



H M receives message from President of Iran

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq received a written message from President Dr Ebrahim Raisi of the Islamic Republic of Iran on Wednesday.

The message deals with areas of cooperation between Oman and Iran in various fields.

It was handed over to His Majesty the Sultan by Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, when His Majesty gave him an audience at Al Barakah Palace on Wednesday.

The minister conveyed greetings of the Iranian President to His Majesty and the

Omani people.

On his turn, His Majesty the Sultan asked the minister to convey his sincere sentiments to President Raisi and the people of Iran.

During the audience, areas of cooperation in various fields were reviewed. Viewpoints were also exchanged regarding regional and international developments.

It was attended by Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister and Ali Najafi, Ambassador of Iran to Oman, and the delegation accompanying the Iranian Minister.

ONA

Muscat ranks high among most friendly cities for expats

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat ranks 23rd out of 50 destinations in the Expat City Ranking 2022 by InterNations, the world's largest expat community with over 4.5mn members.

The capital of Oman ranks second in the Ease of Settling In Index, where expats find the people to be very friendly and the Omani culture quite welcoming. Expats rank Muscat 2nd in Local Friendliness, 6th in Finding Friends and 8th for Culture and Welcome subindices.

But expats face challenges when it comes to their Career Prospects (ranked 48th), Salary and Job Security (47th) under the Working Abroad Index (47th).

Expats seemed to be least happy when it comes to finding leisure options (ranked 50th), 42nd in Travel and Transit, 25th in Environment and Climate, and 42nd in Health and Well-Being subindices under the overall Quality of Life Index (43rd).

However, Muscat does well in Expat Essentials Index (ranked 8th) where it scores high for Housing (5th) and Language (10th).

From the region, Dubai is the favourite city for expats with its



overall 2nd rank and Abu Dhabi ranking 9th.

Valencia (1st), Dubai, Mexico City, Lisbon, Madrid, Bangkok, Basel, Melbourne, Abu Dhabi, and Singapore (10th) are the top ten cities for expat life in 2022.

They all do very well in the Ease of Settling In Index but also have their particular highlights.

Valencia and Mexico City are

great for personal finances, and expats in Valencia and Dubai enjoy a high quality of life. Dubai is a top choice when it comes to working abroad, and expats find it easy to navigate life there.

On the other hand, expats consider Johannesburg (50th), Frankfurt, Paris, Istanbul, Hong Kong, Hamburg, Milan, Vancouver, Tokyo, and Rome (41st), the

world's worst cities to live in.

Expats in Johannesburg are particularly disappointed with the low quality of life and their working life, while Frankfurt and Paris do poorly in the Ease of Settling In and Expat Essentials Indices. Additionally, expats in all the three cities struggle financially.

To identify the best and worst cities for expats around the globe,

the respondents rated up to 56

different aspects of urban life abroad on a scale of one to seven.

The rating process emphasised the participants' personal satisfaction with these aspects, considering both emotional topics (e.g. the ease of finding local friends) and more factual aspects (e.g. the availability of health-care) with equal weight.

There will be no edition of Muscat Daily on January 1, Sunday. The team at Apex Media wishes readers a Happy New Year.

NEWS BRIEF

DEFENCE ACADEMY HEAD RECEIVES SAUDI DELEGATION

Muscat - MajGen Hamid Ahmed Sakroon, Chairman of the Academy for Strategic and Defence Studies, received a delegation of the Ministry of National Guard of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in the former's office at Bait Al Falaj Garrison on Wednesday.

The visiting delegation is headed by Maj Gen Ghazi Sanat al Otaibi. The two sides discussed several matters of mutual interest. Members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the academy's facilities and equipment.



Weekend Special
Del Toro fearful



Special supplement on
Islamic Banking in Oman

Looking back at the year gone by

Shaddad al Musalmey
Muscat

Unlike 2021, when COVID-19 crisis overshadowed all the other events, the year 2022 started with a promise of overcoming the odds beset by the pandemic. Mass vaccination campaigns helped in opening up of the country and its economy again.

Apart from the focus on the post-pandemic recovery, there were other newsworthy events - lifting of all COVID-19 related restrictions, reduction of fees for the recruitment of expatriate workforce, the launch of Investors Residency Programme, the sultanate's first electric car and Qatar hosting the World Cup 2022 - which are likely to make 2022 a year to remember.

In May 2022, the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments arising from the COVID-19 pandemic lifted all precautionary measures, calling on citizens and residents to receive the booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine for a lasting impact on the spread of the virus.

And in June, visitors - not vac-



inated against COVID-19 - were allowed to enter Oman without any conditions. "Passengers who are not vaccinated against COVID-19 can enter the sultanate without any conditions," the Ministry of Health official had told *Muscat Daily*.

Also, Oman Air announced that arriving international travellers would no longer need to register through the eMushrif portal or undergo a PCR test before or upon arrival, as was pre-

viously required. Authorities also removed quarantine requirements and the need to download the Tarassud+ track and trace app for visitors coming to Oman.

A major decision that eased hiring woes - for small and medium enterprises as well as the big companies - was the reduction in expatriate labour fees. The Ministry of Labour implemented the revised fees from June following the Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan

Haitham bin Tariq to reduce the same.

The decision, which applies to both issuance and renewal of work permits for expatriates, saw the reduction by up to 85 per cent for companies committed to Omanisation ratio.

In September, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) launched the Investors Residency Programme granting foreign investors and retirees long

residencies in Oman, which came into effect from October 3 through the ministry's Investment Services Centre.

"The Investors Residency Programme focuses on qualitative investments that contribute to the growth of domestic products, localisation of industries, transfer of modern technologies, and promotion of economic diversification sectors in the sultanate. The programme aims to attract investments from different countries for which the sultanate provides a conducive environment," said H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

With Oman taking a leap in adopting technologies to keep up with the pace of the world, an Omani electric car is something that brought cheer even to those least interested in technology.

Mays Motors, in cooperation with Oman Technology Fund, launched the sultanate's first electric car in February this year. Priced at RO25,000, hundred units were pre-booked in the first stage.

Haider bin Adnan al Zaabi, co-founder of Mays Motors, said, "Mays Motors' electric car is the beginning of a new and promising sector in the sultanate. We have a team with more than 15 years of experience in the automotive field and are offering an opportunity to establish the first factory for electric cars in the sultanate with an investment of RO5mn," he said.

The two-seater can be charged at home and has a driving range of 500km+. Zaabi described the car with a carbon fibre body as "loaded with a lot of technology similar to international brands such as Lamborghini and Ferrari. Here where the starting price is RO25,000 for an electric car of this standard, similar cars abroad cost anywhere near RO50,000," Zaabi added.

In November, the world's biggest sporting event kicked off in Doha. Alongside the excitement on the pitch, FIFA World Cup 2022 also provided a major boost to GCC economies. In Oman, people enjoyed the 'beautiful game' amidst much funfair at special fan festival venues.

Salalah Club wins His Majesty's Youth Cup for 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The results of His Majesty the Sultan's Cup for Youth 2021 were declared on Wednesday in a function held under the auspices of H E Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Salalah Club lifted the cup after being ranked first, while Al Bashaer Club came second, Seeb Club third, Ibri Club fourth, Ahli Sidab Club fifth, Masirah Club sixth, Quriyat seventh, Saham



Club eighth, Oman Club ninth, and Suwaiq Club occupied the

tenth place.

H E Basil Ahmed al Rawas,

Undersecretary for Sports and Youth in the Ministry of Culture,

Sports and Youth, said, "This annual ceremony is an opportunity to focus on the clubs' achievements and efforts in volunteering to take care of the youth as well as in service of the nation."

The competition honour clubs for their efforts to enable young people to practice various activities in the sports, culture and youth fields. "It is a true translation of His Majesty's interest in young people. The competition also aims to motivate clubs to continue raising the level of their activities and to be incubators for

youth and more responsive to their aspirations," said H E Rawas.

The 2021 edition of the competition saw the participation of 31 clubs, which include; Ahli Sidab, Seeb, Al Mussnah, Dhofar, Yanqul, Jalan, Suwaiq, Al Nahda, Al Bashaer, Saham, Masirah, Quriyat, Salalah, Al Salam, Rustaq, Al Nasr, Bahla, Muscat, Al Khabourah, Sohar, Nizwa, Majis, Ibri, Al Hamra, Al Wusta, Al Kamil Wa al Wafi and Al Wahda, Bousher, Al Ittefaq, Shabab and Oman.

More rains hit Muscat, bad weather to continue today

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Inclement weather continued to affect several parts of Oman on Wednesday with more rains predicted for Thursday.

Rains lashed several areas in Muscat in the afternoon on Wednesday, while Dhahira governorate reported medium to light rains in the wilayat of Yanqul and Dhank in the evening.

Sohar, Shinas, Liwa and Saham in North Batinah witnessed rainfall during the early hours of the day.

According to the Civil Aviation Authority, trough of low pressure is expected to affects the weather till Thursday.

'Stay away from electricity poles, avoid touching metal objects, and keep an eye on children and don't allow them to approach flooded areas,' a Civil Aviation Authority statement said, urging people to follow official weather forecasts.

The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority called for caution, not to risk crossing wadis, and to adhere to warnings and instructions.

Classes suspended

The Ministry of Education (MoE) announced the suspension of classes in all private and public schools in Muscat on Wednesday due to inclement weather.

A statement issued by the ministry in the morning said, 'The classes will be suspended at all schools in Muscat Governorate on Wednesday to ensure the safety of students and the teaching staff. Classes will resume on Thursday.'



Residents, businessmen call for better drainage in capital

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Shopkeepers, businessmen and residents called for better drainage system in the city as waterlogging due to heavy rains from Monday night threw the city life out of gear.

While parts of Muttrah Souq, Mawaleh Central Fruits and Vegetables Market, and city neighbourhoods such as Azaiba and Ghubra saw massive water-loggings, other parts of the capital witnessed extensive damage to properties, construction materials, fruit and vegetable merchandise and personal cars.

"We lost as much as 100 kilograms of vegetables and fruits," said Mohammad Rashid, a shopkeeper in Mawaleh.

"Even after the rains stopped, water didn't drain out from the area. Perishable items in our shop got completely damaged," he lamented.

"This is not the first time that we have lost so much due to rain," Rashid said, pointing out that the drains in and around the

market are very old, for which water accumulates very fast. "The drainage system is too narrow for large volume of water to clear out."

The same frustration was palpable in the voice of Nadeem Khan, who runs a bukhur shop in Muttrah Souq.

"Every time it rains, it becomes a nightmare. We need to keep our shops closed for a whole day during rains. At times we cannot even open our shops for two or more days, when water does not drain out," he narrated.

"Such closures of souqs and shops cause major losses for the shop owners. Luckily my shop is at a higher level, but some of my friends have shops at a lower level due to which water enters their establishments and damages their commodities."

Khan blamed again the drainage system. "This part of the city is quite old; I understand that to renovate the city is a herculean task but if the drainage system is not taken care of, we shall continue to suffer," he continued.

tinued.

"Also, this souq is a major tourist attraction. After the rains, some parts of the souq start stinking. Though the municipality personnel are fast to clean up the mess, the unpleasant odour persists long after," said his assistant Sanju.

Poor drainage system not only effects businesses but also causes enormous hardship for the residents and office goers, who need to wade through flooded streets for day-to-day activities.

An Omani woman (who did not wish to be named) working in a bank said, "I stay in Ghubra. My car was swept away after the rains on Tuesday and sadly none of my brothers could save it. Luckily it didn't go too far in the wadi and now we are in talks with the insurance company."

"There is no way that the water can pass; no big drains... without any proper exit water accumulates very fast. While in other places, it sweeps away whatever comes in the way," she added.

Sohar Festival attracted over 900,000 visitors: North Batinah Governor

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Sohar Festival, held from November 18 to December 18, attracted over 900,000 visitors, according to Mohammed Sulaiman al Kindi, Governor of North Batinah, Chairman of the Main Committee of the Sohar Festival.

Kindi informed that 928,000 people visited Sohar Festival in its first edition, during which 137 families with their home-made

products and 37 small and medium enterprises benefitted from business activities.

"The festival has achieved the goals set by the committee, the most important of which were providing temporary jobs to job-seekers and providing an opportunity for families involved in cottage industry to market and promote their products and projects," said Kindi.

In an interview with Oman TV, the North Batinah Governor said that the Royal Decree No

The festival provided an opportunity to those families involved in cottage industry to market and promote their products

MOHAMMED SULAIMAN AL KINDI

36/2022 enabled the governorates to "strive for development in all spheres of life".

With the distribution of powers to the governorates, Kindi said the decentralisation is facilitating works in the wilayats.

"Many seminars have been held to introduce its importance and benefits throughout the sultanate."

North Batinah boasts of the



importance of Port of Sohar, which supplies the sultanate with an estimated 85 per cent of the products that are imported from outside the country. The governorate also has two other ports

in Suwaiq and Shinas, in addition to many fishing harbours.

"The governorate has issued 19,500 permits to practice the fishing profession so far," Kindi said.

With a total population of 845,000, including 574,000 Omanis as of November, the governorate possesses agricultural, animal and mineral resources to keep its business activities buzzing.

"The agricultural land is estimated to be about 36,421

hectares, and the logistics sector holds promising future due to the presence of modern infrastructure represented in roads, ports, and Sohar Airport."

Talking about the development of the Silver Jubilee Park in the governorate, Kindi said that they offered only 15-20 per cent of the area for investment in order to preserve the green space in it. "We used creative inputs from various parties to develop the park within the investment evaluation criteria."

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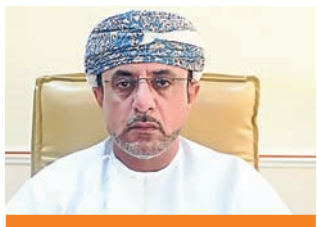
Projects worth RO18mn underway in Dakhiliyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dakhiliyah governorate is currently witnessing the implementation of various service projects at a total cost of RO18mn as part of the development programmes for governorates.

The projects aim to stimulate the commercial and tourism movements and create entertainment spaces for families in all the wilayats of the governorate.

Hilal bin Saeed al Hajri, Governor of Dakhiliyah, said, "We have recently signed many agreements to implement 55 projects worth over RO18mn. The projects include paving of internal roads, construction of parking lots in tourist areas, lighting, and enhancing services and beautification facilities."



We have recently signed many agreements to implement 55 projects

HILAL AL HAJRI

Development of the entrance to the wilayat of Nizwa, improvement and establishment of markets, parks and municipal slaughterhouses are also part of the ongoing programme, the governor added.



Separately, the governorate has taken up projects to enhance services, create jobs, strengthen the role of small and medium enterprises, besides advancing the governorate's economy.

According to Hajri, the governorate has completed the implementation of internal road maintenance projects in the wilayats of Izki, Samail and Manah, and work is underway to repair cracks on damaged roads in different parts of the

wilayats of Nizwa and Al Hamra.

"Work is underway to construct a road and parking spaces for the Nizwa municipality slaughterhouse. The road would be 700m long, while the parking

lot will be built on an area of 10,000sqm."

Hajri pointed out that the wilayat of Bahla witnessed the implementation of a number of projects, including the paving of 31km of internal roads (the second package) distributed among various regions, with a completion rate of 15 per cent.

"Work is also underway for the construction of parking lots in the Misfat al Abriyeen area, and a commercial area in Al Alam in the wilayat of Izki, with a completion rate of 60 per cent. Work is underway also for the construction of waiting areas for taxi drivers and passengers in the wilayats of Samail, Izki, Bidbid, Bahla, and Al Hamra."

The governorate is also running outlets for selling local products in Jabal Akhdar.

The governorate will witness implementation of many more projects, such as construction of commercial area in Tanuf, 1.3km long road for the Samail municipality slaughterhouse; a vegetable and fruit market and commercial area in Al Touq in the wilayat of Izki.

"The wilayat of Al Hamra will witness the construction of a municipal slaughterhouse; internal roads (the second package); a walkway; a place for prayer and toilets in some tourist sites in the wilayat of Izki.

"The governorate will also establish a market for artisans in Al Madrah in the wilayat of Samail, and another in Fanja in the wilayat of Bidbid, in addition to a project to re-plan the internal roads in various wilayats of the governorate," Hajri informed.

MHT to develop Mirbat Fort to boost tourism

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) has initiated a plan to develop the Mirbat Fort as it plans to stimulate the tourism sector by undertaking several projects to attract tourists.

The Mirbat Fort - near the coast of the Arabian Sea - was built to protect the wilayat of Mirbat and its inhabitants, and it eventually became a major tourist attraction in Dhofar governorate.

"The ministry is looking to partner with the private sector for managing and developing the fort for which a tender has been floated," MHT informed through a statement.



Part of the tender calls for investments in the land behind the fort and development of the traditional market in Mirbat, the ministry stated.

The ministry confirmed that the competing companies must submit a study that should in-

clude a proposal on how to market the fort commercially and culturally - holding cultural workshops, organising events, and introducing various activities to revive the castle.

"Competing companies must highlight the architectural

uniqueness of the fort and involve the local community in various cultural and social events."

The Mirbat Fort was built in the 13th century, and was constructed on the orders of Sultan Said bin Taimur for the fortification and protection of the inhabitants of the northern sectors of the region after it was beset by floods in 1948.

The fort covers about 467sqm of land and has a height of 12m.

The first floor of the fort used to have a congregation hall, a prison, and storerooms for food and weapons, while the second floor featured a residential segment for the family of the wali of the region, as well as army barracks for soldiers garrisoned at the fort.

Following the government's continuous efforts to develop the tourism sector, historical sites in Oman recorded a significant increase in the numbers of visitors - 22,259 in 2020 compared to 7,064 in 2016 - registering a growth of 315 per cent, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Available data shows that the governorates of North Batinah and Dakhiliyah have the highest numbers of castles and forts.

The Nizwa Fort received 143,767 visitors in 2019 and 44,047 in 2020.

The Muttrah Fort received 14,781 visitors in 2020; Taqah 4,457; Mirbat 691; Khasab 10,429; Bukha 6,367; Buraimi 1,068; Bahla 11,304; Jibreen 19,977 and Sansilah Fort 1,395.

Royal Camel Corps to organise exhibition in Saudi Arabia

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In implementation of the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Royal Camel Corps will organise a seminar and exhibition on Omani camel history in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, from January 3 to January 7, 2023.

The seminar, to be held in cooperation with Oman's Embassy in Riyadh, seeks to spread awareness of Omani camels, their history, origins and their economic, social and cultural values. It will also highlight the Royal Camel Corps' role in preserving breeds of Omani purebred camels.

The seminar will focus on the ongoing cooperation between

Oman and Saudi Arabia in all fields, including exploring opportunities in camel-related economies, scholarly and other aspects of concern to those interested in camel affairs.

An exposition will be held on the sidelines of the seminar. It will highlight four elements; the history of Omani camels, the activities of the Royal Camel Corps (including services it renders to camel rearing communities), the role of the Directorate General of Veterinary Services at the Royal Court Affairs and the heritage arts associated with camels, including songs of Bedouin people, and two photography exhibitions to be staged by the Omani Society for Fine Arts on the theme of camels.

SAF begins recruitment drive



Muscat - Acting in coordination with the Ministry of Labour, the Command of the Sultan's Armed Forces (COSAF) began implementing initial procedures to recruit citizens who meet the general conditions for recruitment and employment, on Wednesday.

Prior to the final stage of admission, the applicants will undergo various stages of assessment in accordance with

SAF recruitment procedures.

To achieve speedy implementation of procedures, the COSAF puts in place all expertise, specialised human resources, administrative and health requirements, and transportation in a manner that provides an appropriate environment for citizens to join the military service and play their part in national duty.

ONA

8 injured in Duqum road accident

Muscat - Eight people were injured in an accident on the Duqum road on Tuesday evening, the Ministry of Health informed on Wednesday.

A statement issued by the Directorate General of Health Serv-

ices in Al Wusta governorate, said, "The emergency department at Duqm Hospital received eight patients, who were involved in a traffic accident on Tuesday evening." Of the eight, two are in critical state, it added.

SULTANATE OF OMAN
MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH
Muscat, hereby give notice of tenders for the following projects

Tender No.	Project Category	Location	Fees R.O	Grade In Tender Board Registration
26/2022	Services	Tender Documents For Construction For Grassed Football Pitch At Of Madha Sports Club At Musandam Governorate	25/- OMR	Excellent & First Grade
27/2022	Service	Renovation Of Grassed Football Pitch For Al Taleiah Sports Club At South Sharqiya Governorate	25/- OMR	Excellent & First Grade
28/2022	Service	Construction Of Synthetic Turf Football Pitch And Floodlight To Madha Sports Club At Musandam Governorate	25/- OMR	Excellent & First Grade
29/2022	Supply	Supply And Installation Of Floodlight To Main Football Pitch At Al Mudhaibi Sports Club North Sarqiya Governorate	25/- OMR	Excellent & First Grade
30/2022	Consulting Office	Consultancy Services (Design And Supervision) Swimming Pool At Madha Sports Club Musandam Governorate	25/- OMR	First Grade
31/2022	Consulting Office	Consultancy Services (Design And Supervision) Platform At Al Mudhaibi Sports Club North Sharqiya Governorate	25/- OMR	First Grade

Companies, which are registered with the Tender Board and engaged in same category with experience in and same Grade as noted above, can obtain the Tender Documents at the Tender Board E-tendering digital portal link (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) until 11/01/2023.

The last date of tender submission on above E-tendering site at 09:00am 06/02/2023

A Tender Bond equivalent to 1% of the tender sum issued from a registered bank, in the prescribed form, in Sultanate of Oman and valid for 90 days should be enclosed with the tender.

Any tender without the bond will be reject and the tender committee is not bound to accept the lowest or any tender received.

INTERNAL TENDER COMMITTEE OF MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

Any participants have doubt in adopting e-tendering can contact over the phone 24402200 or through email etenderhd@ita.gov.om

Oman Sailing Festival 2022 concludes



The final stop on the Oman Sailing Festival, a nationwide tour organised by Oman Sail to introduce local communities the length and breadth of the coastline, concluded in Musandam with participation of more than 20 SMEs and over 780 people taking the chance to Try Sailing, Try Windsurfing and Try

Kitesurfing over the four days. Held at Bassa public beach, Oman Sail's professional instructors welcomed potential sailors of all ages for an introductory lesson and take the first step towards a life on the water. Even more people from Musandam and the surrounding area visited the festival to see the wide range

of traditional delicacies, arts, crafts, and souvenirs for sale courtesy of local SMEs, a press release said.

Ali al Shehimi, Oman Sailing Festival project manager, said, "This was a fantastic place to conclude a really impactful Oman Sailing Festival. For the past two months, we have visited

coastal communities to share the possibilities that sailing can offer – whether competitively or as a leisure activity. Sailing has been an important part of Oman's history and traditions, and it has been Oman Sail's mission for the past 14 years to reignite this maritime heritage."

"We are very pleased with

the enthusiasm of everyone at each stop this year and are very proud to offer SMEs the chance to show their capabilities and reach a new audience. Planning for 2023 edition will begin soon and we will be looking to build on the success of this year to offer an even bigger event next year," he added.

The Oman Sailing Festival has also helped share an important environmental message at each stop by organising a beach clean-up, run in partnership with Environment Society of Oman (ESO). In Musandam, more than 60 people – including community volunteers, and Oman Sail staff – helped to remove waste from the

shores and preserve the natural habitat for native wildlife.

The Oman Sailing Festival was proudly supported by Oman Air, National Mineral Water Company (Tanuf), Environment society of Oman (ESO), and National University of Science and Technology (International Maritime College).

'42 Abu Dhabi' celebrates year of empowering

'42 Abu Dhabi', the UAE capital's innovative and disruptive coding school that offers a unique peer-to-peer, gamified learning methodology, celebrated its first anniversary. The School highlighted its remarkable achievements in empowering learners to shape the digital future of Abu Dhabi by making coding education accessible to people from all walks of life.

Since its launch in October 2021, 42 Abu Dhabi has enrolled 340 students, including 100 UAE national students. With flexibility being a key pillar of 42 Abu Dhabi's learning methodology, the School is open 24 hours a day, giving students ownership of their learning journey through its peer-to-peer model, a press release said.

42 Abu Dhabi collaborated with leading organisations and companies across different industries and sectors to identify and develop opportunities which contribute to its success. This



year, 358 job and internship opportunities were offered to 42 Abu Dhabi students, including 109 sponsorships for UAE na-

tional students as a result of the successful network of partners that the school has built.

Dr Ahmed al Shoaibi, acting

executive director - Higher Education Sector at Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK), said, "One

year ago, we launched 42 Abu Dhabi under Abu Dhabi's Ghadan 21 accelerator program to complement the emirate's

world-class educational ecosystem, and introduce the school's unique learning methodology to the Emirate education ecosystem. Today we mark a new milestone of making coding education accessible to people from all walks of life.

"In one year, we have made impressive strides toward realizing Abu Dhabi's strategic vision to create a diverse and inclusive educational experience that empowers a future-ready generation of lifelong learners who can lead our future knowledge-based economy.

42 Abu Dhabi has seen huge demand, boasting impressive enrollment figures. We have also developed a strong strategic partner network that continues to play a vital role in supporting our objectives in developing our school as Abu Dhabi's talent incubator, enabling us to foster a culture of entrepreneurship and develop the Emirate's education sector."

Ooredoo offers more data

Want more prepaid Internet allowing you to stream and download as much as you like? Not only can you choose a More Internet plan based on your data needs, but Ooredoo is now giving Hala prepaid customers up to 8GB of bonus data free when recharging their data plans.

Valid for 90 days from 13 December, it is just one of many additional benefits associated with Ooredoo's popular Hala plans that provide the perfect mix of flexibility, great value, simplicity and most of all, convenience.

There are a range of More Internet data recharges and customers can opt for RO2, RO3, RO5 and RO10 recharge for 2GB, 3GB, 6GB and 20GB data respectively.

BRX primed for toughest test at Dakar Rally on December 31

Bahrain Raid Xtreme head into their third Dakar Rally on Saturday with a four-car team of sustainably-fuelled Prodrive Hunters tested, developed and ready for the biggest adventure in the world of motorsport.

The 45th edition of the rally tackles some of the toughest desert terrain seen in recent years, and after winning two of the four World Rally Raid Championship events in 2022, the BRX team is raring to go, with car updates, new staff and a hunger for what lies ahead in Saudi Arabia, a press release said.

After taking runner up spot 12 months ago, Sebastien Loeb returns to action with Fabian Lurquin looking to build on last year's performance in the Prodrive Hunter T1+ that gave BRX eight stage podium finishes overall.

Argentine Orly Terranova, who drove another Prodrive Hunter to fourth place in the 2022 Dakar, will be accompanied by Spaniard Alex Haro who guided him to a superb second place on the Rallye du Maroc in



October.

BRX will also be running the GCK Motorsport Hunter for Guerlain Chicherit and Alex Winocq, who together scored a stunning victory first time out on the Rallye du Maroc. Completing the team line-up will be Lithuanians Vaidotas Zala and Paulo Fiuza.

Nine-time World Rally Cham-

pion Loeb said, "We have a very good car for Dakar after excellent preparation in Morocco and Andalucia, proving that we're right up there with the performance of the Hunter.

"Fabian and I are ready to go. We will try to be consistent and get some clean stages with no problems. We will have some long days in the dunes and that's

where you have to stay focused, but that is our target this year. We're looking forward to it."

Terranova said: "I've been training hard for this, my 15th Dakar. The first week we all know will be hard, with many kilometres to be tackled over new terrain in Saudi Arabia. That will test us, so we must be concentrated and in the best possible shape."

Chicherit said, "I am very happy to attempt my 12th Dakar with a competitive and reliable car. It is difficult to announce a goal at this moment, but all I can say is we have a good car that will allow Alex and I to fight until the end."

As part of the BRX drive towards alternative motorsport solutions, each Hunter will again

run on Prodrive EcoPower bio-fuel, created by Coryton from sustainable sources, which produces 80% less CO2 than petrol. Engineers have also made subtle but important modifications to the cars following extensive tests in the searing heat of the Sahara desert.

Dakar 2023 is the biggest undertaking from Prodrive in recent

years, with huge logistical coordination from all over Europe. This saw 27 vehicles shipped from Marseille to Jeddah in late November ready for the team to get to the first bivouac at Sea Camp, north of Jeddah, this week. The route of Dakar 2023 will be the longest for over ten years and harder than the previous year, organisers say.



A woman holds a photographic portrait during tribute to Mohammad Moradi in Lyon on Tuesday (AFP)

Probe opened after Iranian found dead in French river

Lyon, France - French authorities were Tuesday investigating as suicide the drowning of an Iranian man in the southeastern city of Lyon who had said on social media he was going to kill himself to draw attention to the protest crackdown in Iran.

Mohammad Moradi, 38, was found in the Rhone river that flows through the centre of Lyon late on Monday, a police source, who asked not to be named, told AFP.

Emergency services intervened but were unable to resuscitate him on the riverbank, the source added.

Moradi had posted a video on Instagram saying he was about to drown himself to highlight the crackdown on protesters in Iran since the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, 22, after her arrest in Tehran for an alleged breach of the country's strict dress code for women.

"When you see this video, I will be dead," Moradi said.

"The police are attacking people, we have lost a lot of sons and daughters, we have to do something," Moradi said in the video.

"I decided to commit suicide in the Rhone river. It is a challenge, to show that we, Iranian people, we are very tired of this situation," he added.

Lyon prosecutors said they had launched a probe to 'verify the theory of suicide, in view in particular of the messages posted by the person concerned on social networks announcing his intention' to take his life.

The incident has shocked the city, with a small rally to remember Moradi taking place on the banks of the Rhone on Tuesday. Mourners placed candles and

wreaths on the riverside railings, an AFP correspondent said.

"Mohammad Moradi killed himself to make the voice of revolution heard in Iran. Our voice is not carried by Western media," said Timothee Amini of the local Iranian community.

According to several members of the Iranian community, Moradi was a history undergraduate and worked in a restaurant.

'Heart beating for Iran'

He lived in Lyon with his wife for three years.

"His heart was beating for Iran, he could no longer bear the regime," said Amini, deploring that while the Ukraine conflict

Police are attacking people, we have lost a lot of sons and daughters, we have to do something

MOHAMMAD MORADI

was covered 'every morning' one heard 'very little about Iran' in the news.

Lili Mohadjer said Moradi hoped that 'his death would be another element for Western media and governments to back the revolution underway in Iran'.

She said his death was 'not suicide' but 'sacrifice to gain freedom'. Mohadjer said that Moradi in the video said he 'could not live peacefully, comfortably here - where he was very well integrated -' while Iranians were being killed.

AFP

US digs out from monster storm as death toll passes 50

Buffalo, US - The monster storm that killed dozens in the United States over the Christmas week-end continued to inflict misery on New York state and air travelers nationwide on Tuesday, as stories emerged of families trapped for days during the 'blizzard of the century'.

The number of deaths attributed to the winter storm rose to more than 50 after officials confirmed three more fatalities in western New York's Erie County, the epicenter of the crisis.

The police department 'expects that number to rise,' tweeted Byron Brown, mayor of the lakeside county's biggest city Buffalo - which has been paralyzed for five days by chest-deep snow banks and power outages.

Kathy Hochul, New York state's governor and a Buffalo native, described the storm aftermath as resembling 'a war zone.'

"Certainly it is the blizzard of the century," Hochul told reporters on Monday.

As temperatures plummeted, commuters and some residents fleeing their freezing homes became trapped on highways, unable to be rescued.

The problem was compounded when some areas were rendered inaccessible to ambulances for dozens of hours and snowplows were unable to per-



A resident digs out of the snow in Buffalo, New York, on Tuesday (AFP)

form their job due to the ferocity of the storm - necessitating rescuers being rescued in certain cases.

The family of one 22-year-old Buffalo resident, Anndel Taylor, said she died in her car after getting stuck on her way home from work. A video sent by Taylor and posted by her sister shows her vehicle covered up to its windows in snow.

Emergency responders, who themselves became stuck at-

tempting to rescue her, found her dead 18 hours later, possibly due to carbon monoxide poisoning, her family in North Carolina told local TV station WSOC-TV.

One father described being trapped in his vehicle on the streets of Buffalo with his four young children for 11 hours before being rescued, according to *The New York Times*.

Zila Santiago, 30, said he kept his engine running to provide some warmth and fed his chil-

dren some juice found in his trunk. They were finally rescued at dawn by a passing snowplow.

In a city well-accustomed to snowstorms, some residents were blaming a travel ban they said was enacted too late on Friday morning as contributing to the mayhem.

Buffalo resident Mark Eguliar remained at his workplace, where he was stuck for more than 40 hours.

"Too many people were driv-

ing, too many people were not listening to the ban, so the cars were blocking all the roads, making it a lot harder to get home," he said.

Flight chaos

The perfect storm of fierce snow squalls, howling wind and sub-zero temperatures forced the cancellation of thousands of flights in recent days, including around 5,900 on Tuesday and Wednesday, according to tracking site FlightAware.com.

Most of the cancellations on Tuesday and Wednesday were at Southwest Airlines, which pulled more than 60 per cent of its flights due to cascading logistics issues, earning it a rebuke from the US government.

The Department of Transportation tweeted that it was 'concerned by Southwest's unacceptable rate of cancellations' and would examine if the company was 'complying with its customer service plan', while the US Senate committee overseeing aviation said it would look into causes that 'go beyond weather'.

In a video statement on Tuesday, Southwest CEO Bob Jordan said he was 'truly sorry' for the disruptions and that a 'massive effort to stabilise the airline' was under way.

AFP

Rare hail brings winter white to desert hotspot Kuwait

Kuwait City, Kuwait - Kuwait, one of the hottest countries on Earth, has been hit by a rare hail storm that delighted children and their parents, with images of the winter white shared widely on social media on Wednesday.

"We have not seen so much hail during the winter season in 15 years," Muhammad Karam, a former director of Kuwait's meteorological department, told AFP.

Pictures and videos of southern roads partially blanketed in hail and ice spread online to celebrate the rare weather event.

Children donned scarves and raincoats as they scooped up hail in the Umm al-Haiman district, about 50km (30 miles) south of Kuwait City.

Kuwait's meteorological department said precipitation since Tuesday had reached up to 63 millimetres but that the



This aerial view shows mist covering the skyscraper skyline in the centre of Kuwait City on Wednesday (AFP)

weather was clearing up.

Karam said he expects the phenomenon to reoccur as climate change disrupts weather patterns.

The oil-rich Gulf nation endures blistering summer heat, and scientists predict it could become unlivable in future because of climate change.

In 2016, summer temperatures peaked at 54 degrees Celsius (129 degrees Fahrenheit). Parts of Kuwait could get 4.5 degrees Celsius hotter from

2071 to 2100 compared with the historical average, the Environment Public Authority has warned.

AFP

Eye-for-an-eye justice returns to Afghan courts

Ghazni, Afghanistan - Kneeling in front of a turbaned judge in a tiny room at the Ghazni Court of Appeal in eastern Afghanistan, an old man sentenced to death for murder pleads for his life.

The 75-year-old admits to having shot dead a relative - out of revenge, he says, because of rumours he had sexual relations with his daughter-in-law.

Under eye-for-eye sharia punishments, officially ordered by the Taliban's supreme leader for the first time last month, he faces public execution - with the sentence to be carried out by a relative of his victim.

"We have made peace between the families," the old man pleads. "I have witnesses who can prove that we have agreed on compensation."

AFP had rare access to a court in Ghazni to see how sharia justice is being administered since the Taliban returned to power in August last year.

Hundreds of millions of dol-



Head of the penal court Mohammad Mobin (second from left) listens to a man sentenced to death, during a hearing, in Ghazni on November 28 (AFP)

lars were spent building a new judicial system after the Taliban were overthrown in 2001 - a combination of Islamic and secular law, with qualified prosecutors, defence lawyers and judges.

Many women were recruited into the system, overseeing cases involving hardcore Taliban militants as well as bringing more gender balance to family courts.

All that has been scrapped by the Taliban, with trials, sentences and punishments now overseen

by all-male clerics.

Islamic law, or sharia, acts as a code of living for Muslims worldwide, offering guidance on issues such as modesty, finance and crime. However, interpretations vary according to local custom, culture and religious school of thought. Taliban scholars in Afghanistan have employed one of the most extreme interpretations of the code, including capital and corporal punishments little used by most modern Muslim states.

The difference between the system of the former government and today 'is as big as the earth and the sky', says Mohiuddin Umari, head of the Ghazni court, between sips of tea.

Officials in Ghazni have shunned the use of its formal Western-style courtroom, and proceedings instead take place in a small side room, with participants sitting on a carpeted floor.

The cramped room, heated by an old wood stove, has a bunk bed in a corner, on which religious books and a Kalashnikov rifle are placed.

The young judge, Mohammad Mobin, listens impassively before asking a few questions.

He then orders another hearing in a few days - giving the old man time to gather witnesses who can testify that the families have agreed to what he says.

"If he proves his claim, then the judgement can be revised," Mobin says.

AFP

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Date: 28.12.2022

Place: Sultanate of Oman

Country Head, Oman Operations

China's sudden COVID pivot sparks jitters around world

Beijing, China - Beijing's sudden pivot away from containing COVID-19 has caused jitters around the world, with the United States saying it may restrict travel from China following its decision to end mandatory quarantine for overseas arrivals.

China late on Monday scrapped quarantine for inbound travellers from January 8 onwards, dismantling the last remaining piece of its stringent zero-COVID policy and ending some of the world's harshest border restrictions.

The move was greeted with jubilation by Chinese citizens, who rushed to book international flights, triggering a surge in ticket prices.

Hospitals and crematoriums across China continue to be overwhelmed by an influx of mostly elderly people.

AFP reporters saw dozens of mostly elderly COVID patients lying on gurneys in overflowing hospital emergency wards in Tianjin, 140km (87 miles) southwest of the capital Beijing on Wednesday.

Medical staff are 'pretty much all' expected to continue working despite testing positive for the virus, one doctor said.

Other countries have expressed concerns about the potential for new variants to emerge as China battles the world's biggest surge in infections. US officials said late on Tuesday they were considering COVID entry restrictions on travellers from China, after countries including Japan and India in-



This photo shows COVID-19 patients on beds at Tianjin Nankai Hospital in Tianjin on Wednesday (AFP)

troduced PCR testing on arrival for Chinese passengers.

"There are mounting concerns in the international com-

Taiwan, a self-ruled island that China claims as its own, said on Wednesday that it would also screen travellers from the main-

overall predictable and under control,' foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said on Wednesday.

"Hyping, smearing and political manipulation with ulterior motives can't stand the test of facts," Wang added, calling Western media reporting on China's COVID surge 'completely biased'. All passengers arriving in China have had to undergo mandatory centralised quarantine since March 2020. The period of isolation fell from three weeks to one week in June, and to five days last month.

The end of that rule in January will also see COVID-19 downgraded to a Class B infectious disease, allowing authorities to adopt looser controls.

Chinese immigration authorities said on Tuesday they will resume issuing passports

for tourism purposes from January 8, after years of strict exit controls.

Tracking cases

The winter surge comes ahead of major public holidays next month in which hundreds of millions of people are expected to travel to their hometowns to reunite with relatives.

Chinese authorities have said the scale of the outbreak is now 'impossible' to track and narrowed the criteria for defining COVID deaths.

China's Center for Disease Prevention and Control reported 5,231 new COVID cases and three deaths nationwide on Wednesday - likely a drastic undercount since people are no longer required to declare infections to authorities.

Authorities are using data from online surveys, hospital visits, demand for fever medicines and emergency calls to 'make up for shortcomings in (officially) reported figures', disease control official Yin Wenwu said at a press briefing on Tuesday.

With the country facing shortages of basic medicines, Beijing city authorities plan to distribute the oral COVID drug Paxlovid at local hospitals and community clinics. It remains extremely difficult to obtain for ordinary people.

The US-developed treatment was briefly available on e-commerce platform JD.com and delivery platform Meituan in the past few days before both ran out of stock.

AFP



Passengers check-in at the HK Express counter at the international airport in Hong Kong on Wednesday (AFP)

Hong Kong asks Japan to reverse 'hasty' COVID flight curbs

Hong Kong, China - Hong Kong authorities on Wednesday asked Japan to remove restrictions on direct flights from the city, which were imposed following the explosion of coronavirus cases in mainland China. The city deployed similar curbs during its own fight against COVID, including rapid bans on airlines for carrying virus-positive passengers and travel restrictions for nations with major outbreaks. Japan became one of the first countries to impose China-specific travel restrictions this week as infections surged across the mainland following the dismantling of Beijing's zero-COVID strategy.

They include restricting direct flights from Hong Kong to four airports - Tokyo's Narita and Haneda, Kansai in Osaka and Nagoya's Chubu. Hong Kong's transport department said on Wednesday it was 'greatly disappointed by Japanese authorities' hasty decision during the peak tourist season'. The department said it had contacted the

Japanese consulate in Hong Kong to 'solemnly request' a reversal of the decision - which takes effect from Friday.

It added that the affected airlines have been told they can still fly empty planes to the restricted airports to pick up any stranded passengers in the coming days.

From Friday, Japan will also require on-arrival virus tests for passengers from China, but that will not apply to travellers from Hong Kong and Macau.

Hong Kong had followed a version of China's zero-COVID policy and imposed some of the strictest travel curbs in the world during the pandemic, which left the business hub isolated for more than two years.

The city only began lifting restrictions recently, ending mandatory hotel quarantine for all arrivals in September. Since then, travel has surged as Hong Kongers clamour to take holidays and visit loved ones overseas.

AFP

Ex-Nazi camp secretary appeals against conviction

Berlin, Germany - A 97-year-old former Nazi camp secretary has filed an appeal against her conviction of complicity in the murder of more than 10,000 people, a German court said on Wednesday.

Irmgard Furchner was the first woman in decades to be tried in Germany for Nazi-era crimes.

She was last week handed a two-year suspended sentence for her role in what prosecutors called the 'cruel and malicious murder' of prisoners at the Stutthof camp in occupied Poland.

But her defence, as well as a co-plaintiff, have since 'filed an appeal to the Federal Supreme Court against the judgment of the regional court of Itzehoe', said a spokeswoman for the court in a statement. The legal challenge could only question if the sentence had been based on a violation of the law, said the spokeswoman.

The supreme court would examine if 'proceedings have been conducted properly and substantive law has been applied correctly,' she said.

AFP

One dead in China highway pile-up of hundreds of cars

Beijing, China - One person died during a highway pile-up involving hundreds of vehicles in central China, state broadcaster CCTV reported Wednesday, with images of the accident showing scenes of chaos.

Aerial pictures showed hundreds of passenger cars, vans and lorries - many of which had smashed into one another - piled up on one section of the highway in dense fog.

Other viral videos posted online showed the mangled remains of several vehicles that had crashed into others.

The accident occurred due to low visibility from fog near the city of Zhengzhou, Henan



This aerial photo shows a multi-vehicle collision on Zhengxin Yellow River Bridge in Zhengzhou, in China's central Henan province on Wednesday (AFP)

province, and involved at least 200 vehicles, state media reported. "On Wednesday morn-

ing, a sudden build-up of fog occurred at the Zhengxin Yellow River Bridge in Zhengzhou,

which caused a traffic accident involving the collision of multiple vehicles," CCTV cited

Zhengzhou authorities as saying, adding that one person died as a result.

Zhengzhou traffic police said on their official social media account that traffic on the flyover had resumed as of Wednesday afternoon.

Emergency rescue efforts were carried out soon after the accident occurred, the CCTV report said.

Road accidents are common in China due to a lack of strict safety controls. In September, 27 passengers died after a bus transporting them to quarantine facilities in southwestern Guizhou province flipped over on a motorway.

AFP

US Supreme Court keeps controversial border policy in place

Washington, US - The US government's two-year-old policy of invoking COVID-19 precautions to turn away hundreds of thousands of migrants at the Mexican border will remain in place for now, the Supreme Court ruled on Tuesday.

The decision to uphold the controversial rule known as Title 42 delayed a looming political crisis for President Joe Biden, as thousands waited at the southern border in expectation the policy was about to end.

But the conservative-dominated high court accepted a petition from 19 states warning of a surge of migrants should the policy introduced under former president Donald Trump in March 2020 be lifted as ordered by a lower court.

The Supreme Court said Title 42 - which allows the swift expulsion even of people who might qualify for asylum - would

remain in place pending its ruling on the issue, and that it would hear the case in February.

"The states contend that they face an immigration crisis at the border and policymakers have failed to agree on adequate measures to address it," the court said in its 5-4 ruling.

"The only means left to mitigate the crisis, the states suggest, is an order from this Court directing the federal government to continue its COVID-era Title 42 policies as long as possible."

'Broken' system

The ruling could give the Biden administration, which had conceded that Title 42 was wrong and prepared for a surge of asylum-seeking migrants, until May or June before a final decision.

Departing the White House for vacation on Tuesday night, Biden told reporters that ending Title 42 was 'overdue,' but the



A Nicaraguan family crosses the Rio Grande river from Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua state, Mexico to El Paso, Texas, US on Tuesday (AFP)

administration would heed the court's decision until a final ruling is made, likely in June.

"In the meantime, we have to enforce it," Biden said. White House spokeswoman

Karine Jean-Pierre said earlier in the day the administration would prepare for the next hearing.

"We are advancing our preparations to manage the

The decision to uphold the controversial rule known as Title 42 delayed a looming political crisis for President Joe Biden

border in a secure, orderly, and humane way when Title 42 eventually lifts," Jean-Pierre said in a statement. "Title 42 is a public health measure, not an immigration enforcement measure, and it should not be extended indefinitely."

"To truly fix our broken immi-

gration system, we need Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform," she said.

Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy said that removing Title 42 'would have made our border crisis worse, and the White House seemed willing to let that happen'. "Glad to see the Supreme Court step in to preserve it, but we need a permanent solution," he said on Twitter.

While the government had prepared for the end of Title 42 with more staffing and more fencing along the border, it was not clear how it would have stemmed an expected surge.

Some 2.5mn people were intercepted while trying to cross the southern US border in the 12 months through November.

While two years ago most of the migrants were from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, now more than half come from much further away - from

Nicaragua, Venezuela, Cuba, Eastern Europe and Asia.

Ballooning migrant numbers at the border pose an increasing political headache for Biden and his Democratic Party, whom the Republicans have repeatedly sought to paint as soft on illegal immigration.

Critics have branded Title 42 'inhumane'.

"As a COVID control strategy, a humanitarian policy, and a border policy, Title 42 has not only failed but caused irreparable harm on a massive scale," said Karla Marisol Vargas, senior attorney at the Texas Civil Rights Project, in a statement.

"People have continued to make the long and dangerous journey to the border, because for many Black, Indigenous, and Brown communities, the United States remains their last, best chance at survival," she said.

AFP

Pope says ex-pontiff Benedict ‘very ill’

Benedict XVI, who in 2013 became the first pontiff to resign, has been in increasingly frail health

Vatican City, Holy See - Pope Francis said on Wednesday that former pontiff Benedict XVI, 95, is ‘very ill’, and urged people to pray for him before going to be by his side.

Benedict, who in 2013 became the first pontiff to resign in six centuries, has been in increasingly frail health.

“I would like to ask all of you to pray a special prayer for Pope Emeritus Benedict,” Francis said at the end of his general audience at the Vatican.

“Remember him, because he is very ill, asking the Lord to console and support him.”

A short while later, the Vatican confirmed Benedict’s health has worsened ‘in the last few hours’ and said Francis visited him after his audience.

“In the last few hours there has been a deterioration due to advancing age,” spokesman Matteo Bruni said in a statement. “The situation at the moment remains under control, monitored continually by doctors.”

Benedict had cited his declining physical and mental health back in 2013 in his decision to become the first pope since 1415 to stand down as head of the world-wide Catholic church.



Pope Francis salutes the pilgrims during the weekly general audience in Paul VI hall at the Vatican on Wednesday (AFP)

The pope emeritus, whose real name is Joseph Ratzinger, has since lived a quiet life in a former convent inside the Vatican. He was the first German pope for 1,000 years.

German Chancellor Olaf

Scholz ‘wishes the pope emeritus a good recovery and sends his thoughts to him’, government spokeswoman Christiane Hoffmann told a press briefing.

‘Weak and fragile’

In 2018, in a letter sent to Italy’s *Corriere della Sera* daily, Benedict said that he was ‘moved that so many readers want to know how I spend my days in this, the last period of the life’.

“I can only say that with the

slow withering of my physical forces, I am on an interior pilgrimage towards home,” he said.

Maltese Cardinal Mario Grech said in 2020 that Benedict ‘has difficulty in expressing himself’.

The ex-pope, who uses a

wheelchair, said ‘the Lord has taken away my speech in order to let me appreciate silence’, Grech told *Vatican News*.

In April, Benedict’s long-time secretary, Archbishop Georg Gaenswein, told *Vatican News* the ex-pope was ‘physically relatively weak and fragile’, but ‘in good spirits’.

Benedict was 78 when he succeeded the long-reigning and popular John Paul II in April 2005.

The resignation created an unprecedented situation in which two ‘men in white’ - Benedict and his successor, Pope Francis - have co-existed within the walls of the tiny city state.

His papacy was beset by Church infighting and the outcry over paedophilia.

He became the first pontiff to apologise for scandals over clerical sex abuse of children that emerged around the world, expressing ‘deep remorse’ and meeting with victims in person.

But while he took key steps to tackling the issue, he was criticised for failing to end Church cover-ups. The paedophilia scandal has returned to haunt him in retirement.

A damning report for the Ger-

man church in January 2022 accused him of personally failing to stop four predatory priests in the 1980s while archbishop of Munich.

Benedict has denied wrongdoing and the Vatican has strongly defended his record.

God’s Rottweiler

Unlike his successor Pope Francis, a Jesuit who delights in being among his flock, Benedict is considered a conservative intellectual.

He was dubbed ‘God’s Rottweiler’ in a previous post as chief doctrinal enforcer.

But as pontiff he appeared overwhelmed by the challenges facing a Church that was losing influence and followers, and years of Vatican turmoil took their toll.

He stepped down in February 2013 in an announcement delivered to cardinals in Latin, later saying the decision was the result of a mystical experience.

Eleonora Matsechek, 19, who was in Saint Peter’s Square shortly after the news of Benedict’s worsening health broke, said his death would be ‘sad, because he was a good pope’.

AFP



North Korea’s leader Kim Jong Un gives a report at the 8th Central Committee of the Workers’ Party, in Pyongyang on Tuesday (AFP)

Kim sets out new goals for North’s military

Seoul, South Korea - Kim Jong Un announced new goals for North Korea’s military in a report to party leaders, state media reported on Wednesday, hinting that sanctions-busting weapons tests will continue next year.

Kim is currently presiding over a major party meeting in capital Pyongyang, during which the top leader and other senior party officials outline their policy goals for 2023 in key areas including diplomacy, security and the economy.

Kim ‘set forth new key goals for bolstering up the self-reliant defence capability to be pushed ahead with in 2023’, the official Korean Central News Agency reported on Wednesday, without giving any details.

The report ‘analysed and assessed the new challengeable situation created in the Korean peninsula’, KCNA said, in an apparent reference to the recent sharp escalation in tensions between North and South. Kim made clear the ‘orientation of struggle against the enemy to be adhered to by our Party’, KCNA added.

North Korea has conducted a record-breaking number of weapons tests this year, including firing inter-continental ballistic missiles, which it is banned from testing by UN sanctions.

Pyongyang has also ratcheted up tensions with Seoul,

Kim set forth new key goals for bolstering up the self-reliant defence capability to be pushed ahead with in 2023

KCNA

including firing artillery into maritime buffer zones and this week sending unmanned drones into South Korea’s airspace. The incursion by the five drones - the first such incident since 2017 - prompted Seoul to fire warning shots and deploy fighter jets and attack helicopters to shoot them down.

North Korea’s end-of-year plenary meetings are typically used by the regime to unveil the country’s priorities both domestically and overseas for the year ahead.

Full details of the current ongoing plenary are expected to be announced when it concludes later this week.

While Kim focused on the domestic economy at the 2021 event, analysts are widely expecting a shift in tone to highlight the military front this year, in light of the nuclear-armed North’s increasing belligerence.

AFP

Australians to decide on Indigenous ‘Voice’

Sydney, Australia - Australians will decide next year if the country’s constitution will be changed to give an institutional voice to the long-suffering Indigenous population, the government said on Wednesday.

The proposed ‘Voice to Parliament’ aims to give Indigenous Australians a greater say in national policy-making, as they battle poorer health, lower incomes and higher barriers to education.

Indigenous Australians are not currently mentioned in the country’s constitution - adopted in 1901 - and any move to change that is politically contentious. Australia’s centre-left government was elected in May and had promised to hold a referendum on the issue - but until now has shied away from setting a date.



Speaking at a folk festival in the state of Queensland later on Wednesday, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese will say the vote will be held ‘next year’, according to prepared remarks released by his government.

“I also want to reaffirm, proudly and clearly, my government’s determination to enshrine in the Australian constitution an Indigenous Voice to Parliament,” he will say.

The Voice to Parliament would establish a constitutionally-recognised body - or voice -

Vote will be held next year. I also want to reaffirm, proudly and clearly, my government’s determination to enshrine in the Australian constitution an indigenous Voice to Parliament

ANTHONY ALBANESE

responsible for advising the government on issues impacting Indigenous Australians.

Albanese argues the constitutional change would help Australia ‘come together as a nation and take the hand that First Nations people have extended to us’.

Advocacy group Reconciliation Australia said putting it in the constitution would mean it cannot be ‘shut down’ if a different government had a change of heart in the future.

“Embedding a Voice in the

constitution would recognise the special place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia’s history,” the group has said. Of Australia’s 25mn residents, about 900,000 identify as Indigenous.

Widespread discrimination

The conservative Nationals party, a minor political player, has already announced it will campaign against the Voice.

The centre-right Liberal party, Australia’s main opposition, has

yet to take a position.

Critics have called the Voice ‘another layer of bureaucratic red tape’ and have questioned whether it will make any difference in remote Indigenous communities.

Indigenous Australians settled the country an estimated 65,000 years ago, according to the national museum, but have suffered widespread discrimination and oppression since the arrival of British settlers in the late 18th Century.

They were still banned from voting in some Australian states and territories until the 1960s.

The inequalities facing the Indigenous population remain stark - they have life expectancies years shorter than other Australians and are far more likely to die in police custody.

AFP

Nearly 200 starving Rohingya reach Indonesia

Laweung, Indonesia - Some died of sickness. Others of dehydration.

But after more than a month adrift on the Andaman Sea without much food, medicine or a working engine, nearly 200 Rohingya reached western Indonesia’s Aceh province after their overcrowded, rickety wooden boat finally reached shore on Monday.

Among the emaciated refugees who survived the harrowing voyage, some were so malnourished they could barely walk and many had to be rehydrated via IV drips.

Gaunt young children, as well as men and women, queued for food, baths and haircuts after spending the night on the floor of a local mosque.

“Some people died in the boat. Around 26 people. We threw them out to the sea,” said Rasyit, an exhausted-looking refugee.

Every year when the monsoon season abates, thousands of Rohingya flee violence in Myanmar and squalid refugee camps in Bangladesh on perilous sea voyages run by human traffickers who promise sanctuary abroad.

Malaysia and Indonesia are favoured destinations for the



A Rohingya refugee bathes at a temporary shelter after arriving by boat in Laweung, Aceh province on Tuesday (AFP)

persecuted Muslim minority, but they are often caught up in what the United Nations has called ‘human ping-pong’ as governments turn them away.

The group in Aceh said after Malaysia refused to allow them to dock, they spent weeks waiting for the wind to buffet them ashore. Local authorities estimated the boat was carrying 174 people. “We left Bangladesh (and) after 10 days our rations

finished,” said 14-year-old Umar Faruq, who was travelling without any family. “The engine broke down after seven days. (Then) Malaysia didn’t let us arrive.”

When they embarked, they had only enough clean water for seven days and food to last 10, he said. “We were at sea one month and 10 days.”

Medical teams from the International Organization for Migration ‘treated cases of severe

dehydration and malnutrition’, Louis Hoffmann, the head of mission in Indonesia, told AFP on Tuesday.

Theirs was the fourth such vessel to arrive in Indonesia in the past two months, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which fears another 180 refugees may be dead after their boat sank somewhere in the Indian Ocean.

Nearly one million Rohingya live in camps near Bangladesh’s border with Myanmar, many after fleeing a brutal military crackdown in 2017.

With few opportunities for jobs and education in the camps, and no chance of returning to junta-run Myanmar, thousands embark on high-risk sea journeys, often on makeshift boats.

“In Bangladesh, (our life was) difficult. We were prohibited even to go outside of the house, (and) the children cannot go to school,” said Muhammad Taher.

Monday’s boat landing in Aceh came a day after another vessel carrying 57 Rohingya refugees was pulled ashore on Christmas morning by the Indonesian Navy.

AFP

Nigeria: 7 dead as car smashes into carnival

Port Harcourt, Nigeria - Seven people were killed and more than two dozen injured when a car ploughed into a popular carnival at Calabar in southeast Nigeria, the local head of highway security said.

“The incident occurred when a Toyota Camry car lost control and rammed into (a) crowd of onlookers,” Maikano Hassan, the local commander of the Federal Road Safety Corps, said in a statement.

Seven people died and 29 were injured on Tuesday, some of them critically, according to the statement.

The injured included three girls and two boys.

The incident happened as the crowd were watching a motorcyclists’ parade in front of a mosque in the district of Bogobiri.

AFP



New Zealand's Kane Williamson plays a shot en route to his century on the third day of the first Test against Pakistan in Karachi on Wednesday (AFP)

TALE OF HITS AND MISSES

Kiwi centurions Kane Williamson and Tom Latham punish fumbling Pakistan in first Test

Karachi, Pakistan - Kane Williamson and Tom Latham hit contrasting hundreds Wednesday to propel New Zealand to 440-6 at the close on the third day of the first Test against Pakistan in Karachi.

Williamson survived two stumpings and a leg-before decision before knocking an unbeaten 105, while Ish Sodhi was on one, with the tourists leading by two runs.

Williamson's 25th Test century is his first in international cricket since he racked up 238, also against Pakistan, in Christchurch in January last year.

He built on a solid foundation laid down by openers Latham, who cracked 113 en route to his 13th Test century, and Devon Conway, who fell for 92.

With the National Stadium pitch likely to take spin on the last two days, New Zealand will

look to press home their advantage in the first Test of the two-match series, their first in Pakistan since 2002.

Williamson pushed fast bowler Mohammad Wasim for a sharp single to complete his hundred, a fifth against Pakistan.

In all he has batted for 356 minutes, cracking 11 boundaries.

But Pakistan were left rueing missed chances as wicketkeeper Sarfaraz Ahmed fumbled two stumpings with Williamson on 15 and 21 - spinner Nauman Ali the unlucky bowler on both occasions.

"I think they were chances but one of the deliveries was on the leg side and Sarfaraz did his best," said Nauman.

"This pitch is on the slow side so our effort will be to get the last four wickets early on day four and then set a good target of close to 200 - which will be good

on this pitch."

Williamson added a solid 90 for the fifth wicket with Tom Blundell, who fell to Wasim after scoring 47.

Pakistan's spin duo of Nauman and Abrar Ahmed took two wickets in the post-lunch session, with Henry Nicholls falling for 22 and Daryl Mitchell scoring a robust 47-ball 42.

Ahmed, who has figures of 3-143, also had Michael Bracewell for five.

Decision overturned

Williamson, who also overturned a leg-before decision against him on 13, added 65 for the fourth wicket with Mitchell.

Mitchell smashed seven boundaries and a six including four consecutive fours off Wasim after Pakistan took the second new ball at 272-3.

Earlier, resuming on 165 without loss, New Zealand were lifted by Latham's 13th hundred - the most centuries by a New Zealand opener.

Latham swept Ahmed for a single to reach three figures, eclipsing John Wright's 12 centuries as an opener for New Zealand.

He was finally dismissed for 113 after miscrewing a reverse sweep and being caught at slip.

Latham, who hit ten boundaries in his 288-minute knock, thinks New Zealand are in good shape to push for a win.

"The pitch has started to take more turn from the footmarks so obviously it's not going to get any easier for batting," he said.

"Hopefully, from the position we are in, we can get as many ahead as possible and put Pakistan under pressure."

Latham and Devon Conway put on 183 for the first wicket, beating the New Zealand record against Pakistan of 181 set by openers Mark Richardson and Matthew Bell at Hamilton in 2001. Conway was trapped leg-before by Nauman for 92 after striking 14 boundaries in his fifth Test half-century.

The Pakistan camp has been hit by viral flu with skipper Babar Azam not taking the field in the first session and Agha Salman missing for the entire day.

AFP

India promotes Pandya, drops Pant for Sri Lanka series

New Delhi, India - All-rounder Hardik Pandya will lead India's T20 side at home against Sri Lanka next week after selectors left several heavyweights out of the side.

Selectors have been under pressure to make wholesale changes to India's white-ball squads after the side's disappointing T20 World Cup semi-final defeat to England in November.

Sri Lanka's tour begins with the first of three 20-over matches in Mumbai on January 3 before a three-match ODI series from January 10-15.

Out-of-form wicketkeeper-batsman Rishabh Pant has been dropped from both white-ball squads.

Ageing superstars Virat Kohli, 34, and Rohit Sharma, 35, were not included for the three-match T20 series but both return for the ODI portion of the tour.

Sharma returns as 50-over captain after a thumb injury that forced him to sit out most of this month's Bangladesh tour.

Veteran ODI opener Shikhar Dhawan, 37, who led the team for a three-match series against hosts New Zealand in December, was also dropped from the squad for up-and-coming rookies Shubman Gill and Ishan Kishan.

Sri Lanka has announced a 20-man squad for the tour with all-rounder and Asia Cup-winning skipper Dasun Shanaka



Hardik Pandya

leading the visitors in both formats.

India squads:

T20Is: Hardik Pandya (capt), Ishan Kishan (wk), Ruturaj Gaikwad, Shubman Gill, Suryakumar Yadav, Deepak Hooda, Rahul Tripathi, Sanju Samson, Washington Sundar, Yuzvendra Chahal, Axar Patel, Arshdeep Singh, Harshal Patel, Umran Malik, Shivam Mavi, Mukesh Kumar.

ODIs: Rohit Sharma (capt), Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Suryakumar Yadav, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul (wk), Ishan Kishan (wk), Hardik Pandya, Washington Sundar, Yuzvendra Chahal,

Kuldeep Yadav, Axar Patel, Mohammed Shami, Mohammed Siraj, Umran Malik, Arshdeep Singh.

Sri Lanka squad:

Dasun Shanaka (capt), Pathum Nissanka, Avishka Fernando, Sadeera Samarawickrama, Kusal Mendis, Bhanuka Rajapaksa, Charith Asalanka, Dhananjaya de Silva, Wanindu Hasaranga, Ashen Bandara, Maheesh Theekshana, Jeffrey Vandersay, Chamika Karunaratne, Dilshan Madushanka, Kasun Rajitha, Nuwanidu Fernando, Dunith Wellalage, Pramod Madushan, Lahiru Kumara, Nuwan Thushara.

Bangladesh coach Domingo quits after India Test whitewash

Dhaka, Bangladesh - Bangladesh coach Russell Domingo has quit just days after the side's disappointing Test series defeat at home to India with a year left on his contract, authorities announced Wednesday.

Domingo, 48, had already been partially sidelined earlier this year when he was stripped of his role overseeing the T20 side right before the Asia Cup.

The South African's departure will leave Bangladesh scrambling to find a replacement before they host England in February.



Russell Domingo

"We received his resignation letter last night. We will now start working to appoint a new head coach before our next series," Bangladesh

Cricket Board operations chief Jalal Yunus told AFP.

Jalal said all other coaching staff members, including pace bowling coach and fellow South African Allan Donald, will remain in their roles despite Domingo's resignation.

Bangladesh won its ODI series against India 2-1 but lost both Tests, despite an impressive showing by its bowlers in the final match.

England will play three ODIs and three T20 matches during their tour which concludes on March 14 in Dhaka.

AFP

Carey hits century as Australia eye victory against South Africa

Melbourne, Australia - Australia closed in on winning the second Test and the series against South Africa on Wednesday after Alex Carey struck a maiden century to leave them in a commanding position.

The hosts declared at tea on 575-8 on day three with an ominous lead of 386 after South Africa were bowled out in their first innings for 189.

In reply, the Proteas were 15-1 when play was abandoned early at the Melbourne Cricket Ground due to persistent drizzle.

Their bid to save the Test, and the three-match series after losing the opener in Brisbane, got off to a horror start with under-pressure skipper Dean Elgar caught by Carey off Pat Cummins without scoring in the second over.

Theunis de Bruyn, who was dropped by David Warner on three, was not out six alongside Sarel Erwee on seven.

Wicketkeeper Carey, playing in his 14th Test, was superb in reaching three figures for the first

This one's really special. But it's also great to help Australian cricket team be in a strong position

ALEX CAREY

time before he was caught and bowled by Marco Jansen for 111.

At the declaration, a battling Cameron Green was not out 51 despite a fractured finger, alongside Mitchell Starc on 10.

"It was nice to be able to consolidate from our start from yesterday," Carey, only the second wicketkeeper to make a Test century at the MCG after Rod Marsh, told reporters.

"This one's really special, obviously it's a big moment. But it's also great to help the Australian cricket team be in a strong position. That's what we play for, to win games."



Australia's Alex Carey celebrates after completing his century against South Africa in Melbourne on Wednesday

Carey and Green piled on the misery in a 117-run partnership after South Africa gave themselves a glimmer of hope with

early wickets, including Warner first ball after he resumed on 200.

Australia began on 386-3 with

Travis Head on 48 and Carey on nine after a Herculean unbeaten double century from Warner in his 100th Test in gruelling heat on

day two. The veteran opener retired exhausted with severe cramp after making his third Test double ton, but he returned to the crease when Head was out for 51.

He told host broadcaster Fox before play began that he had a "rough night's sleep".

"I probably woke up six or seven times," he added, and was bowled first ball by an Anrich Nortje yorker as Australia lost three wickets for five runs.

Green ruled out of bowling

Temperatures were much cooler than the 37 degrees Celsius (98.6 Fahrenheit) on Tuesday, with conditions overcast and humid - generally favourable to the bowlers.

And the ever-dangerous Anrich Nortje took advantage, bowling Head in the third over before snaring a bewildered Warner next ball.

"In general it has been a tough three days for us as a bowling unit," admitted Proteas bowling

coach Charl Langeveldt.

"Kagi (Rabada) wasn't on song and a few of the other guys in periods didn't bowl well as a unit. It's important for us to get the consistency going, but it hasn't been there for us in this game."

"We have to take it hour by hour tomorrow and just try and get runs and see where it goes from there," he added.

Pat Cummins fell to the third ball he faced when South Africa successfully reviewed a caught behind decision off Rabada's bowling that was initially denied by the umpire.

Carey was joined by Nathan Lyon and they steadied the ship with the spinner making an entertaining 25.

Ahead of play, Green, who took 5-27 in South Africa's first innings, was ruled out of bowling again in Melbourne - and the third Sydney Test - with a fractured finger, but he bravely came out to bat.

AFP

EAGER BEAVER

World number one Iga Swiatek looking to put stellar season behind her to start 2023 with clean slate

Brisbane, Australia - World number one Iga Swiatek said Wednesday she will put a break-through 2022 season behind her to concentrate on staying at the pinnacle of the women's game.

The Polish star won eight singles titles, including the French and US Opens, in a stellar season that saw her take a commanding position at the top of the rankings, well clear of second-placed Ons Jabeur of Tunisia.

The 21-year-old inherited the number one spot with the shock retirement of Australia's Ashleigh Barty in March, but has since made it her own.

"I'm going to try to kind of cut off everything that happened last year and just focus on the future, because I feel like I can take a lot of experience from these tournaments last year," she said ahead of the inaugural mixed-teams United Cup in Brisbane.

"I don't want to really like hold on to that too much, because I want to go forward and kind of focus on my next goals."

Swiatek admitted she had mixed emotions when she became number one after Barty's retirement, not sure that she de-



Poland's Iga Swiatek hits a return to Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus during their World Tennis League exhibition match in Dubai last week (AFP)

served it.

"At first I felt like I wasn't sure if this is kind of my place to be," she said. "Ash, she seemed like a huge role model for everybody in terms of her behaviour on court

but also off court so I felt like she really set the bar pretty high.

"I need to show it to people but also show it to myself that I'm in the right place.

"I'm super proud of myself,"

she added. "I feel a huge satisfaction, because I have been working my whole life to get to this point. I didn't really think it's possible for me.

"Even right now I feel like there

is a lot I can change and improve."

Poland get their United Cup underway in Brisbane on Saturday against Kazakhstan with Swiatek taking on Yulia Putintseva in the opening rubber.

Garcia eyeing Slam title

French United Cup teammates Caroline Garcia and Alize Cornet spent Christmas at 39,000 feet in their haste to get to Perth for Thursday's start of the ATP-WTA United Cup.

The pair made sure to arrive in Western Australia in good time for the kickoff of the inaugural mixed teams event, with the

with Caroline."

World number four Garcia, who won the WTA Finals last month in Texas following a break-through US Open semi-final, will be starting a season ranked inside the top 10 for only the second time in her career.

She has fond memories of the Perth venue, where she played on the 2019 Fed Cup title-winning squad which defeated Australia in the final.

"Winning the Fed Cup (over Australia) was a crazy emotion," she said.

"I'm looking forward to playing for France here again, I'm happy the new season is starting."

She added: "Last season was good, but to feel comfortable you need to get into a match rhythm. I'm happy the way it's going, but one day at a time."

Garcia said that reaching the final four at the US Open in September - losing in straight sets to Tunisian Jabeur - was a career breakthrough.

"It gave me a lot of confidence that I'd not had before. But the dream remains to win a Grand Slam."

AFP

"I'm going to try to kind of cut off everything that happened last year and just focus on the future"

IGA SWIATEK

French facing Argentina in their opening tie as they warm-up for the Australian Open in January.

"I had to leave really early from France," the 36th-ranked Cornet, who considered packing in her career last season but opted against it, told reporters. "I spent Christmas on the plane



Rafael Nadal during a practice session in Sydney on Wednesday

Nadal 'highly motivated', all set for Djokovic challenge

Sydney, Australia - A "highly motivated" Rafael Nadal welcomed rival Novak Djokovic's much-anticipated return to the Australian Open as "good for tennis" Wednesday, while brushing off suggestions this may be his last tilt at the season-opening Grand Slam.

The 36-year-old Spanish great, who recently became a father, is beginning his new season at the United Cup, a new mixed-teams event starting Thursday in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth.

It will provide a warm-up for his defence of the Australian Open title next month at Melbourne Park, where he swept past Russian Daniil Medvedev to win this year in an epic five-setter.

That victory came after arch-rival and nine-time Australian Open winner Novak Djokovic was detained and deported ahead of the tournament after refusing to get vaccinated for Covid-19.

Australia has since lifted its requirement for visitors to show proof of vaccination against Covid. The Serb arrived back in the country on Tuesday for the first time since being turfed out.

Nadal, who has a record men's 22 Grand Slam titles to Djokovic's 21, said he was

happy to see his superstar rival back.

"Novak is here, good for tennis, good for probably the fans," the world number two said in Sydney. "Let's see, no? Best players on court always win."

Fifth-ranked Djokovic will begin his quest for an incredible 10th title at Melbourne Park at the Adelaide International from Sunday.

Nadal backed up his Australian Open win this year with a 14th French Open but struggled with injury after withdrawing from the Wimbledon semi-final with an abdominal tear in July.

Despite a poor second half of the year, Nadal said he was raring to go again with a clash first up at the United Cup against British world number 14 Cameron Norrie ahead of a blockbuster showdown with Australia's Nick Kyrgios.

"The highest motivation to try to start well. It's always important to start well for me, for the confidence," he said.

"The last few months haven't been easy for me. Main thing for me now is recover the positive feelings on court, being competitive. I hope to. I am ready to make that happen, but let's see."

AFP

Kyrgios pulls out of United Cup

Sydney, Australia - Nick Kyrgios stunned his teammates by pulling out of the United Cup Wednesday on the eve of the tournament, soon after Rafael Nadal said the Australian had "all the weapons" to win a Grand Slam.

The temperamental star withdrew ahead of the new mixed-teams event in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth, depriving fans of a scheduled clash between him and the Spanish great.

Instead, Alex de Minaur will face Nadal in a round-robin singles match.

Australia co-captain Sam Stosur said they only learned about Kyrgios' withdrawal minutes before a scheduled team press conference.

"We literally just found out," she said. "We move forward now and do our best on the day."

The Sydney Morning Herald cited the Kyrgios camp as saying he suffered an ankle injury during an exhibition tournament in Dubai last week.

He practised in Sydney on Tuesday before deciding against



Nick Kyrgios

competing in the United Cup, they added.

Kyrgios' potential has often been betrayed by his on-court behaviour, but he had a stellar season this year, reaching his first Grand Slam final at Wimbledon, losing to Novak Djokovic.

He was also agonisingly beaten in five sets in the US Open quarter-finals by Russia's Karen Khachanov.

Speaking before Kyrgios pulled out of the United Cup,

Nadal, who has 22 Grand Slam titles, said the Australian could easily go all the way.

The Australian Open next month will be his first opportunity of the year, a tournament where the Spaniard is defending champion.

"I know he doesn't like a lot to play Roland Garros, that's the only tournament that looks like he doesn't like to play that much," said Nadal in Sydney.

"The rest of the tournaments, he played final in Wimbledon, in New York he was close with the quarter-finals I think, with a very positive chance.

"He can win in any tournament that he's playing. He has all the talent, the weapons to win against any player. Of course, he can."

Kyrgios told reporters earlier this week that he was "training well, enjoying it, mentally feeling good. That's all that really matters".

The Australian Open gets under way at Melbourne Park on January 16.

AFP

Norway's Ruud says world number one ranking within reach

Brisbane, Australia - Norway's Casper Ruud declared Wednesday that the world number one ranking could be his as early as the Australian Open in January.

The 24-year-old had a chance to top the rankings when he took on Carlos Alcaraz in the US Open final this year, but the Spanish teenager won in four sets to take the title and with it the number one spot.

Ruud said a good run for him at the Australian Open could be enough to become number one.

"If there is maybe one time that it could happen again, it's actually in the near future," the world number three said ahead of the inaugural United Cup mixed-teams tournament.

"If I have a good trip I can be in a position (to become number one) again."

But Ruud, who also made the French Open final this year, remained philosophical about his chances of reaching the sport's



Casper Ruud

summit.

"It gives me motivation to keep going and know that you were very close at one time, but maybe that will be the closest you will ever be," he said.

"Maybe you'll get it, and maybe you will be in a close position another time in your career.

"I think last season has shown me that I have the potential if I continue to do the right things, work hard, I can be in that position again, or it can never happen -- you never know in this sport."

Norway begin their United Cup campaign against Brazil in Brisbane on Saturday.

Andoo Comanche wins Sydney-Hobart race

Sydney, Australia - Australian supermaxi Andoo Comanche secured a fourth line honours victory in the gruelling Sydney-Hobart ocean race Wednesday, but fell short of setting a new course record.

The 100-foot yacht, skippered by John Winning Jnr, triumphed in a nail-biting finish in the early hours of Wednesday after leading the blue water classic for much of the race.

It completed a quartet of line honours wins for Andoo Comanche in the prestigious event since 2015 under a third different owner.

Andoo Comanche crossed with a time of one day, 11 hours, 56 minutes and 48 seconds -- about 20 minutes in front of rival supermaxi Law Connect -- and just under three hours short of its own record.

The current race record of one day, nine hours, 15 minutes and



Andoo Comanche triumphed in a nail-biting finish but fell short of setting a new course record

24 seconds was set by the same Comanche boat under a different skipper in 2017.

Winning Jnr was part of the team that won the event in

2016, but said it was something special to skipper his own crew.

"To do it in a campaign that I was part of putting together is really quite exceptional," he told

national broadcaster ABC.

Last year's defending champion Black Jack crossed third, followed by Wild Oats, which fell behind after tearing one of

its sails earlier in the race.

The 109-strong racing fleet set off from a sun-splashed Sydney Harbour on Monday afternoon, charting their way through the 628-nautical mile course (1163km) to Hobart.

Favourable weather early in the race raised the prospect of toppling that mark, but the strong winds faded as the boats barrelled towards the finish line in Hobart.

The Bass Strait, which separates Tasmania from the mainland, can unleash perilous conditions.

A deep depression proved catastrophic for the fleet in 1998, when six sailors were killed and 55 more were rescued after five boats sank.

Race officials on Tuesday evening said only three of the starting fleet had been forced to retire so far.

AFP

NO RONALDO? NO PROBLEM

Rashford, Martial on target as Man United make bright start to life without Portuguese superstar

Manchester, United Kingdom - Manchester United made a positive start to life without Cristiano Ronaldo as Marcus Rashford and Anthony Martial stepped out from the Portuguese's shadow to score in a 3-0 win over Nottingham Forest on Tuesday.

But manager Erik ten Hag is still targeting a striker to replace Ronaldo in the transfer market to make the Red Devils more clinical in the final third.

Ronaldo's rollercoaster second spell at Old Trafford came to an end during the World Cup break after an explosive interview in which he took aim at Ten Hag and the club's owners.

On the field, his influence had already waned since the Dutch coach took charge at the start of the season.

Rashford has been a player transformed under Ten Hag and carried his fine form for England at the World Cup into the Premier League's return.

"Our players performed really well in the World Cup, I was happy to see that and now they continue," Ten Hag told Amazon Prime. "They have to stay on that level, keep going and progress



Manchester United's Anthony Martial celebrates with Marcus Rashford after scoring against Nottingham Forest on Tuesday (AFP)

from game to game."

A brilliantly worked corner opened the floodgates for United as Christian Eriksen picked out an unmarked Rashford inside the area to sweep into the top corner.

Forest were without their first

choice goalkeeper Dean Henderson as he is on loan from United and his understudy Wayne Hennessey was culpable when the home side doubled their lead just three minutes later.

Rashford's burst down the left

and teed up Martial at the edge of the box, but the Frenchman's strike should not have had enough power to beat the Welsh international goalkeeper.

United were also short handed at the back with Lisandro Mar-

tinez absent following Argentina's World Cup celebrations, Diogo Dalot injured and Harry Maguire still feeling the aftereffects of an illness.

As a result Raphael Varane was forced into starting just nine

days after playing 113 minutes for France in the World Cup final, while Luke Shaw lined up as a centre-back in a back four for the first time.

But Forest did little to test a makeshift backline as they remain with just one goal away from home in the league all season.

Steve Cooper's men did have the ball in the net shortly before half-time, but Willy Boly's effort

United appear to have already missed out on one target with Cody Gakpo set to join rivals Liverpool from PSV Eindhoven.

"We are looking for a striker because games are coming every three days," added Ten Hag. "It's tough and we want to play in all the leagues. Hopefully we can keep going till the end of the season, so we need numbers in the squad."

Antony fired straight at Hennessey after fine play from Rashford and Bruno Fernandes gave the Brazilian a clear sight of goal.

Hennessey also stood firm to block from Martial and Rashford from close range, but United finally got the third goal they deserved three minutes from time.

The imperious Casemiro strode forward to win possession and picked out his Brazilian compatriot Fred to slot into the far corner.

Victory takes United to within one point of the top four and with a game in hand to come on fourth-placed Tottenham.

Forest remain rooted in the relegation zone, but just one point adrift of safety.

AFP

Our players performed really well in the World Cup, I was happy to see that and now they continue

ERIK TEN HAG

was ruled out for offside after a lengthy VAR check.

Gakpo no go

The home side should have added more than one goal in the second half, leading Ten Hag to repeat his call for a new striker.

Chelsea back to winning ways against Bournemouth

London, United Kingdom - Chelsea manager Graham Potter praised the Blues' reaction to a poor run prior to the World Cup as they eased past Bournemouth 2-0 on Tuesday to end a five-game winless streak in the Premier League.

Kai Havertz and Mason Mount struck inside the first 24 minutes to get Chelsea back in the hunt for a place in next season's Champions League.

Victory took Chelsea up to eighth and within six points of the top four.

"You have to use breaks as best you can," Potter told Amazon Prime. "Evaluate and reassess and get injured players back. We used it as best we could even with players coming back at different times."

However, victory came at a cost as defender Reece James



Chelsea's Kai Havertz (rear L) scores against Bournemouth on Tuesday

limped off on his return from the knee injury which kept him out of England's World Cup campaign.

James cruised through the first half but called for a substitution early in the second and looked disconsolate as he pointed to his knee before going to ground.

Potter, aiming to avoid over-seeing a fourth consecutive

Chelsea league defeat for the first time since 1998, handed Denis Zakaria his Premier League debut.

The Swiss midfielder broke forward well to drive Chelsea up the pitch in the first half, while the effervescent attacking duo of Raheem Sterling and Christian Pulisic led the Bournemouth defence on a merry dance.

AFP

Barca must cope without Lewandowski

Barcelona, Spain - Robert Lewandowski has taken La Liga by storm but Barcelona coach Xavi must cope without him during a busy January period, starting with a Catalan derby against Espanyol on Saturday.

The Polish striker is the division's top scorer but is suspended for three league games after being sent off in Barcelona's final match before the World Cup.

Despite being reduced to 10 men, Barcelona came from behind to beat Osasuna and move two points clear of champions Real Madrid, who are second after 14 games each.

Xavi has three options to pick from up front, with Ferran Torres, Ansu Fati and Memphis Depay vying for a start, although none of the three are natural centre forwards.

Meanwhile winger Ousmane Dembele, World Cup runner up



Robert Lewandowski (C) with Ansu Fati (L) and Gavi

with France, returned to training with Barcelona on Monday and could be involved against Espanyol.

After Barca's disappointing

Champions League group stage elimination, moving top ahead of the World Cup was an important morale boost for the Catalans.

The coach is under pressure

to win trophies in his second season at the helm after finishing the previous campaign trophyless.

Barcelona spent big in the summer, signing Lewandowski, Brazil winger Raphinha, France defender Jules Kounde and other players, making controversial financial sacrifices to do so.

Lewandowski's arrival seemed to be paying instant dividends but after Barcelona were beaten twice by his former side Bayern Munich in Europe, pressure on them has risen.

"I am aware that we need to win titles this season," Xavi told Barca TV last week.

"The pressure is mainly on me. And I accept it. I thrive on challenge and one needs to be brave."

Barcelona's first chance to lift silverware this season comes in mid-January with the Spanish Super Cup.

AFP

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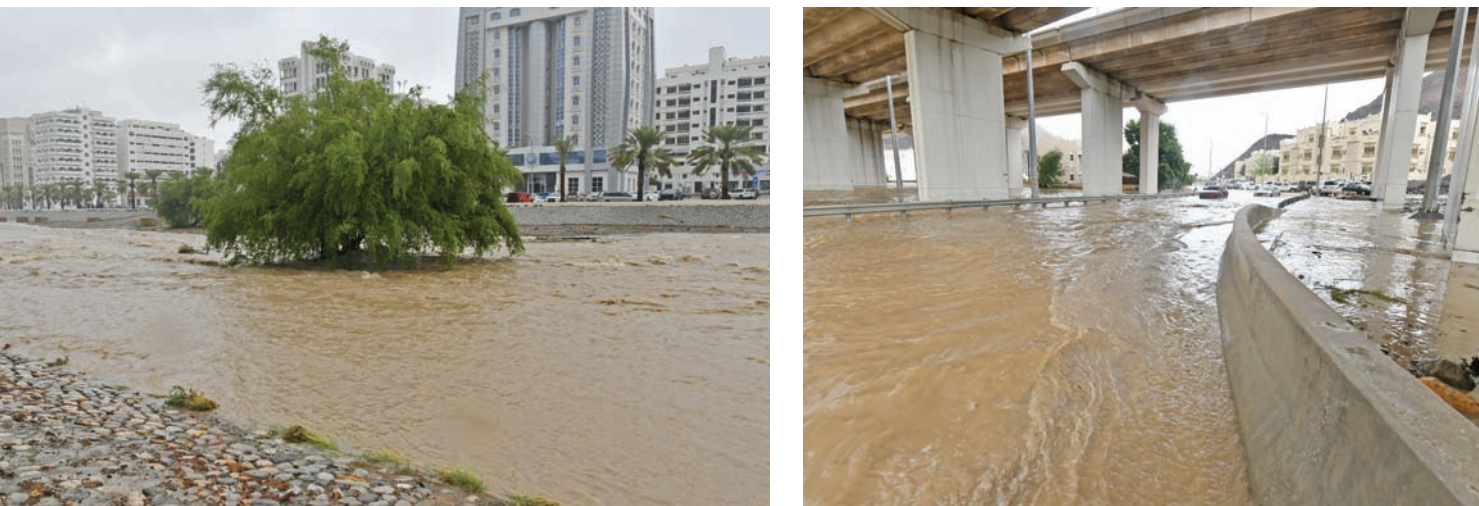
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IN TOWN

DAY OF THE DELUGE



Tuesday morning brought forth a sudden cloud burst over Muscat which received incessant showers causing flooding of wadis and residential areas. Photos: V K Shafeer



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

- 

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
You always have time to learn new things, so even if your day is jam-packed, you should reserve at least a few minutes to go exploring! Check out that new shop or restaurant, go for a drive in a different part of town, or pick up a book about something or someone you've never heard of. You might be invited for an adventure that's fun.
- 

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
You are about to come to a crossroads in your life. You should take the road that your mind tells you is the right one, not your more emotional choice. Right now, your feelings are a bit too confused to be good indicators. Your financial worries will soon be a thing of the past thanks to the generosity of someone close to you. You will be given a real opportunity for career advancement.
- 

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
Your usual partners in crime might not be as ready to move on to the next social escapade as you are, so what are your options? You can sit on your hands and wait for them to catch up to you, or you can go ahead and take action by yourself. This might be a good time to try things on your own for a while.
- 

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
People could be falling all over each other to be of service to you today, so much so that you might start feeling like royalty! Will you be a kind ruler or a ruthless one? The choice is up to you, but keep in mind that you might not always be the one sitting on the throne. Someday, it might be you down there kissing someone's ring.
- 

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
The noise in your romantic life is going to be amplified today, which means that there is a lot of fun in store for you! Delightful coincidences will make you feel more alive than ever before, and the apple of your eye is feeling frisky. A favour is in the day's cards for you, and it will likely come from your sweetie, who wants you to know how much brighter you make their world.
- 

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
The path ahead of you is in a state of unrest right now. There is a lot that is still to be decided, and those choices have to be made by other people. If you rush forward and just hope for the best, you might be adding more chaos to your life than you can handle. Wait until the uncertainty fades and you get a clearer picture.
- 

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
It's a very good thing that you're still exploring all your options, because you have to be patient with the learning curve. New facts and details are still dribbling out, so don't get discouraged if you aren't getting the answers you want right now. The success of your latest endeavour depends on other people as much as it depends on you.
- 

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
Today, the conditions are absolutely perfect for you to make a bold romantic move, take a risky business leap, or tell that certain someone what you've been wanting to tell them for so very long. Hesitation and fear are things of the past. Unless you act decisively today, you could run the risk of missing out on something interesting.
- 

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
If you want to be alone right now, then be alone. You can't be peer-pressured into being social. Tell your friends to go on and have their fun without you. You'll be fine. Right now, your friends might hold a bit more influence over your life than they should, and it's probably a good thing to be without their influence for a while.
- 

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Have you been contemplating taking on the role of matchmaker? You should. Two people in your life need to get together, and you might be just the person to help make it happen today! You can't worry about getting in the middle of anything. You already are in the middle between these two! See what you can do to be the mediator and bring them together.
- 

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
If you're feeling a little bit more outgoing than usual today, it's going to definitely work in your favor. It's an expansive day, when an open mind and free attitude will treat you to a massive amount of possibilities and positive attention. Things you never noticed before are suddenly popping up in front of you, capturing your imagination and giving you a few ideas about how to make changes.
- 

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
Try to adopt a "keep it to yourself" attitude about controversies today. Play it safe, because it's quite likely that an authority figure will have different a opinion from yours. It's best to just button your lip and bite your tongue. This person isn't interested in starting a debate about whether you're right or they are. They need you to just go along with them and not make any waves.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. What is the British Engineerium, in Hove?

A. An engineering and steam power museum

B. An advanced wind tunnel facility

C. A university

D. A land transport museum

02. Gordonstoun School is famous mainly because of which past pupils?

A. Prince Philip & his 3 sons

B. Elton John & Bernie Taupin

C. All British prime ministers between Harold Macmillan and Tony Blair

D. Margaret Thatcher and Madonna

03. In gymnastics, what is a salto?

A. Leap

B. Somersault

C. Pirouette

D. Roll

Answers: 1.A 2.A 3.B

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

BOGGLER

L	O	O	G
A	N	T	L
V	A	D	T
S	D	S	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

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

entertainment



Nobel-winner Ishiguro pens 1950s remake 'Living'

Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro has been obsessed for half a century with *Ikiru*, a classic Japanese film about an aging bureaucrat who after being diagnosed with cancer races to find meaning in what remains of his monotonous life. The Japanese-born British novelist and movie buff, 68, began to imagine a remake of Akira Kurosawa's heartbreaking masterpiece, still set in its original 1950s era, but transplanted to London.

Kim Kardashian opens up about backlash

Kim Kardashian opened up about the backlash that surrounded her response to the controversial Balenciaga ad campaign. In a recent podcast, Kardashian spoke frankly about criticism she faced for her comments addressing the fashion brand's holiday campaigns that featured children holding teddy bear bags dressed in what looked like bondage gear. When people said 'Why aren't you speaking out?' the Kardashians star said, "Wait, I'm not in this campaign. I don't know what's happening. As soon as I saw what everyone was seeing on the internet and the reality of the situation, I completely spoke out and gave my thoughts on child porn and completely denounced it."



'Avatar' stays atop N America box office

Pulling in an estimated US\$90mn, *Avatar: The Way of Water* has blown away the competition even as a massive storm kept millions at home over the four-day Christmas weekend, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations said Monday. The James Cameron sci-fi sequel has now earned 20th Century US\$287.7mn domestically, becoming the fifth highest-grossing film of 2022.

HOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW:
SUMMIT FEVER
Genre: Adventure
Starring: Ryan Phillippe, Freddie Thorp, Hannah New, Mathilde Warnier



CHILLING ACTS OF FAITH

If you enjoyed 2015's biographical survival adventure - *Everest*, directed and produced by Baltasar Kormákur, this one's gonna ring a bell. However, there's no point in drawing any parallels as *Summit Fever* does offer a little more in terms of taking the audience up, close and personal with the lead characters in their chilly ordeal. The story is about a daring dream to scale the world's most challenging trio of mountains which turns into a terrifying nightmare for a group of friends when a deadly storm traps the climbers near the summit and cuts off all hope of rescue. With the odds stacked against them, the friends are forced to trust each other to save themselves by any means necessary. Julian Gilbey's mountaineering drama isn't just visually resplendent, it also has an impressive tactile familiarity with its milieu - placing its actors on real rock faces on the Eiger, Matterhorn and Mont Blanc mountains - that results in super-authentic climbing sequences. Thorp plays a Keanu-esque newbie - Michael - who has quit his finance job to chase the Chamonix dream. Egged on by his loudmouth climbing partner JP (Michel Biel), Michael starts to push his limits on the region's slopes, starting with the terrifyingly sheer Dent du Géant. And, despite initially being whipping boy for weathered American Leo (Ryan Phillippe), he fits right in with the young, dumb and full of kombucha hip local scene - including a budding hookup with piste-bashing French ski guide Isabelle (Mathilde Warnier). The climbing sequences are genuinely exhilarating - in monumental drone shots homing in on minuscule figures on rock faces and in blow-by-blow crag-side set pieces that demonstrate the film-makers know whereof they speak. And with lightning backlighting alpine vistas in the final storm sequence, you feel right alongside the climbers in a way that even *Everest* couldn't do justice to.

Rating ★★★★★

DESPITE
'PINOCCHIO'
SUCCESS,
DEL TORO
FEARFUL

Despite his international success, including a new adaptation of the classic puppet tale *Pinocchio*, Oscar-winning Mexican director Guillermo del Toro fears that his country's cinema industry is facing systematic destruction. Del Toro's animated version of *Pinocchio*, in which an elderly woodcarver and his living puppet find themselves in 1930s fascist Italy, was the most watched film on streaming platform Netflix in the week of December 12-18. Its debut on December 9 came a week before the release of *Bardo*, an autobiographical tale of a journalist-filmmaker returning home after years in Los Angeles, by fellow Mexican Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu.

NEW RELEASE

THE SMURFS
The story has begun in a small village that gathers diverse and distinctive blue characters in one place. The story returns today with new adventures, Gargamel the main danger in the village, is still causing problems for the Smurfs and trying to eliminate them. Will he succeed?
Genre: Animation
Starring: Sandra Asratian, Vincent Broes, Tess Bryant
Language: English

BOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW: **KAAPA** (Malayalam)
Genre: Action
Starring: Prithviraj Sukumaran, Aparna Balamurali, Asif Ali, Anna Ben



GANGLORD GALLANTRY

Director Shaji Kailas' *Kaapa*, starring Prithviraj, Asif Ali and Anna Ben, is a gangster drama done differently. The film explores the dark underbelly of Thiruvananthapuram where rival gangsters clash in cold-blooded gang wars to gain dominion over the city's suburbs and slums. Amidst it, an expendable henchman (Prithviraj Sukumaran) grows to become a prominent name in this world of crime, through grit, determination, and a massive appetite for violence. The movie opens with an introduction to a married couple, Anand (Asif Ali) and Biju (Anna Ben), who shift from Bengaluru to Thiruvananthapuram. Anand then finds his wife's name in the Kerala Anti-social Activities Prevention Act because of news stories that carried her name along with crimes she allegedly committed. He then tries to clear her name, claiming she is innocent, and seeks out Kotta Madhu (Prithviraj), the city's leading gangster, for help. Anand then meets Madhu's wife Prameela (Aparna Balamurali) and

pleads for her help. It is after this that Anand inadvertently gets caught up between a mess-up with local gang wars. Kotta Madhu, though arrogant and ruthless, does have a heart. And the scenes between a younger Madhu and the small boy show his softer side, though not convincingly enough as his life is ridden with constant guilt, the cause of his downfall. Cinematography by Sanu John Varughese and music by Justin Varghese are some of the highlights of *Kaapa* - one of the better films from Prithviraj this year, amid six other releases. Expect something new from Shaji and Prithviraj this time round. The title of the film comes from the acronym for the Kerala Anti-Social Activities Prevention Act under which the Kerala Police has created a watch list. And if you've had if you've had enough of ganglord gallantry, from *Kabali* (2016) to *Beeshma Parvam* (2022), then you can very well give this one a miss.

Rating ★★★★★

10 Years of Islamic Banking

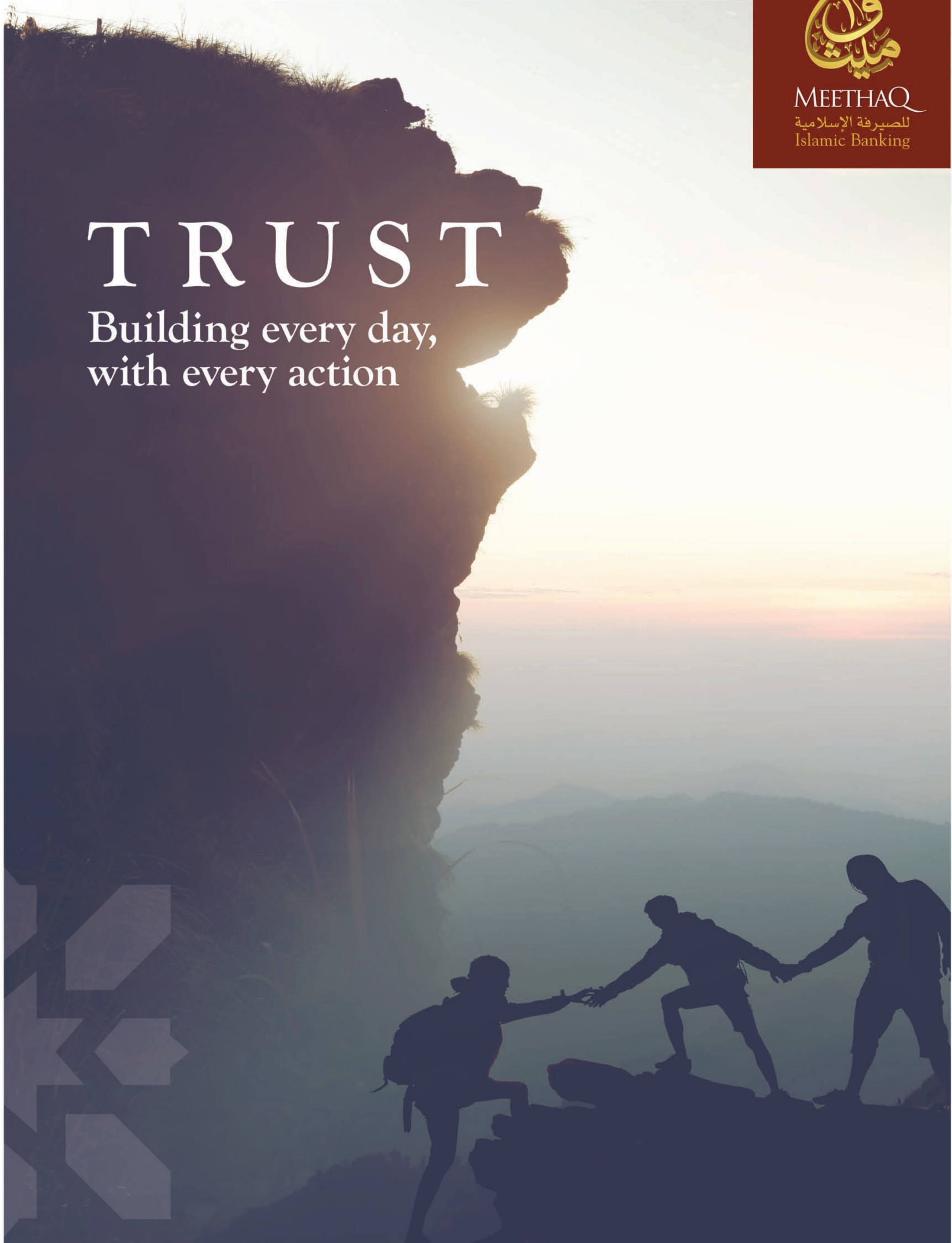
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2022

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Pioneer of Islamic Banking in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's Islamic banking industry is currently marking its 10th anniversary. Since its inception in 2012, Islamic banking has significantly contributed to the expansion of Oman's financial sector and development of various industries and the overall economy.

Islamic banking segment in Oman consists of two fully-fledged Islamic banks and five Islamic banking windows of conventional banks, all established during 2012 and 2013.

Recording nearly 10 per cent year-on-year growth this year, Islamic banking assets in Oman reached RO6.4bn at the end of October 2022, thanks to robust and consistent growth recorded over the past ten years.

In terms of market share, Oman's Islamic banking assets now make up 16.6 per cent of total banking sector assets as of the end of October 2022, according to data from the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

Global credit ratings agency Moody's last year rated Oman as the second fastest-growing Islamic financing market in the world.

The rating agency noted that the rapid growth of Islamic banking assets in Oman has strongly outpaced the growth in conventional banking assets in recent years, which reflects Islamic banking assets' relatively recent introduction and low but increasing penetration.

Latest CBO data showed that Oman's Islamic banking entities provided financing worth RO5.3bn as of the end of October 2022, recording a growth of 10.7 per cent over that a year ago. Total deposits held with Islamic banks and windows increased by 9.7 per cent to RO4.8bn at the end of October 2022 compared to a year ago.

Even during 2020 and 2021 the sultanate's Islamic banking sector continued its double-digit growth despite the

Oman's Islamic banking assets hit RO6.4bn mark



In terms of market share, Oman's Islamic banking assets now make up 16.6 per cent of total banking sector assets as of the end of October 2022

adverse economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The asset quality of the Islamic banking financing portfolio also remained strong with a non-performance financing ratio of 1.9 per cent at the end of December 2021, which is among the lowest in the region, the CBO noted.

'Systemically important'
The market share of Oman's Islamic banking sector crossed the 15 per cent threshold in late 2021, thanks to the robust growth achieved by Islamic banks and windows over the previous nine years.

With the achievement of this major milestone, Oman's Islamic banking sector became systemically important in the sultanate, the CBO announced in

December 2021.

The Islamic Financial Services Board (IFSB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) consider a jurisdiction with 15 per cent market share as a 'systemically important' Islamic banking system.

As per IFSB Stability Report 2021, Oman has become 15th country in the world that has achieved this (over 15 per cent) market share.

Since the licensing of first Islamic bank in Oman in December 2012, this landmark market share was achieved in less than nine years with the active participation of two Islamic banks and five Islamic banking windows of conventional banks. Currently, Islamic banking entities are operating more than 94 branches covering most geo-

graphical areas of the sultanate.

Robust growth continues
Islamic banking assets in Oman recorded a strong 30 per cent average annual growth rate between 2013 and 2021, compared with around 5 per cent average annual growth for conventional banking assets, according to Moody's.

Islamic banking is still continuing to grow rapidly in the sultanate driven by growing awareness about Sharia-compliant products, strong retail demand and supportive regulations.

'Growth in the Islamic banking segment is now being driven, not only by capital injections from shareholders as was originally the case, but also by inflows of customer deposits,' Moody's

said in a recent report.

Moody's expects Islamic banking sector's share to reach 20-25 per cent of Omani banking assets by 2025.

According to Fitch Ratings, the Islamic banking sector in Oman is likely to sustain its positive trajectory in the short-to-medium term despite a number of structural challenges.

Growth in Islamic banking, Fitch said, will be driven by growing awareness, strong retail demand for Islamic products, supportive regulations, and a strong push from the Islamic windows of conventional banks.

'An improving operating environment, expected positive real GDP growth, higher oil prices, the easing of coronavirus restrictions, and the rise in interest or profit rates will also support

growth in both Islamic and conventional banking in the sultanate,' Fitch said in a statement.

Medium-term strategy
To ensure robust and sustained growth of Oman's Islamic banking sector, CBO is finalising its medium-term Islamic banking strategy, which is built on five pillars, namely (1) sustain the momentum, (2) enhance the stability, (3) expand the outreach, (4) nurture the talent, and (5) boost the awareness. Each pillar of the Islamic banking strategy is supported by several 'goals', with a total of 40 'initiatives' in the strategy, about half of which are to be undertaken by CBO and rest by Islamic banking sector, the CBO said in its Financial Stability Report 2022.

As part of its medium-term Islamic banking strategy, the CBO is working to introduce a range of Islamic money market instruments to meet the liquidity needs of Islamic banking sector.

'These (Islamic money market instruments) included, among others, providing Sharia-compliant emergency liquidity support and LOLR (lender of last resort) facility and offering Wakalah-based remunerative deposit facility to Islamic banking entities,' the CBO said.

Moody's recently commented that the CBO's planned introduction of Shariah-compliant money market instruments will be positive for the sultanate's Islamic banking sector.

'The availability of Shariah-compliant short-term money market instruments will support the Islamic banking sector growth and diversify Islamic banks' asset base, a credit positive,' Moody's said in a sector comment note.

These instruments, Moody's noted, will support Oman Islamic banks' and windows' liquidity needs and will position Islamic entities on the same competitive platform of conventional peers. Future availability of short-term Islamic instruments to place excess liquidity will further support the sector growth, the rating agency added.

Meethaq: Changing the banking landscape in Oman

As the pioneer of Islamic banking services in the Sultanate, Meethaq has been continuously setting new benchmarks in the sector

Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat is the most popular and largest Islamic banking services provider in Oman, offering a full suite of Sharia-compliant retail, corporate banking and wholesale banking products and services. Since its inception, Meethaq Islamic Banking has been enjoying phenomenal growth and continues to set new benchmarks. It has been very encouraging to see both retail and corporate customers wholeheartedly adopting innovative Islamic banking and finance solutions, which were previously unavailable in Oman.

In line with its excellent customer-centric vision and full commitment to offer a world-class Islamic banking experience to customers in every corner of the country, Meethaq has established the largest Islamic branch network in Oman consisting of 12 branches in the Governorate of Muscat and 12 branches across other governorates. In addition to its already excellent network of branches, Meethaq has a dedicated network of 41 ATMs/CDMs and also provides free access to more than 800 ATMs and CDMs of Bank Muscat across the country for customers to conduct their banking transactions with ease. This has resulted in Meethaq enjoying the tremendous confidence of its extensive base of customers.

Supporting Oman's economic development

Meethaq has been at the forefront in actively supporting Oman's economic development with its ever-growing suite of Islamic finance products and services catering to the varied and sophisticated needs of its different customer segments. In May 2017, Meethaq attained a notable milestone when it received ap-



proval from the Capital Market Authority and the Central Bank of Oman to launch the first Sukuk programme in the Sultanate of Oman allowing participation by retail investors. The maiden Sukuk issuance was a great success with subscriptions far exceeding the initial target amount. Meethaq exercised its greenshoe option to absorb the excess demand for its Sukuk and raised a total of RO 44.6 million, which was well above the initial target of RO 25 million. Similarly, Meethaq Sukuk Second Series launched in 2019 was a resounding success with the Islamic banking leader successfully raising an additional RO 45.6 million. Building on these successes, Meethaq has played a pivotal role in several sovereign Sukuk issuances by the Government of Oman. In addition to supporting the Sukuk issuances in various capacities which include being mandated as the Sole Lead Manager, Issue Manager and Book Runner, Meethaq has always been the largest Islamic Financial Institutional investor in all of the Government of Oman Sukuk issued so far. This reflects Meethaq's commitment to support the Sultanate's sustainable

economic and development growth over the long term

Meethaq recognizes the immense investment prospects and potential offered by Oman and continues to play an important role in the development of key sectors in the Sultanate. In support of Oman's Food Security related strategic initiatives, several local food producers such as Gulf International Poultry, Osoul Poultry Company and Al Nama Poultry have been financed by Meethaq. Meethaq has also been instrumental in the development of the country's transport and logistics infrastructure by providing financing facilities to Oman Air and Oman Shipping Company. Hence, Meethaq promotes the Sultanate's national goals of achieving strong economic growth, sustainable development and ensuring prosperity for all by financing national initiatives which are vital for the well-being of the country's economy.

Innovation

Innovation has always been a crucial element of Meethaq's product offerings and has resulted in the launch of numer-

ous innovative corporate and retail products. Meethaq's product suite comprises of several variants of Savings and Current Accounts customized to meet the needs of different customer segments, financing solutions such as Home Financing, Car Financing, Personal Goods Financing, Travel Finance, Marriage Finance, Ijarah Financing, Diminishing Musharaka Financing, Wakala Bil Istihmar Financing and Goods Murabaha Financing amongst other structured products & services. With the aim of offering a full range of Islamic financial offerings to cater to the different customer segments, Meethaq also offers credit cards, debit cards, Motor Takaful solutions, Trade Finance solutions and Hafawa Premium Banking services. These are essentially additional products and services recently launched by Meethaq in response to the growing sophistication of its customers. It is also noteworthy that even during multiple periods of enhanced social distancing and lockdowns in the post-COVID-19 phase, Meethaq continued to innovate and launch new products or

upgraded its existing products and services, which have greatly benefitted its customers. These include digital onboarding of customers for opening savings accounts, domestic helper, travel and SME Takaful offerings in partnership with Takaful Oman, launch of Corporate Purchase Card, co-branded Lulu Credit Card and the opening of fixed deposits through Mobile banking.

Digital payments

Meethaq is strongly committed towards investing in state-of-the-art technology to further increase efficiency and improve customer service. With emphasis on competitive channels and new products to cater to various customer segments, Meethaq is focused on maintaining leadership in hi-tech products and services, including electronic payment and web-based services, in tune with the banking requirements of a young, tech-savvy generation.

Several significant technology upgrades were implemented, including the Meethaq Wallet, which supports storing both Meethaq and non-Meethaq credit/prepaid/debit card details or even

another bank's wallet details. This allows customers with a Meethaq Bank wallet to make digital fund transfers to a third party conveniently. It also allows a registered wallet customer to send or request money from anyone just by entering their mobile number or email address, irrespective of whether the customer is a Meethaq Bank wallet user or not. Naturally, the new product has significantly boosted cashless payments in Oman.

Other recent technological upgrade involved enabling customers of other banks in Oman to use Bank Muscat and Meethaq CDMs / FFM's to transfer funds to Meethaq or Bank Muscat accounts. Allowing the usage of debit cards issued by other Omani banks at Meethaq and Bank Muscat CDMs has reduced customer visits to Meethaq branches across the Sultanate and helped improve social distancing during the pandemic phase.

World-class Islamic banking experience

Meethaq's strong commitment to support the strategic national development initiatives in line with Oman's Vision 2040 economic blueprint, continued investment in new technologies and infrastructure to nurture and grow existing and new customer segments, has been well recognised by the global Islamic Finance community.

Every Meethaq product goes through the process of Sharia compliance certification by the Sharia Supervisory Board and is created in line with the guidelines of the Central Bank of Oman. Meethaq's adoption of AAOIFI standards (Accounting & Auditing Organisation for Islamic Financial Institutions) further distinguishes Meethaq Islamic banking practices in terms of standardisation of its products and services complementing its world-class Islamic banking experience.

'Strong economic rebound to boost Islamic banking sector'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Higher energy prices and the easing of pandemic restrictions will continue to support strong economic recovery across the GCC countries over the next 12 to 18 months, boosting the financial performance of Islamic banking entities in the region, Moody's Investors Service recently said.

The rating agency in a report said that Islamic finance markets are benefiting from high commodity prices and the economic rebound in the major Islamic finance markets, such as the Gulf states, will keep the asset quality of Islamic banks while driving up profitability.

'Islamic banks can therefore maintain strong capital and liquidity buffers, enabling them to capitalise on the growing demand for Shariah-compliant financial services,' Moody's said.

'Economic growth in the GCC countries is accelerating in 2022 and will remain strong in 2023, driven by the easing of pandemic restrictions and the high prices of commodities such as hydrocarbons. Inflation in these countries will also remain moderate because of government subsidies and policy rate hikes,' the rating agency added.



Strong economic recovery, Moody's said, will keep the asset quality of Islamic banks stable. It added that the improving economic conditions will keep the performance of Islamic financing stable despite the unwinding of regulatory forbearance.

'The focus on retail financing will support asset quality because of its secured and diversified nature and prudent underwriting by the Islamic banks. In addition, financing to public-sector employees, who enjoyed stable employment during the pandemic, constitutes the lion's share of retail financing in the GCC region. Strong provisioning buffers built up during the pandemic will also mitigate asset risks,' the rating agency said.

Moody's predicted that Islamic banks' profitability will rise given their sufficient loss reserves, while efficiency gains from digitalisation will offset their higher technology spending.

'The return on average assets of Islamic banks will improve as provisioning needs decline since they have set aside sufficient reserves through precautionary provisioning. Their profitability will also be driven up by the rise in interest rates, particularly in the Gulf states where domestic currencies are pegged to the US dollar. Their cost-income ratios will remain stable, with increases in technology spending offsetting efficiency gains from digitalization,' it said.

Moody's noted that the Gulf states

are major hydrocarbon producers and are benefiting from the surge in oil prices. Despite the recent modest easing in oil prices, the rating agency expects the price of Brent crude to average around US\$95 per barrel for 2022, well above the 2021 average of US\$70 per barrel.

'The high oil revenue is creating positive spillover effects on the non-oil sectors where banks do most of their lending. After expanding by 4 per cent in 2021, we expect the real GDP in non-hydrocarbon sector to grow by 3.6 per cent in 2022 in the GCC, still well above the average 2.3 per cent growth rate between 2016 and 2019,' Moody's added.

It further said that over the longer term, Islamic banks in the GCC will also benefit from the economic diversification agendas of countries, which aim to promote higher employment levels among citizens in the private sector.

'There will also be growth opportunities in the housing market as a result of state-led home ownership programs, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Still, economic diversification plans are significant undertakings and their successful implementation is not guaranteed,' Moody's added.

Muzn Islamic Banking upgrades customer experience with larger network of CCDMs



Salima Al Marzouqi

Muscat - National Bank of Oman's (NBO) Islamic banking window, Muzn Islamic Banking, continues to expand its diverse network of Cash Deposit Machines (CCDMs).

With more than 135 locations across Oman, it's now easier than ever to make secure cash deposits through NBO's CCDMs, 24/7, without having to visit a branch. Operated by Muzn's parent organisation NBO, the state-of-the-art self-service terminals are part of the bank's ongoing commitment to make it effortless for all customers to manage their finances.

Salima Al Marzouqi, Assistant General Manager and Chief Islamic Banking Officer of Muzn, said, "At Muzn, we always aim to provide our customers with access to innovative, simplified and Islamic Shari'a-compliant solutions, while making their everyday banking experience as seamless and convenient as possible. Our growing network of CCDMs, which are conveniently found at various locations, offer a practical alternative to waiting in line in a branch and represent just one of many ways to bank with us."

Muzn offers a host of innovative, competitive and quality financial solutions with the values of Islamic Shari'a at the core and has been

recognised for its customer-centric approach throughout 2022.

Early December, Muzn won the Most Innovative Islamic Window award at the Islamic Banking and Finance Summit 2022. It was also named Best Islamic Bank Oman 2022 at the World Economic Magazine Awards and Islamic Bank of the Year 2022 at The Banker Islamic Bank of the Year Awards.

Customers can find a list of ATM, CCDM and branch locations on Muzn's mobile app, which offers a host of convenient functions and enables customers to manage their finances around the clock, wherever they are.

Muzn Islamic Banking is a licensed Islamic banking window operating in the sultanate with the aim to deliver Shari'a-compliant financial solutions for customers. Muzn Islamic Banking believe that Islamic banking is for everyone, regardless of beliefs or geographical location.

Part of the National Bank of Oman Group, which was founded in 1973, Muzn Islamic Banking became the first Islamic Window in the sultanate in 2013. Muzn Islamic Banking is also committed to making a positive and sustainable difference in the community through the Bank's corporate social responsibility program.

Young investors in Middle East prefer Islamic and sustainable assets: Survey

Dubai, UAE - Lombard Odier, a leading global wealth and asset manager, recently revealed further results from its 'Middle East Investor Views 2022' survey, which examine the investment habits of next generation investors.

Having surveyed 300 high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs), of which 200 were under the age of 40, the findings reveal that younger investors are more likely to seek investments that comply with their values, including in Islamic and sustainability-focused assets, while seeking a wealth management partner that shares their investment values and principles.

Younger investors in the region are positive on values-based assets such as Shariah-compliant and Islamic investments, alongside those taking sustainability factors into account. Around 91 per cent say they already allocate to Islamic

Younger investors in the region are positive on values-based assets such as Shariah-compliant and Islamic investments, alongside those taking sustainability factors into account

investments, while 88 per cent plan to increase their allocations to sustainable assets.

This comes as no surprise given the positive performance of sustainable investments, with 73 per cent of respondents believing that they can generate improved returns through ventures

that drive the transition to a net-zero economy, and 74 per cent assuming that new business opportunities will be found in sustainable sectors in the region.

"Islamic finance has proven its resilience against the worst of situations" said a younger investor in the UAE, with a younger Saudi investor commenting, "Sustainable investing is a key business fundamental for us. We formulate our investments and determine whether they are sustainable according to key factors, prioritising these conditions."

Adherence to Islamic principles is also a key area of focus. While the families of 85 per cent of young respondents share traditional Middle Eastern values based on religious or cultural principles, 31 per cent say those traditional values are updated for the present day. This contrasts with older

investors, 79 per cent of which say their values are exclusively traditional.

There is also a divergence in the objectives of younger and older investors in preserving and growing their wealth. Younger investors have a greater focus on improving their lifestyle and remaining wealthy compared to older investors over the age of 40 (45 per cent versus 16 per cent), who are more interested in their financial and reputational legacy.

The survey also highlights the geographic spread of younger respondents' investments. Around 89 per cent of younger HNWIs hold their assets in the Middle East and intend to keep them there over the next five years, while the remaining 11 per cent keep their assets in Europe (5 per cent), North America (4 per cent) and Asia Pacific (2 per cent).




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MARKET WATCH

MSX30 4,872.06
Sensex 60,910.28

FOREX RATES

(ROI equals)

Indian	215.33
Pakistan	590.10
Bangladesh	275.96
Philippines	145.65
Sri Lanka	951.19

*Rates as on December 28
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Egypt to explore oil and gas in Nile Delta

Egypt has launched an international tender to explore natural gas and crude oil in the Mediterranean Sea and the Nile Delta.

Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Tarek el-Molla said the tender, announced by the Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company (EGAS), aims to attract investment to explore gas and oil in promising areas.

In statements quoted by state news agency MENA, he added that the tender covers 12 regions in the Mediterranean and the Nile Delta, including six offshore regions and six onshore.

Egypt is keen to step up exploration and exploration of natural gas deposits in the Mediterranean to boost its gas production to meet local market needs and for export.

Following Russia's war against Ukraine earlier this year, the European Union is seeking to reduce its dependence on energy supplies from Moscow and is seeking energy agreements with other countries, including Egypt.

Egypt achieved self-sufficiency in gas in 2018.

OQ, SABIC and KPI sign deal for petrochemical complex in Duqm

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's global integrated energy company OQ, Saudi chemicals giant SABIC and Kuwait Petroleum International (KPI) have signed a project development agreement for a jointly owned petrochemical complex in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD).

The three companies aim to establish a world-scale petrochemical complex in Duqm consisting of a steam cracker, derivative units and a natural gas liquid (NGL) extraction facility. They will conduct the necessary studies and collaborate using their wealth of technical and commercial experience to develop the project with unique attributes that make it globally competitive and profitable for all three partners.

The agreement was signed by Talal bin Hamid al Awfi, OQ Group CEO, Abdulrahman bin Saleh al Fageeh, CEO (A) of SABIC, and Shafi Taleb al Ajmi, CEO of KPI.

Commenting on this agreement, Awfi said, "OQ is proud of this historic agreement with our partners SABIC and KPI. The agreement is a significant milestone reached between the part-



ners and comes at an important time in Oman along with our 52nd national day celebrations and the near completion of the QO8 refinery project in SEZAD being undertaken by OQ and KPI through the QO8 joint venture. This agreement also comes in line with Oman Investment Authority's (OIA) plans to attract foreign investments to support realize Oman's Vision 2040 in its endeavour to diversify Oman's economy."

Fageeh said, "SABIC's collabor-

ative approach has built longstanding relationships of collaboration, delivered innovative solutions and created mutual value for more than 45 years. This agreement enables us to identify and assess opportunity for ambitious and sustainable growth by bringing together our capabilities, expertise and technologies and work collectively with our partners."

"Our involvement in this well positioned project is consistent with our growth strategy and

Saudi Vision 2030 goals to develop a stronger downstream business addressing challenges in petrochemicals industry such as carbon neutrality and providing diversified and sustainable products," he added.

KPI's Ajmi commented, "We are pleased to work side by side with OQ and SABIC on this pioneering project in Oman, because working with our regional partners supports KPC's 2040 strategy for growth in the petrochemical industry and enhances

integration between the refining and petrochemical sectors. The project also supports the economic growth and development of the Special Economic Zone at Duqm."

Petrochemicals demand is expected to continue its growth path as living standards and human development improve, particularly in growing markets close to Oman. The project intends to monetise NGLs and other feedstocks from OQ and KPI's joint venture refinery, QO8

in Duqm, to manufacture petrochemical products targeting growing markets linked to energy transition, clean technologies, mobility, construction, durable goods, healthcare and packaging amongst others.

The project intends to deploy state-of-the-art technologies to minimise carbon footprint and incorporate circular economy aspects and commit to high environmental standards. This mega project would support the region's development aspirations, maximizing socio-economic impacts as well value addition to these companies.

In addition, the project would also benefit from the excellent location of Duqm being close to markets and taking advantage of the infrastructure which has been developed in the area, as OQ continues in its strategy to help develop SEZAD as manufacturing and logistics hub in line with vision 2040.

SABIC is a global diversified chemicals company, headquartered in Riyadh, manufacturing on a global scale in the Americas, Europe, Middle East and Asia Pacific. It makes distinctly different kinds of products: chemicals, commodity and high performance plastics, agri-nutrients and metals.

World economy faces more pain in 2023 after a gloomy year

Paris, France - This was supposed to be the comeback year for the world economy following the Covid pandemic.

Instead, 2022 was marked by a new war, record inflation and climate-linked disasters. It was a "polycrisis" year, a term popularised by historian Adam Tooze. Get ready for more gloom in 2023.

"The number of crises has increased since the start of the century," said Roel Beetsma, professor of macroeconomics at the University of Amsterdam.

"Since World War Two we have never seen such a complicated situation," he told AFP.

After the Covid-induced economic crisis of 2020, consumer prices began to rise in 2021 as countries emerged from lockdowns and other restrictions.

Central bankers insisted that high inflation would only be temporary as economies returned to normal. But Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February sent energy and food prices soaring.

Many countries are now grappling with cost-of-living crises because wages are not keeping up with inflation, forcing households to make difficult choices in their spending.

Central banks have played catch-up. They started to raise interest rates this year in an effort



to tame galloping inflation - at the risk of tipping countries into deep recessions, since higher borrowing costs mean slower economic activity.

Inflation has finally started to slow down in the United States and the eurozone.

Careful spending

Consumer prices in the Group of 20 developed and emerging nations are expected to reach eight per cent in the fourth quarter before falling to 5.5 per cent next year, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The OECD encourages governments to provide aid to bring relief to households.

In the 27-nation European Union, 674bn euros

(US\$704bn) have been earmarked so far to shield consumers from high energy prices, according to the Bruegel think tank.

Germany, Europe's biggest economy and the most dependent on Russia energy supplies, accounts for 264bn euros of that total.

One in two Germans say they now only spend on essential items, according to a survey by EY consultancy.

Rising interest rates have also hurt consumers and businesses.

Both the US Federal Reserve and European Central Bank began to slow the pace of their rate hikes in December, but signalled they still need to go higher to get a grip on inflation.

Economists expect Germany

and another major eurozone economy, Italy, to fall into recession. Britain's economy is already shrinking. Rating agency S&P Global foresees stagnation for the eurozone in 2023.

But the International Monetary Fund still expects the world economy to expand in 2023, with growth of 2.7 per cent. The OECD is forecasting 2.2-per cent growth.

The easing of Covid curbs in China is raising hopes for the revival of the world's second-biggest economy and major driver of global growth.

The curbs had torpedoed China's economy and sparked nationwide protests.

China signalled this week that it was reopening to the world as it announced that it would end quarantines for overseas arrivals from January 8.

But for Beetsma, the biggest crisis is climate change, which is "happening in slow motion".

Natural and man-made catastrophes have caused US\$268bn in economic losses so far in 2022, according to reinsurance giant Swiss Re. Hurricane Ian alone cost an estimated insured loss of US\$50-65bn. Floods in Pakistan resulted in US\$30bn in damage and economic loss this year.

AFP

Oil prices change little as Russia unveils export ban

New York, US - Russia on Tuesday banned oil sales to countries and companies that comply with a price cap agreed by Western nations, briefly helping to lift crude prices.

"The supply of Russian oil and oil products to foreign legal entities and individuals is prohibited if the contracts for these supplies directly or indirectly" are using a price cap, a presidential decree said.

The decree will be in effect from February 1 until July 1.

It added that the ban may be lifted in individual cases on the basis of a "special decision" from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The price ceiling of US\$60 per barrel agreed by the European Union, G7 and Australia came into force in early December and



seeks to restrict Russia's revenue while making sure Moscow keeps supplying the global market.

Oil prices initially jumped on the announcement and analysts pointed to expectations for stronger demand due to reopening actions by China after lengthy Covid-19 restrictions.

But most of the gains in oil prices had evaporated by the end of the trading session. Analysts have noted that Moscow's move will not impede deliveries to India, China and other importers that did not join the price cap.

The Russian action "should not come too much as a surprise for the market really, given what we heard from them over the recent months," said Matt Smith of Kpler.

"It'll tighten things up a bit, but not too much."

Brent oil futures for delivery in February ended up 0.5 per cent at US\$84.33 a barrel.

US benchmark West Texas Intermediate for delivery in February slipped less than 0.1 per cent to US\$79.53 a barrel.

AFP

Germany shrugs off Russia's oil export ban

Germany on Wednesday shrugged off Russia's ban on oil sales to countries and companies that comply with a price cap agreed by Western allies, saying it has "no practical significance".

"I would not like to say that it's irrelevant but it has no practical significance," said an economy ministry spokeswoman, adding that Germany has been prepar-

ing since early summer to do without Russian oil.

Berlin has been working to ensure security of supply which "continues to be assured regardless of whether this decree has been issued or not".

Germany had been highly reliant on Russian energy, but has been forced to wean itself off crude, coal and gas from the

power giant after Moscow invaded Ukraine.

The price ceiling of \$60 per barrel agreed by the European Union, G7 and Australia came into force in early December and seeks to restrict Russia's revenue while making sure Moscow keeps supplying the global market.

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