moroccan newspaper headline, while others bemoaned the ‘tragic epilogue’ that had brought ‘sadness and shock’.

The boy’s father said he had been repairing the well when the boy fell in, close to the family home in the village of Ighrane in the Rif mountains of northern Morocco.

“Little angel, you fought until the end, a hero,” said one Twitter user called Anouar, while another said ‘he has brought people together around him’.

Throughout the major digging operation to extricate him from the bottom of the well shaft, authorities had cautioned that they did not know whether he was alive.

The shaft, just 45cm across, was too narrow for the boy to be reached directly, and widening it was deemed too risky - so earth-movers dug a wide slope into the hill to reach him from the side.

The operation made the landscape resemble a construction



The parents of Rayan Oram arrive at the scene where rescue teams try to remove the boy from a well shaft in Ighrane in Chefchaouen on Saturday (AFP)

site, and red-helmeted civil defence personnel had at times been suspended by rope, as if on a cliff face.

From hope to sorrow

Rescue crews, using bulldozers and front-end loaders, had excavated the surrounding red earth down to the level where the boy was trapped, and drill teams began creating a horizontal tunnel to reach him from the side.

On Saturday morning, the head of the rescue efforts, Abdelhadi Tamrani, said images from a camera sent down

showed the child ‘lying on his side’, and that while it was ‘impossible’ to confirm he was alive there were ‘very high hopes’.

But progress slowed to a snail’s pace as the drill teams worked by hand to avoid any vibrations that might bring the brittle soil down on the stricken child, local authorities said.

Late on Saturday evening, crowds cheered when the rescue workers broke through the final stretch of earth to reach the boy.

Volunteer digger Ali Sahraoui cleared the last soil away with his hands, becoming a ‘hero’ on so-

cial media. But soon after, AFP correspondents saw the boy’s parents walk down the slope into the horizontal tunnel, visibly crushed, before returning and boarding an ambulance without saying a word.

Race against time

It was Morocco’s royal cabinet that announced he had been found dead.

“Following the tragic accident which cost the life of the child Rayan Oram, His Majesty King Mohammed VI called the parents of the boy who died after falling down the well,” a state-

ment from the royal court said.

The date of the funeral has not been announced but according to Muslim tradition the funeral should take place swiftly, potentially as early as Sunday.

No official information has been released on a possible autopsy. Huge crowds of thousands of people had gathered to watch the rescue beside the giant pit, singing songs to urge on the diggers, who worked through the nights.

Many of the watchers prayed, chanting in unison ‘Allahu akbar’ (God is greatest). Workers had tried to get oxy-

Iran: Talks failed to produce ‘balance’

Tehran, Iran - Iran’s top security official said on Sunday that Washington and Tehran had so far failed to produce ‘balance’ in their commitments during the Vienna talks aimed at restoring the nuclear deal.

“Despite limited progress in the #ViennaTalks, we are still far from achieving the necessary balance in the commitments of the parties,” Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani said in a Twitter post.

“Political decisions in #Washington are requirements for balance of commitments to reach a good agreement.” Iran is engaged in negotiations with Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States to revive the 2015 deal - the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

After months of stalemate, progress has been made in recent weeks to revive the agreement that was supposed to prevent Iran from acquiring an atomic bomb, a goal it has always denied pursuing.

Former US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the pact in 2018 and reimposed tough economic sanctions on Iran, prompting the Islamic republic to begin pulling back from its commitments under the deal. Talks on reviving the agreement were halted last week and the negotiators returned to their capitals for consultations.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, in a phone call with Iran’s foreign minister on Saturday, said he expected all parties to come to Vienna with a clear agenda to reach an agreement.

AFP



This file photo shows US soldiers accompanied by members of SDF gathering in the neighbourhood of Ghwayran in Hasakeh, last month (AFP)

Minors still detained in prison in Syria attacked by IS: UN

Beirut, Lebanon - The United Nations said on Sunday that minors were still being detained in a northeast Syria prison attacked last month by the Islamic State (IS) group, calling their conditions ‘precarious’.

International rights groups, including Save the Children and Human Rights Watch have previously said that 700 boys had been in the Ghwayran jail before the January 20 operation.

Aged between 12 and 18, they include many who had adult relatives inside the prison and were transferred from nearby displacement camps housing thousands of children of fighters.

“UNICEF met with some of the children still detained in the Ghwayran detention centre,” the UN’s child agency said in a statement. “Despite some of the basic services now in place, the situation of these children is incredibly precarious,” it added, without specifying how many minors were still detained.

Farhad Shami of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces told AFP that ‘hundreds’ of minors were still being held in Ghwayran, refusing to disclose an

exact figure. “They are being kept in a safe place,” he said

The IS prison break attempt from the Ghwayran jail in Hasakeh city triggered a week of clashes inside and around the Kurdish-run facility, leaving hundreds dead, before Kurdish-led forces recaptured the jail.

It was the largest militant operation in Syria since the group’s territorial defeat in 2019.

UNICEF said it was working to immediately provide care for the minors and confirmed that it ‘is ready to help support a new safe place in the northeast of Syria to take care of the most vulnerable children’.

On Sunday, the SDF said in a statement that UNICEF was the first UN agency granted permission to visit the jail since the attack. “The delegation was provided with information on the status of the Deash-linked teenagers,” the SDF added, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

Video footage of the visit posted on social media networks showed around a dozen boys, many covered in blankets, in a prison cell.

AFP

‘N Korea pressed ahead with weapons development’

United Nations - North Korea pressed ahead with the development of its nuclear and missile programmes last year despite international sanctions, according to a confidential United Nations report seen by AFP on Saturday.

Pyeongyang is under major sanctions over its weapons programmes, including a ban on exports of coal, iron, lead, textiles, seafood and other products.

While no nuclear tests or launches of intercontinental ballistic missiles were reported last year, North Korea kept developing ‘its capability for production of nuclear fissile materials’, ac-



This file photo shows people watching a news broadcast of a North Korean missile test, at a railway station in Seoul on January 30 (AFP)

cording to the report, which was compiled by sanctions monitors

and shared with the 15 UN Security Council members.

“Maintenance and development of DPRK’s nuclear and ballistic missile infrastructure continued, and DPRK continued to seek material, technology and know-how for these programmes overseas, including through cyber-means and joint scientific research,” said the report, using the initials of North Korea’s official name.

The document also said North Korea resorted to cyberattacks, especially on cryptocurrency assets, as an important source of government revenue.

The UN experts noted a sharp increase in the quality of illicit refined petroleum imports

last year, ‘but at a level much lower than that of previous years’.

While Western countries have steadily pushed for more pressure on Pyongyang, Beijing and Moscow have called for easing sanctions on humanitarian grounds and urged more flexibility when dealing with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Pyongyang conducted an unprecedented seven weapons tests in January, including launching its most powerful missile since 2017 as it hinted it could restart nuclear and long-range missile tests.

AFP

Philippines’ raucous election campaign season to kick off

Manila, Philippines - Philippine election candidates will hit the hustings on Tuesday for the official start of campaigning, with the son and namesake of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos leading the presidential race as he seeks the ultimate revival of the family brand.

Political scions, celebrities and ex-convicts are among the contenders vying for more than 18,000 posts in the May 9 polls, with most interest on the contest to succeed authoritarian firebrand Rodrigo Duterte, whose six-year presidency has been marked by foul-mouthed tirades and a deadly drug war.

More than 35 years after the Philippines emerged from his father’s dictatorship, voter surveys show Ferdinand Marcos Jr heading towards a landslide victory as a social media campaign cranks up support and, critics say, whitewashes the clan’s history.

Boosted by a formidable alliance with first daughter and



This file photo shows Ferdinand Marcos Jr along with his family members posing for photos after filing his candidacy for 2022 presidential race, in Pasay, Metro Manila on October 6, last year (AFP)

vice-presidential candidate Sara Duterte, Marcos Jr - one of the most polarising figures in the Philippines - has vowed ‘to unify the country and give our fellowmen the future that they deserve’. In the Philippines, the president and vice-president are elected separately.

Efforts to disqualify Marcos Jr over a decades-old tax convic-

tion sparked a public spat between election officials, while allegations of cocaine snorting and corruption among presidential candidates have fuelled a political atmosphere of chaos and skulduggery.

As usual, personality will trump politics for many of the roughly 65mn voters deciding who to support.

“This will be a campaign dominated by personalities and political dynasties, rather than a contest over policies or economic ideologies,” said Eurasia Group analyst Peter Mumford.

Outgoing presidents usually identify their preferred successor, who they hope will keep them out of prison as much as protect their legacy. But Duterte

has been silent since his choice, loyal aide Senator Christopher Go, pulled out of the contest.

Polls show Marcos Jr, popularly known as ‘Bongbong’, with a huge lead in a field of five credible candidates for president.

Some analysts are still cautious about calling a winner in a race that only requires the victor to get more votes than anyone else. Vice-President Leni Robredo - the opposition candidate and nemesis of both Marcos Jr and Duterte - is a distant second, ahead of celebrity mayor Francisco Domagoso, retired boxing champion Manny Pacquiao and ex-police chief Panfilo Lacson.

“Nothing is set in stone - it’s a very fluid race,” political analyst Richard Heydarian told a briefing.

Victory for Marcos Jr would mark the ultimate political comeback for his controversial clan, which was chased into US exile after the patriarch’s humiliating downfall in 1986.

AFP

Russia headed for an all-out invasion of Ukraine, say US officials citing intel

Washington, US - Russia has stepped up preparations for an all-out invasion of Ukraine but it is not clear if Moscow has decided to take such a step, US officials have said citing intelligence assessments.

Russia has assembled 110,000 troops along the border with its pro-Western neighbour but US intelligence has not determined if President Vladimir Putin has actually decided to invade, according to the officials who in recent days briefed members of Congress and European allies.

The officials warned lawmakers that the assembled Russian force on the frontier is growing at a rate that would give Putin the force he needs for a full-scale invasion - some 150,000 soldiers - by mid-February.

They said Putin wants all possible options at his disposal: from a limited campaign in the pro-Russian Donbas region of Ukraine to a full-scale invasion.

Russia denies that it is planning to invade Ukraine.

If Moscow does opt for a full-scale attack, the invading force could take the capital Kyiv and topple President Volodymyr Zelensky in a matter of 48 hours, the officials said.

They estimated such an attack would leave 25,000 to



A military instructor teaches civilians to use Molotov cocktails during a training session at an abandoned factory in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv on Sunday (AFP)

50,000 civilians dead, along with 5,000 to 25,000 Ukrainian soldiers and 3,000 to 10,000 Russian ones. It could also trigger a refugee flood of one to five million people, mainly into Poland, the officials added.

Special forces
President Joe Biden has decided to send American forces to

Poland to protect NATO members, as diplomats work furiously to try to persuade Russia to pull its troops back from the border with Ukraine.

The first contingent of US soldiers arrived on Saturday.

Russia has also announced what it calls joint military manoeuvres with Belarus, where it has sent several battalions to the

north of Kyiv and in the Brest region, not far from the border with Poland.

US intelligence has concluded that Russia is continuing to muster a major military force on its border with Ukraine.

Two weeks ago, a total of 60 Russian army battalions were positioned to the north, east and south of Ukraine, particularly in

the Crimean peninsula, which Russia annexed after an invasion in 2014. But on Friday, there were 80 battalions and 14 more were en route from elsewhere in Russia, US officials said.

They added that some 1,500 Russian special forces soldiers known as Spetsnaz arrived along the Ukraine border a week ago.

Naval forces assembling
A major Russian naval force is also positioned in the Black Sea, equipped with five amphibious vessels that could be used to land troops on Ukraine's southern coast, the US officials said.

They added that another six amphibious craft were observed leaving the Barents Sea north of Russia, sailing past Britain and through the Strait of Gibraltar, apparently on their way to the Black Sea. In other deployments, Russia has positioned fighter planes near Ukraine, as well as bombers, missile batteries and anti-aircraft batteries, US officials said.

On Thursday, the United States said it had evidence that Russia was preparing a video depicting a bogus attack by Ukraine that would serve as a pretext for a real Russian assault on Ukraine.

AFP

Diplomatic solution more likely than attack: Ukraine

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukraine's presidency on Sunday insisted the chance of resolving soaring tensions with Russia through diplomacy remained greater than that of an attack, as the US warned Moscow was stepping up preparations for an invasion.

"An honest assessment of the situation suggests that the chance of finding a diplomatic solution for de-escalation is still substantially higher than the threat of further escalation," said presidency advisor Mykhailo Podolyak in a statement.

Podolyak said that Russia had been conducting large-scale troop rotations, manoeuvres and weapon deployments on a regular basis 'to ensure constant massive psychological pressure' since massing forces at Ukraine's border last spring.

"For our intelligence service and our armed forces, this Russian activity comes as absolutely no surprise," he said.

Podolyak pointed out that

Ukraine's Western backers received 'a significant amount' of their intelligence about Russian activities from Kyiv.

"How long will such Russian activity last and for what purpose is it maintained? Only the Kremlin can know the exact answer to this question," he said.

"The task of both Ukraine and our partners is to be prepared for any scenario, and we are fulfilling this task 100 per cent."

The statement came after Washington said its intelligence assessments showed Moscow was stepping up moves towards a potential full-scale invasion, and has in place 70 per cent of the forces it would need for such an attack.

Russia has assembled 110,000 troops along its border with Ukraine but US intelligence had not determined if President Vladimir Putin has actually decided to invade, US officials said.

AFP

African Union condemns coups, dodges Israel vote

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia - The African Union has condemned a recent 'wave' of military coups that has seen an unprecedented number of member states suspended from the bloc, a senior official said on Sunday, the last day of its annual summit.

The putsches were among the main issues expected to be discussed at the summit, along with the AU's ties to Israel and its response to a grinding war in the north of host country Ethiopia.

Less than two weeks before the summit began on Saturday, Burkina Faso became the fourth country to be suspended by the AU after disgruntled soldiers toppled President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré.

Guinea, Mali and Sudan are also currently suspended.

"Every African leader in the assembly has condemned unequivocally... the wave of constitutional changes of government," Bankole Adeoye, head of the AU's Peace and Security Council, told a press conference on Sunday.

"Do your research: At no time in the history of the African Union have we had four countries in one calendar year, in 12 months, been suspended," Adeoye said.

Addressing African foreign ministers ahead of the summit, Moussa Faki Mahamat, chair of the African Union Commission, denounced a 'worrying resurgence' of such military coups.

But the AU has been accused of an inconsistent response, notably by not suspending Chad after a military council took over following the death of longtime President Idriss Deby Itno on the battlefield last April.

And while Adeoye touted the AU's use of suspensions to punish coup leaders, analysts say the body must be more proactive to prevent putsches.

"It is only when crisis hits that we say, 'Gosh, how come this country is falling apart like this so quickly?'" Solomon Dersso, founder of the AU-focused



Bankole Adeoye gives presser in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on Sunday (AFP)

Amani Africa think-tank, told AFP this week.

Israel debate paused
Also on Sunday, leaders agreed to suspend debate on Faki's controversial decision to accept the accreditation of Israel, postponing a potentially divisive vote.

Faki's move last July drew protest from powerful members including South Africa and Algeria which argued that it flew in the face of AU statements supporting the Palestinian Territories. Both countries pushed to have the issue put on the summit agenda.

As the summit opened on Saturday, Faki defended Israel's accreditation, saying it could be 'an instrument in the service of peace' while calling for 'a serene debate'.

He also said the AU's commitment to the Palestinian push for independence was 'unchanging and can only continue to grow stronger'.

Palestinian prime minister Mohammed Shtayyeh, addressing the same opening session, called for Israel's accreditation to be revoked, saying it 'should never be rewarded' for its 'apartheid regime'.

The AU normally prizes consensus, but it was unclear how a vote on the issue would have fared.

A two-thirds majority would have been required to overrule Faki.

Instead a six-country committee will study the issue, diplomats told AFP on Sunday.

Along with South Africa and Algeria, the committee will include Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, who supported Faki's move, as well as Cameroon and Nigeria, the diplomats said.

Ethiopia peace push
It was unclear whether the week-end summit, most of which took place behind closed doors, substantively addressed the 15-month war in Ethiopia, which pits Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government against fighters from the northern Tigray region.

The fact that Ethiopia hosts the AU makes any intervention by the bloc especially delicate, and Faki waited until last August - nine months after fighting began - to appoint Olusegun Obasanjo as a special envoy tasked with trying to broker a ceasefire.

Ethiopia has also held a seat on the Peace and Security Council throughout the conflict, though it failed in its bid to stay on the 15-member body for the next term, diplomats said.

Adeoye said on Sunday it was 'not true' that the AU had been slow to respond to a war that has left thousands dead and, according to the United Nations, driven hundreds of thousands to the brink of starvation.

AFP

COVID curbs: Canada protests gain steam

Ottawa, Canada - More demonstrators poured onto the streets of Ottawa and other Canadian cities on Saturday demanding an end to COVID vaccine mandates, as protests against pandemic restrictions entered their second week.

In the capital, demonstrators huddled around campfires in bone-chilling temperatures and erected portable saunas and bouncy castles for kids outside Parliament, while waving Canadian flags and shouting anti-government slogans.

Their chants of 'freedom' were met with cries of 'go home' by a smaller group of counter-protestors fed up with the week-long occupation of the capital.

The atmosphere, however, appeared more festive - with dancing and fireworks - than a week earlier, when several protesters waved Confederate flags and Nazi symbols and clashed with locals.

The demonstrations, which



Fireworks are set off into the sky near Parliament Hill as supporters against vaccine mandates continue to gather in Ottawa on Saturday (AFP)

started out as protests by truckers angry with the vaccine requirements when crossing the US-Canadian border, have morphed into broader protests against COVID-19 vaccine mandates and restrictions.

Police were out in force and put up barriers to limit vehicle access to the city center, as many thousands of protestors - including two on horseback - joined truckers already jamming

Ottawa streets.

Similar protests were happening in almost every major Canadian city, including Toronto - where a man was charged with assault after throwing a smoke bomb into a crowd.

In Winnipeg, a driver was arrested for slamming his SUV into demonstrators. Four people were treated for minor injuries, police said.

And in southern Alberta

province, truckers continued to block a major border crossing to the US state of Montana.

'Nationwide insurrection'
At an emergency meeting late on Saturday, Ottawa police chief Peter Sloly requested 'an additional surge of resources' to bring an end to what police board chair Diane Deans described as a 'siege' of the capital.

"This group is a threat to our democracy," Deans said. "What we're seeing is bigger than just a city of Ottawa problem, this is a nationwide insurrection. This is madness."

With public anger rising - thousands of residents have complained of harassment by protesters, and an online petition demanding action has drawn 40,000 signatures - Sloly has faced increased pressure to end what he has called an 'unlawful' occupation of the city.

AFP

Cyclone Batsirai kills at least six people, displaces thousands in Madagascar

Mahanoro, Madagascar - Cyclone Batsirai killed at least six people and displaced nearly 48,000 when it struck Madagascar overnight, the national disaster management agency said on Sunday.

Cyclone Batsirai weakened overnight but not before wreaking havoc in the poor Indian Ocean island nation which is still reeling from a deadly tropical storm earlier this year.

The eastern district of Mananjary was lashed with heavy rains and wind before the cyclone made landfall, forcing local residents to weigh down flimsy corrugated iron roofs, an AFP correspondent saw.

The rain will cause flooding across parts of the country, Madagascar's meteorological office said on Sunday.

Batsirai made landfall in Mananjary on Saturday night as an



A man sits on a bench amid trees uprooted and fell on a public garden in Antsirabe following the passage of Cyclone Batsirai on Sunday (AFP)

'intense tropical cyclone', packing winds of 165km per hour, Faly Aritiana Fabien of the country's disaster management agency told AFP. His colleague responsible for risk management in the same agency, Paolo Emilio Raholinarivo, listed the numbers of dead and their location in a text

message to AFP.

However the national meteorological office - which had warned of 'significant and widespread damage' - said on Sunday that 'Batsirai has weakened'.

The cyclone's average wind speed had almost halved to 80km per hour, while the

strongest gusts had fallen back to 110km/h from the 235km/h recorded when it made landfall, Meteo Madagascar said.

Bodies emerge from cemetery
At a cemetery in the eastern town of Mahanoro, overlooking the sea, Marie Viviane Rasoanandrasana, sat on the ground watching over the bodies of her husband, her father-in-law and her daughter.

The waves of the rising sea eroded the sandy hill which was part of graveyard. Several graves were ripped open and some bodies, including those of her family, were exposed. "A few days ago the sea was far away, but this morning I was told the waves had washed away part of the cemetery," the 54-year-old unemployed widow said.

AFP

Queen Elizabeth II backs Camilla to be Queen Consort

London, UK - Queen Elizabeth II on Sunday became the first British monarch to reign for seven decades, expressing her 'sincere wish' for Camilla, the wife of her heir Prince Charles, to ultimately be known as Queen Consort.

Elizabeth II made the announcement in a message renewing her pledge to spend her life serving the nation as she began her Platinum Jubilee in subdued fashion at Sandringham, her estate in eastern England. Britain's longest-serving monarch acceded to the throne aged 25 on February 6, 1952, following the death of her father King George VI.

In a message addressed to the public signed 'Your servant, Elizabeth R', the Queen said late on Saturday she wanted 'to express my thanks to you all for your support'.

She said she wanted to renew a pledge she gave on her 21st birthday 'that my life will always be devoted to your service'.

With the main Platinum Jubilee celebrations set for this summer, the Queen said she hoped the events would 'bring together families and friends, neighbours and communities'.

In a major statement on the future of the royal family, the 95-year-old said: "It is my sincere wish that, when that time comes, Camilla will be known as Queen Consort."

The Queen also said she hoped that when Charles, now 73, becomes monarch, the British people would give him and Camilla 'the same support that you have given me'.

Charles and Camilla, now known as the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall, had a highly publicised adulterous relationship and Camilla was vilified for her role in



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II cuts a cake to celebrate the start of the Platinum Jubilee during a reception in the Ballroom of Sandringham House, the Queen's Norfolk residence on Saturday (AFP)

the break-up of Charles' marriage to Princess Diana.

When the couple married in 2005, the royal family announced that Camilla would become known as Princess Consort due to the sensitivity of the issue,

but she has gradually won plaudits as the future king's loyal wife. The Queen's suggestion means Camilla would be crowned alongside Charles and be known to the public as Queen Camilla, *The Sunday Telegraph*

wrote.

Charles has always been adamant his 'darling wife' should receive the title, *The Sunday Times* reported citing a source, with a spokesperson for the couple saying on Saturday

they were 'touched and honoured' by the news.

'Historic reign'

Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Sunday praised the Queen's 'inspirational sense of duty and unwavering dedication' in a message celebrating the start of her Platinum Jubilee, saying he looks forward to the summer 'when we will be able to come together as a country to celebrate her historic reign'.

Four days of festivities are planned for early June, coinciding with the anniversary of her 1953 coronation, including a military parade and music concert, street parties, a nationwide 'Big Jubilee Lunch' and a 'Platinum Pudding Competition'.

On Monday, there will be ceremonial gun salutes marking Accession Day in London's Green Park, close to Buckingham Palace, and at Edinburgh Castle in Scotland. During her reign, the Queen has remained a constant through periods of huge social and political upheaval - a living link to Britain's post-war and imperial past. In September 2015, she surpassed Queen Victoria's 63 years and seven months on the throne and, despite some health concerns over the past year, her latest message shows she is determined to continue her record-breaking reign.

After husband Philip's death in April last year, the Queen returned to public and official engagements, including hosting world leaders at the G7 summit.

She was forced to slow down on advice from doctors, however, after an overnight hospital stay in October sparked public concern.

Since then, she has largely stayed at Windsor Castle and made few public appearances.

AFP



This file photo shows Princess Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh in a horse-drawn carriage in London in 1947 (AFP)

Queen Elizabeth II's 70 years on the throne: Key dates

London, UK - Here are some of the key moments that have defined Queen Elizabeth II's 70 years on the throne.

1952: Princess to Queen

Princess Elizabeth, then aged 25, was visiting Kenya with her husband, Prince Philip, when her father, King George VI, died aged 56 on February 6, 1952. She cut short the trip and rushed back to Britain.

1953: The Coronation

Queen Elizabeth II's coronation did not happen until the following year. She was crowned at Westminster Abbey on June 2, 1953, in front of 8,500 assembled guests.

The ceremony was watched across the world and led to a surge in sales for television sets.

1977: Silver Jubilee

The Queen's 25 years on the throne saw her reaffirm the vow of lifelong service to Britain and the Commonwealth she had made in a speech aged 21 in 1947.

She toured the country and the Commonwealth. Celebratory street parties provided some respite from the economic gloom at home, marked by industrial decline and strikes.

1992: 'Annus horribilis'

The Queen's eldest son and heir, Prince Charles, separated from Princess Diana, and her second son, Prince Andrew, split from his wife, Sarah.

Her only daughter, Princess Anne, divorced her husband, Mark Phillips. Windsor Castle, her favoured home west of London, was also seriously damaged by fire.

The Queen called the 12 months her 'annus horribilis'.

1997: Death of Diana

Diana's death in a car crash on August 31, 1997 rocked the royal family to the core, provoking rare criticism of the Queen for staying at her Balmoral estate in Scotland.

She eventually returned, the Union Jack was lowered to half-mast at Buckingham

Palace, and the Queen made a televised tribute to Diana, helping to calm public anger.

2002: Golden Jubilee

Celebrations for the Queen's 50 years on the throne came in the same year as the deaths of her own mother and younger sister Margaret, and showed public support for the monarchy. Huge crowds gathered on The Mall in central London to watch Queen guitarist Brian May play the national anthem from the roof of Buckingham Palace after a star-studded pop concert.

2011: Ireland state visit

The Queen's visit to Ireland was the first by a British monarch since the Republic of Ireland won independence in 1922 and saw the republic's biggest-ever security operation.

An address in Irish, plus other symbolic gestures, helped galvanise reconciliation and cement the peace process in Northern Ireland, after years of conflict over British rule.

2012: Olympics and Diamond Jubilee

The Queen and other senior royals visited every region of Britain to mark her 60 years on the throne. Beacons were lit across the country, and a river pageant was held in London. A surprise cameo for the monarch alongside James Bond actor Daniel Craig was a hit at the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics.

2021: COVID, Philip, health fears

The coronavirus pandemic forced the ageing Queen into self-isolation at Windsor, from where she made public appearances over video conference. Prince Philip died aged 99 in April 2021, while later that year fears grew for the Queen's own health after she spent a night in hospital and was forced to cut back her duties.

AFP

UK papers herald future 'Queen Camilla'

London, UK - Britain's Queen Elizabeth II has announced that she wants daughter-in-law Camilla to hold the role of queen consort once her son Charles ascends to the throne, in a major statement timed to mark her unprecedented seventieth jubilee.

The move cemented a remarkable journey to public acceptance for Camilla, after being vilified for her role in the break-up of Charles' marriage to Princess Diana - and shows



Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall (AFP)

that the Queen is planning for the future after her death.

Predictably the news dominated Sunday's front pages, with the *Daily Mail* - Britain's highest-circulation newspaper - declaring 'Camilla WILL become Queen'.

The move was a long time coming for the *Mail*, which splashed on its Sunday front page that the queen's statement 'ends years of speculation' over the future role of the Duchess of Cambridge as well

as quashing rumours that she might abdicate.

The decision, the tabloid declared, represented 'the clearest sign yet not just of the Queen's unswerving support for her daughter-in-law but proof of her enduring affection for the woman who has secured her eldest son's happiness'.

The *Mail's* main conservative tabloid rival, *The Sunday Express*, also led with the story, describing it as the Queen's 'Platinum Jubilee Gift to Charles' and of-

fering readers a free eight-page souvenir special to mark Elizabeth II's 70 years as monarch.

The broadsheet *Sunday Times*, too, emphasised the significance of the decision, reporting that the Queen 'anoints Queen Camilla' in a move that ended 'years of controversy and confusion'. "It was the first time the Queen has given her view publicly on an issue that has divided opinion since Charles and Camilla wed in 2005," it said.

AFP

'Enduring figurehead and unifying force' for UK citizens

London, UK - Not all Britons are fans of the monarchy but many recognise that Queen Elizabeth II's 70-year reign is an achievement, seeing her as an enduring figurehead of the nation.

The 95-year-old head of state on Sunday became the first British monarch in history to reign for 70 years. Public celebrations are planned for early June. On the streets of London, the public broadly welcomed the landmark event. Here are some reactions:

John Paul, 22, works in politics: "I think it's a really great achievement... it's a real unifying thing for the country to bring people together."

"The queen is very popular, people of all generations, three generations now can look at the queen and they have some kind of connection with her."

"We've been through a really tough time as a country. And I



Queen Elizabeth II (centre left) speaks with representatives from local community group Little Discoverers during a reception at her Norfolk residence on Saturday (AFP)

think one of the things that I look back on particularly during the first wave of the pandemic, when we had the first lockdown was people looked to the queen."

"Hopefully it'll bring people

back... and we'll forget even if it is only for a day and I'm sure it will see people forget those divisions. They'll come back together. That'd be nice to see."

David Newell, 33, works in education: "It means something I suppose, it's not nothing... we live in Britain, I'm British, and it's a British institution, part of the makeup of the country. So I think it makes a difference. And I'm quite happy to get a few days off as well."

"There's still a lot of evolution to do. I think certainly, with recent news, there's definitely work to be done and I think there's the potential for that to happen... I wouldn't abolish the monarchy. But yeah, I think there's work to be done."

Bill Hartness, 50s, works in responsible investment: "She's gone through some up and down times over the years, but I think she's highly respected now and

as a leader with integrity, and that's something I think we need to see more in our leaders these days because we don't see much of it elsewhere else."

"I think that everybody's had to adjust incredibly over the last 70 years. You think of all the changes and technology and issues and all these things, you know, and monarchy I think, has by and large evolved strongly probably in the last 15 to 20 years."

Helen Chadwick, 60, retired: "I'm not much of a royalist I have to say. Because my culture and my background are from the north and I also have Irish heritage."

"But it means something to everybody and I think certainly at the moment, if there's one person who embodies what the country stands for, it's certainly Her Majesty the Queen."

"This is supposed to be a

great democracy, and I feel pretty badly let down by elected officials, elected members. So the person that I think in my mind who I see as embodying the greatness of Britain and integrity and honesty and compassion is the queen."

Bill and Ann Stack, in their 60s, retired veterans: "We're both ex-veterans. So for us, you know, serving queen and country and seeing her to this stage is absolutely fantastic... what a fantastic envoy she is for the country."

"That's what makes us great, because at the end of the day, we've still got our royalty, we still got a royal family, particularly the queen, and politics will always go on. It's never a straight line."

"It's important she's above all of that, that she stays apolitical. And let's get on with it. But overall, she's the constant."

AFP



MELODY QUEEN

LATA - THE LEGEND

India's eternal 'Melody Queen' Lata Mangeshkar, 92, who passed away after a prolonged illness in Mumbai's acclaimed Breach Candy Hospital on Saturday, has left behind a void that may never be filled in times to come

There was a myriad of textures to her voice - often melancholic, sometimes lyrically mischievous and flirtatious, at times passionate and emotionally intense... In the 30,000-odd songs that she recorded in studios over the past nearly eight decades, Lata Mangeshkar always delivered with verve.

Often referred to as India's 'Melody Queen', occasionally as the 'Nightingale of India' - a sobriquet previously accorded to late Indian poet Sarojini Naidu - Lata Mangeshkar, leaves behind a huge void in the music world, especially playback singing - the backbone of the Indian film industry where music drives the viewer into the cinema hall. She also held the distinction of being the first Indian singer to perform live at London's Royal Albert Hall in 1974 - a performance par excellence during her heyday.

Having begun her long-standing career in singing way back in 1942, at the age of 13, Lata, the daughter of Pandit Deenanath Mangeshkar and Shevanti Mangeshkar, belonged to a musical family and was the eldest of five children. She had been initiated as a performing artiste by her father at a time when the profession was

dominated by divas like Shamshad Begum and Noor Jehan and had to struggle to make her presence felt.

Her real break came in 1945 with the hit Hindi song - 'Aayega Aanevala', from the film *Mahal*, starring Madhubala. From there, Lata's career as a singer soared to the greatest of heights. Since then, she has lent her melodious voice for almost every female star in Bollywood, from Madhubala in the 1940s to Kajol in the 1990s, and alongside top male singers, including Mohammad Rafi and Kishore Kumar. She also worked with a range of Bollywood music directors, from C Ramchandra (of *Aye Mere Watan Ke Logon* fame) to Oscar-winning A R Rahman.

Having delivered evergreen solos, duets and chorus-backed renditions in around 36 languages, Lata, fondly known as 'Didi' in the Indian film industry, had gained popularity also in neighbouring Pakistan, Bangladesh and even some western countries. Her fan following lies in countries across the globe and not a single day passes by without a few of her songs being aired on television and radio channels worldwide over the past 7-8 decades.

Known for her humble disposition, her soft-spoken nature, her signature white sarees and her hair done in two schoolgirl-like

braids, Lata was also recipient of the 'Bharat Ratna', India's highest civilian honour in 2001. The government of France had also conferred on her its highest civilian award, 'Officier de la Legion d'Honneur', in 2007, besides numerous awards and accolades that came her way from countries around the world.

Lata was also known for her diverse taste in appreciating varied forms of music. She enjoyed listening to Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Nat King Cole, the *Beatles*, Barbra Streisand and Harry Belafonte. She also loved going to the movies - her favourite Hollywood film was *The King and I*, which she once admitted to have seen at least 15 times, besides *Singing in the Rain*. The James Bond films featuring Sean Connery and Roger Moore were also her favourites.

There were also many lesser-known sides to *Didi*. Cars were another passion and at various points in her life she owned a grey Hillman, a blue Chevrolet, a Chrysler and a Mercedes. She was also fond of pets and at one point of time owned nine dogs.

Lata's siblings were also music icons in their own right, including her singing sisters Meena Khadikar, Asha Bhosle, and Usha Mangeshkar and her music director brother Hridaynath Mangeshkar.

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SPAIN



With Valentine's Day coming up (February 14), an exceptional, romantic getaway in Spain could be an expression of love for those who would want to step out of the box and celebrate in style

Spain is one of the most romantic countries of the world, and there is a wide variety of things to do and places to see with your loved one or family.

You can fly on a hot air balloon in Barcelona and admire the mesmerising view from a height of 2000 feet, go for a charming beach experience in sunny Ibiza, book a trip on the Catamaran cruise in Malaga if you're a fan of the ocean, or visit any of the world renowned monuments perfect for a romantic trip around the country, like the Prado National Museum in Madrid, the Setas de Sevilla, the Royal Palace and Botanical Garden, or the City of Arts and Sciences in Valencia.

If you are considering a quick getaway to Spain this Valentine's Day, then some popular places to visit should include these must-see destinations:

Canary Islands

The Canary Islands include Gran Canaria, Tenerife, Fuerteventura, Lanzarote, La Palma, La Gomera, El Hierro and La Graciosa.

The wonderful scenery and picturesque enclaves make these islands a very romantic destination for a couple. Some of the most striking natural areas include the volcanic landscapes of Lanzarote, the sand dunes of Fuerteventura and Gran Canaria, the lush green forests of La Palma and La Gomera, and Tenerife's Mount Teide, the tallest

mountain in Spain. Other attractions include the lovely World Heritage City of San Cristóbal de la Laguna (Tenerife) or art by César Manrique, on Lanzarote.

The Canary Islands are known for remarkable gastronomy, having a wide variety of delicious dishes that cannot be found in other places around the country. However, in your next trip to the islands, make sure to ask around for Rabbit in Salmorejo - marinated rabbit meat, fried and garnished, and served papas arrugadas (wrinkled potatoes).

Madrid

Discover one of Spain's liveliest cities - Madrid. As well as being the country's capital, its lifestyle will delight you, with the streets usually full of people sitting and chatting over delicious tapas at pavement cafés.

Take your camera - you'll want it in districts like the Barrio de los Austrias, Barrio de Las Letras, and the 'Art Walk', or while you get away from the hectic pace in the beautiful Retiro Park.

Madrid is a city that never sleeps - in the evening you can take in a musical on the Gran Vía and then go on to any of the hundreds of clubs and discos, where the party often carries on until dawn. It is also a fantastic place to shop. You'll find everything, from centuries-old shops in the historic centre to avant-garde art galleries and the luxury brands of Spanish and international designers.

If you're travelling with children, be sure to make time for theme parks like the Parque de Atracciones, Parque Warner, Zoo Aquarium, and Faunia, or fun activities like a cable

car ride on the Teleférico or a visit to the Wax Museum.

Barcelona

Don't let another day go by without experiencing this modern, cosmopolitan and authentically Mediterranean city. Barcelona is a must-see for the world-famous architecture of Gaudi, and the charm of exploring the nooks and crannies of its Gothic quarter. Its



Barcelona is a must-see for the world-famous architecture of Gaudi, and the charm of exploring the nooks and crannies of its Gothic quarter

cheerful, lively atmosphere is unique, and can be enjoyed at its best strolling along the Ramblas, beside the sea or in its city centre parks.

Shopping is a delight, with little hundred-year-old shops, top designer boutiques and luxury jewellers. Children have a great time here, discovering animals at the zoo and the aquarium, or enjoying parks like Tibidabo and Poble Espanyol.

It's also a gourmet's dream, combining

the healthy Mediterranean diet with the creative cooking of international award-winning chefs with restaurants in the city. And of course, Barcelona has spectacular sports, with Barça and its star players.

Andalusia

The southern Spanish region of Andalusia is famous for its fascinating history and infectious exuberant lifestyle. Its towns are always lively, and you'll love exploring its scenic coasts and picturesque whitewashed villages. The main cities are easy to reach from central Spain and other regions thanks to the high-speed train, or AVE.

The impressive cultural heritage here includes some of the world's most beautiful and significant buildings, such as the Great Mosque of Cordoba, the Giralda in Seville and the Alhambra in Granada.

Lakes of Covadonga

Located in Asturias, within the Picos de Europa National Park, The Lakes of Covadonga are a perfect natural getaway surrounded by the highest peaks in the Cantabrian Mountains.

To reach the lakes, eager travelers ascend a narrow paved route, passing by lush forests, valleys, and rocky gorges, reaching up to 1000 meters in altitude, to enjoy the rich fresh air and witness the grand beauty of a worldwide renowned natural landscape.

Once you're done with the climb, you can see the Cantabrian Sea in the background, and you will be welcomed by soaring Griffon vultures, eagles, woodpeckers, and bearded

vultures, flying above a terrain populated beeches.

Aqueduct of Segovia

This ancient edifice is a remarkable symbol of Roman engineering, standing up to 28m tall and stretching to 16,220m of unmortared granite bricks held in place by nothing other than gravity.

The locals call the fascinating monument Puente de Diablo, meaning 'The Devil's Bridge'. According to folklore, the devil built the bridge overnight in a bet to win a serving girl's soul. The tale says that the devil lost the gamble because he was one brick short of completing the aqueduct when the rooster crowed, signalling morning.

If you look up close, you notice the marks from the devil's fingers appearing as holes dotting the surface of the granite blocks.

Markets of Ibiza

Ibiza's unique artistic roots date back to the early 1960's when artisans, painters and designers flocked to the island creating a landscape of limitless expression and incredible light. You can witness that for yourself visiting on of the island's many atmospheric markets, where hand-made items of clothing, jewellery, artifacts and more are sold.

The biggest markets are the Punta Arabí Hippy Market on Wednesday in Es Caná and the Las Dalias Hippy Market on Saturday in San Carlos. You can spend the whole day in one of these markets, looking for souvenirs, eating delicious street food, or just enjoying the fun vibes.

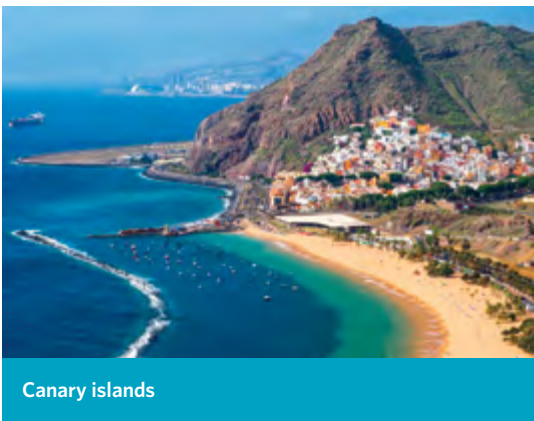
AFP



Barcelona



Seville, Andalusia



Canary islands



Markets of Ibiza



New Zealand win historic gold

Pékin, China - "Super-proud" snowboarder Zoi Sadowski Synnott made history on Sunday after winning New Zealand's first ever Winter Olympic gold but the men's downhill skiers were forced to wait 24 hours for their chance.

Seven golds were up for grabs on the second full day of competition in the Chinese capital.

Seven became six when the main event of the day, the men's downhill - one of the most closely watched events at the Winter Olympics - was postponed until Monday because of gusty winds.

Norway's Aleksander Aamodt Kilde - one half of skiing's golden couple with Mikaela Shiffrin - will be hot favourite.

Sadowski Synnott, 20, held her nerve under brilliant blue skies to take the women's snowboard slopestyle title with the last run of the competition and make history.

"Honestly it's absolute disbelief but it probably means more to me to win New Zealand's first Winter Olympic gold," said Sadowski Synnott, who was born in Sydney and moved to New Zealand when she was six.

"It makes me super proud to be a Kiwi."

Sadowski Synnott, who spent COVID-19 lockdown back in New Zealand jumping on a trampoline to help her aerial awareness,

ness, launched into a massive jump with her final trick to earn a winning score of 92.88.

She was mobbed at the finish by American Julia Marino, who was relegated into silver with 87.68, and bronze medalist Tess Coady of Australia.

New Zealand had previously won one silver and two bronze medals at the Winter Olympics - including a third-place finish for Sadowski Synnott in the Big Air

It's absolute disbelief but it probably means more to me to win New Zealand's first Olympic gold

ZOI SADOWSKI SYNNOTT

competition at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games.

More than medals

Cross-country skier Alexander Bolshunov became the first Russian to win an Olympic title at these Games - but not for Russia. Punished for mass doping at the Sochi Olympics in 2014, the Russians must compete under the banner of the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC).

Such was his dominance of

the 15-kilometre-plus-15-kilometre skiathlon, Bolshunov had time to wave at the TV cameras long before the race had finished.

Other golds on offer Sunday were in freestyle skiing, luge, ski jumping and speed skating.

Georgian luge athlete Saba Kumaritashvili failed to make the final of the men's competition -- but he was competing for more than medals.

His cousin Nodar Kumaritashvili was killed in the same sport at the 2010 Vancouver Games when his luge sledge flew off the track in training, hours before the opening ceremony.

"I think about Nodar -- I think about him all the time," said Kumaritashvili.

"After Nodar, I didn't want luge to die in Georgia, I wanted to keep it going. I wasn't afraid. I wanted to be in the Olympics to race."

Meanwhile, organisers admitted they had failed to produce enough panda souvenirs to keep up with demand.

Bing Dwen Dwen, a cuddly panda on ice skates, is the official mascot of the Beijing Games - but people in China are being turned away disappointed from gift shops.

Zhao Weidong, a spokesman for the local organising committee, blamed the shortage on the Lunar New Year holiday in China.

AFP



Gold medalist New Zealand's Zoi Sadowski Synnott celebrates on the podium during the women's snowboard slopestyle victory ceremony at the Zhangjiakou Medals Plaza in Zhangjiakou on February 6, 2022 (AFP)

Japan's Kobayashi holds nerve to win ski jumping gold

Zhangjiakou, China - Japan's Ryoyu Kobayashi won ski jumping gold on the men's normal hill at the Beijing Olympics on Sunday, holding his nerve while his main title rivals lost theirs.

Kobayashi, who becomes the first Japanese ski jumper to win Olympic gold on foreign snow, led after the first round and sealed the deal with his second jump to finish on 275.0 points.

World Cup leader Karl Geiger of Germany, who had struggled all week in practice, finished 15th after a disastrous performance.



Japan's Ryoyu Kobayashi competes during the Ski Jumping Men's Normal Hill Individual 1st Round, on February 6 (AFP)

MEDALS TABLE				
	G	S	B	T
Norway	2	0	1	3
Sweden	2	0	0	2
Russian O C	1	2	2	5
Germany	1	1	0	2
Netherlands	1	1	0	2
Australia	1	0	1	2
Japan	1	0	1	2
Slovenia	1	0	1	2
China	1	0	0	1
New Zealand	1	0	0	1
Austria	0	2	1	3
Italy	0	2	1	3
United States	0	2	0	2
Canada	0	1	1	2
France	0	1	0	1
Finland	0	0	1	1
Hungary	0	0	1	1
Poland	0	0	1	1
G Gold S Silver B Bronze T Total				



Kamila Valieva competes in the women's single figure skating (AFP)

US-born Chinese skater savaged online after blunder in the rink

Pékin, China - China appeared Sunday to censor an outpouring of social media vitriol against a naturalised US-born figure skater who took a tumble at the Beijing Games and nearly cost the hosts dear.

The 19-year-old Beverly Zhu, who was born and raised in the United States but now competes for China under the name Zhu Yi, came last in the women's singles short programme in the team event.

It was a nervous performance from Zhu, who fell early on and looked to be holding back tears as she awaited her score.

China fell from third to fifth and only narrowly squeezed through to the free programme.

On China's Twitter-like Weibo the hashtag #ZhuY-iFellOver racked up over 230

million views before being deactivated, with searches late Sunday afternoon returning no results.



Another hashtag -- #ZhuY-iMessedUp -- remained accessible, clocking over 80 million views. "I guess because I missed the first jump I was just kind of

frazzled and felt a lot of pressure on landing that last jump, and unfortunately I popped it," said Zhu, who chose in 2018 to skate for China.

But there was little sympathy online, with some questioning the decision to select her ahead of a team-mate.

"Chen Hongyi is far better than her. I don't know why someone like this was allowed to represent China," wrote one commenter.

Another added: "Sure, there's lots of pressure -- but show me an athlete who doesn't go out there under pressure from their country and people?" Some brought up Zhu's father, Zhu Songchun, a leading artificial intelligence expert who returned to China to head a key research institute in 2020.

AFP



'He's come!' Hanyu mania hits games as skater finally arrives

Pékin, China - Japanese figure skating idol Yuzuru Hanyu finally arrived in Beijing on Sunday to start his quest for a third Olympic gold, his team said, whipping his Chinese fans into a social media frenzy.

The defending champion's arrival is far from out of character: he also missed the opening ceremony and skating team event at the Pyeongchang Games in 2018.

But his absence on the prac-

tice rink has been a source of fevered discussion amongst his fans online, with some anguishing over when he would make an appearance.

Soon after news of his arrival, he was a top-trending topic on China's Twitter-like Weibo with at least 220 million views of hashtags relating to him.

"The fans' cherished Hanyu has come! He's come, he's come!" read one post.

AFP

Russian teen does it for grandma in dazzling Olympic skating debut

Pékin, China - Fifteen-year-old Kamila Valieva dominated on her Olympic debut Sunday in Beijing, coming close to breaking her own world record and propelling the Russians into first place ahead of the United States in the figure skating team event.

Valieva, the favourite in the women's individual event, swept away the competition with a score of 90.18 in the short programme, skimming across the ice with almost supernatural poise and precision.

Japan's Wakaba Higuchi came a distant second with 74.73.

"I felt a little bit nervous, but also calm," a glowing Valieva said afterwards, adding this was an unusual feeling.

"I'm so happy to be at the

Olympic Games."

Valieva is the 2022 European Champion and her teammates Anna Shcherbakova and Alexandra Trusova took silver and bronze at the same competition.

With a deep breath and a nod, the teenager moved into starting position. Skating to Kirill Richter's "In Memoriam", Valieva looked in complete control as she landed a triple axel in a programme that showcased her balletic discipline.

"I'm skating for my grandmother who passed away so I think it was that feeling got me," she said afterwards, wearing an off-shoulder purple ombre dress glittering with rhinestones, and clutching a fluffy pink rabbit tissue box.

AFP

India cruise to 6-wicket win in landmark 1,000th ODI

Ahmedabad, India - Spinners Yuzvendra Chahal and Washington Sundar set up India's comfortable six-wicket victory over the West Indies for the hosts' landmark 1,000th one-day international on Sunday.

Rohit Sharma took to the field as India's new full-time ODI captain and his decision to bowl was vindicated by the two spinners as the hosts bowled out the West Indies for 176 in Ahmedabad.

The skipper's top-scoring 60 then helped India romp home in just 28 overs on the day they became the first team to pass the 1,000 ODI milestone.

The West Indies had slipped to 79-7 before Jason Holder hit 57 to salvage some dignity for the visitors.

Leg-spinner Chahal returned figures of 4-49 - including the key wicket of skipper Kieron Pollard for nought - to rattle the West Indies batters.

Ace bowler Mohammed Siraj struck first in the third over to send back Shai Hope as an incoming delivery got the wicket-keeper-batsman's inside edge on to the stumps.

India introduced spin in the eighth over and off-spinner Sundar soon made it count, dispatching Brandon King for 13.

Chahal broke the West Indies' back with successive strikes but Holder avoided the hat-trick.

Holder put on 78 runs with Fabien Allen, who made 29, to offer some resistance against India's onslaught.

He went past 2,000 ODI runs and then raised his 11th half-century in the 50-over format but finally fell to Krishna, who finished with figures of 2-29.

Rohit came out attacking and

dominated returning pace bowler Kemar Roach to smash two fours and one six in the 10th over. He put on 84 runs with opening partner Ishan Kishan and made his half-century in 42 balls before Alzarri Joseph trapped him lbw, also sending back former captain Virat Kohli in the same over.

Kohli announced his arrival with two successive boundaries but got caught out at long leg two balls later.

Left-arm spinner Hosein got the wicket of Kishan for 28 and wicketkeeper-batsman Rishabh Pant was run out while backing up at the non-strikers end as India wobbled.

The second ODI is on Wednesday at the same venue.

SCOREBOARD		
WEST INDIES		
S. Hope	b Siraj	8
B. King	c Yadav b Sundar	13
D. Bravo	lbw b Sundar	18
S. Brooks	c Pant b Chahal	12
N. Pooran	lbw b Chahal	18
K. Pollard	b Chahal	0
J. Holder	c Pant b Krishna	57
A. Hosein	c Pant b Krishna	0
F. Allen	c and b Sundar	29
A. Joseph	c Yadav b Chahal	3
K. Roach	not out	0
Extras:	(lb4, w4)	8
TOTAL:	(all out, 43.5 overs)	176
Fall of wickets:	1-13, 2-44, 3-45, 4-71, 5-71, 6-78, 7-79, 8-157, 9-167	
Bowling:	Siraj 8-2-26-1 (w1), Krishna 10-0-29-2 (w2), Sundar 9-1-30-3 (w1), Thakur 7-0-38-0, Chahal 9.5-0-49-4	
INDIA		
R. Sharma	lbw b Joseph	60
I. Kishan	c Allen b Hosein	28
V. Kohli	c Roach b Joseph	8
R. Pant	run out (Joseph)	11
S. Yadav	not out	34
D. Hooda	not out	26
Extras:	(b1, lb2, w8)	11
TOTAL:	(4 wickets, 28 overs)	178
Fall of wickets:	1-84, 2-93, 3-115, 4-116	
Bowling:	Roach 5-0-41-0 (w4), Holder 5-0-29-0 (w1), Joseph 7-0-45-2 (w3), Hosein 9-0-46-1, Allen 2-0-14-0	



India's captain Rohit Sharma plays a shot during the first ODI against West Indies in Motera (AFP)



China's players celebrate with the trophy after their win in the AFC Women's Asian Cup India 2022 football final Mumbai (AFP)

China beat South Korea in nailbiter for 9th Women's Asian Cup title

Navi Mumbai, India - China turned around a two-goal deficit at half-time to beat South Korea 3-2 in a remarkable late comeback for their ninth AFC Women's Asian Cup title on Sunday at the DY Patil Stadium in Navi Mumbai on Sunday.

Midfielder Xiao Yuyi sealed the victory three minutes into stoppage time, following a 68th-minute penalty from Tang Jiali and an equaliser moments later from Zhang Linyan.

China's record-extending ninth title is their first since 2006. Sunday also marked their first finals appearance since 2008, after edging out Japan in the semis with a 4-3

win on penalties.

China pressed the Korean defence early with Wang Shuang - returning to the side after missing the semifinal-leading the charge, eager to put some pressure on the first-time finalist. This strategy worked perfectly as the girls in red controlled possession.

Korea tried to counter the stronghold by playing the ball long but China's physicality helped them make timely interceptions and even attempt some shots at goal to frustrate the Koreans.

South Korea's debut final came after a comfortable 2-0 victory over the Philippines.

Agencies

UAE dominate Oman in 2nd ODI to take series

Muscat - The United Arab Emirates beat Oman by four wickets to clinch the three match ODI series at the Oman Cricket Academy Ground on Sunday.

Although the margin of victory was the same as in the first game, this one was a far more dominant performance from the visitors. For the second time in a row, they won the toss and put Oman to bat.

Jatinder Singh continued where he left off on Saturday and looked ominous in the initial overs but was dismissed for 17. Khawar Ali and Kashyap Prajapati showed glimpses of steel and flair respectively, but Oman found themselves placed precariously at 60/3 after 20 overs.

Luckily for the hosts, Shoaib Khan and Ayaan Khan applied themselves in the middle much better than their predecessors and navigated the middle overs smartly. The duo stitched together a priceless 98 run partnership that reinvigorated Oman's hopes of posting a big total. Shoaib's aggression and feet movement against spin was particularly notable, as the pair



Oman's Shoaib Khan (left) and Ayaan Khan applied themselves to navigate the middle overs, while UAE's Basil Ahmed (right) was star bowler

rotated strike effectively in between boundaries to keep the pressure on the UAE fielders.

Their double dismissal in successive overs was a blow Oman could not recover from. With Basil Hameed in the form of his life with the ball, the 'Red Brigade' proceeded to lose their final five wickets for 35 runs and were bundled out for 195.

The UAE run chase was a far

more routine affair this time. Muhammad Waseem was sent packing early, but Chirag Suri and Chundangapoyil Rizwan managed to consolidate the chase with a 72-run stand.

This win also means that the UAE now find themselves occupying fourth place in Group B of the ICC CWC League two. With 11 points from 9 games, they are within touching distance of the



United States, who have 14 points having played seven games more. Oman still lead the pack with 29 points from 22 games, but with second placed Scotland on 16 points from 12 games, their lead certainly isn't an unassailable one.

All eyes now turn to the Oman Cricket Academy Ground on Tuesday, where the hosts will look to win, and win handsomely,

avoiding the ignominy of a 3-0 series clean sweep at home in the process.

BRIEF SCORES:

Oman 195/10 in 47.2 overs (Shoaib Khan 68 (59) - 5 x 4, 3 x 6 Basil Hameed - 17/5) lost to UAE 196/6 in 45.3 overs (Chundangapoyil Rizwan 76 (116) - 5 x 4 Bilal Khan - 47/3) by four wickets

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TOUR OF OMAN 2022



Riders to watch

- Quick-Step Alpha Vinyl Team:**
Mark Cavendish,
Fausto Masnada

Team DSM:
Kragh Andersen,
Casper Pedersen

UAE Team Emirates:
Rui Costa, Fernando Gaviria

Team Arkea-Samsic:
Elie Gesbert, Amaury Capiot

Intermarché-Wanty-Gobert-Matériaux: Rein Taaramäe

Cofidis: Max Walscheid

Team BikeExchange-Jayco: Kaden Groves,
Campbell Stewart

Groupama-FDJ:
Miles Scotson

B&B Hotels-KTM:
Eliot Lietaar
- Uno-X Pro Cycling Team:**
Niklas Eg

Bardiani CSF Faizane:
Filippo Zana

Bingoal Pauwels Sauces WB:
Milan Menten

Euskaltel-Euskadi:
Antonio Angulo

Gazprom-Rusvelo:
Marco Canola

Burgos-BH:
Jetse Bol,
Mihkel Raim

Team Novo Nordisk:
Charles Planet

Astana Qazaqstan Team Development:
Sebastian Henao

Oman National Team:
Said al Rahbi

World's top riders to star in Tour of Oman

Oman National Champion Said al Rahbi leads the local selection to do battle against the international cycling elite heading to the sultanate



Muscat-The picturesque setting of the 2022 Tour of Oman is set to both amaze the world and push international champions to their limits over six days of racing from February 10-15.

Sprinters such as the British icon Mark Cavendish, climbing talents like the rising German champion Marco Brenner and all-rounders such as the 2014 World Champion Rui Costa will all find opportunities to shine and write glorious new pages in the history of the event. Since the first edition in 2010, winners have included riders of the calibre of Fabian Cancellara, Vincenzo Nibali and Chris Froome.

Fast men are expected to be immediately in action in this 11th edition of the race, provided they survive the windy traps of the first two stages leading to the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre and the Sohar Corniche, respectively. With Cavendish in the race, this portion proves to be particularly exciting – when it comes to sprinting, there aren't many riders in the whole history of cycling that can match his skills and achievements.

The British superstar, who shares the record for most wins in the Tour de France (34) with Belgian legend Eddy Merckx, won the final stage of the Tour of Oman in 2011, on the historic

Muttrah Corniche. After a brilliant return to the forefront last year, the 'Manx Missile' will be able to rely on a strong Quick-Step Alpha Vinyl Team to battle through the desert and lead him out in the final kilometres with partners such as the experienced Ilijo Keisse and the gifted Mauro Schmid.

At 27 years old, Fernando Gaviria (UAE Team Emirates) also holds a place in the history books since he sprinted to the prestigious yellow and pink jerseys on the roads of the Tour de France and the Giro d'Italia. Coming off the Saudi Tour, the Colombian "Misil" will take on the Omani roads with the support of one of the best lead-out men of this century, Maximiliano Richeze.

Belgian sprinter Amaury Capiot (Team Arkea-Samsic) will be eager to challenge these two icons, following a strong start of the season (winner in the GP La Marseillaise). It will also be interesting to see how Campbell Stewart's talents fare on the road, after leading him to a World Champion title on the track. The New-Zealander, also a silver medallist in last year's Olympic Games, embarks on a new adventure with his first race for Team BikeExchange-Jayco alongside another young sprint-

Mark Cavendish, who shares the record for most wins in the Tour de France with Eddy Merckx, will vie for top spot



Mark Cavendish



Fernando Gaviria

ing talent, Kaden Groves. These fast men can expect to be pushed to their limits by all-rounders such as Soren Kragh Andersen, a stage winner in the Tour of Oman (in 2017, on the Quariyat climb where the race returns this year) and the Tour de France. The Dane and his compatriot Casper Pedersen forms a strong power duo for Team DSM. Other punchy and resilient riders like Max



Rui Costa



Campbell Stewart

Walscheid (Cofidis) and Ryan Gibbons (UAE Team Emirates) can shred the bunch before they make the most of their pure speed in the final stretch.

Rui Costa (UAE Team Emirates) is another versatile talent whose abilities already got him eight top-5 stage finishes in the Tour of Oman, with strong overall results (2nd in 2017, also in the top 5 in 2016 and 2019).

Italian climber Fausto Masnada (Quick-Step Alpha Vinyl Team) should be among Costa's main rivals on the slopes of Jabal Akhdar (5.7km at 10.5%), where French climber Elie Gesbert (Team Arkea-Samsic) already showed his worth in 2019 (5th in 2019, alongside Costa). German teenager Marco Brenner (Team DSM) is a special talent, and the iconic climb could also inspire him to show his budding abilities to the world.

The young Said al Rahbi is not much older (21 years old), and he'll also be determined to be at his best as the reigning Oman National Champion, crowned last Autumn in Quriyat. He's joined by his runner-up, Mohammed al Wahibi and bronze medalist Husam al Rawahi in the seven-man Oman National Selection who will be competing in the race for the first time in its history.



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