



H M receives message from Japanese PM

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received a written message from Fumio Kishida, Prime Minister of Japan, on Tuesday.

The message deals with the advanced relations between the two countries and matters of common interest.

It was handed over to His Majesty the Sultan by Nishimura Yasutoshi, Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry, when His Majesty gave him an audience at Al Barakah Palace on Tuesday.

The minister conveyed greetings and best wishes of the Japanese Prime Minister to His Majesty the Sultan and the Omani people.

On his turn, His Majesty asked the minister to convey his sincere sentiments to the Prime Minister and the people of Japan.

During the audience, areas of cooperation in various fields were reviewed.

The meeting was attended by Eng Salim Nasser al Afi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, Jota Yamamoto, Ambassador of Japan to Oman and members of the delegation accompanying the Japanese Minister.

ONA

51 RESCUED AS HEAVY RAINS LASH MUSCAT

The low-pressure trough is likely to continue until Thursday

Our Correspondent Muscat

Normal life was thrown into disarray on Tuesday morning when heavy downpour lashed Muscat governorate with around 51 people being rescued by authorities.

The rainfall caused by a low-pressure trough is likely to continue to affect the country's weather until Thursday.

According to the weather data, some parts of Oman will witness thunderstorms and heavy rainfall ranging between 10mm to 60mm for the next two days.

The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) received 30 reports and rescued 51 people in Muscat governorate after they were stranded due to flooded roads and houses.

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) on Tuesday closed the Amerat-Bousher Mountain Road due to the damage caused by heavy rains. 'The road has been closed until further notice and commuters are advised to use alternative roads,' ROP stated.

Continued on Page 02



(Supplied photo)

Muttrah receives record rainfall in a day

Muscat - The wilayat of Muttrah in Muscat governorate received a record rainfall of 153mm in a span of few hours on Tuesday morning.

The latest weather maps and analysis of the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre show that the sultanate will continue to be affected by the low-pressure trough till Thursday morning.

An alert issued by the Directorate General of Meteorology stated that clouds will continue to flow over the governorates of Musandam, North Batinah, South Batinah, Buraimi, Dakhiliyah, Muscat, Dhahirah, North Sharqiyah, and South Sharqiyah, with chances of sporadic rain of varying intensity, leading to the flow of wadis.

Data from the rain monitoring stations of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources showed the wilayat of Muscat receiving 113mm of rainfall, Seeb 77mm, Barka 49mm, Mussanah 28mm, Nakhl 25mm and Bausher 25mm from Monday night till Tuesday morning.



Pact signed to operate 14 flights between Oman and Russia

Muscat - The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Civil Aviation Authority, on Tuesday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in the field of air transport with the Federal Republic of Russia.

The agreement, signed in Moscow, provides for Omani and Russian airliners operating as many as 14 weekly regular flights between the two countries. The MoU also provides for code sharing between each other's airlines, besides various regulatory and operational aspects of air transport and civil aviation.

The signing ceremony was attended by Oman's Ambassador to Russia and representatives of Oman Air and SalamAir.



Japan firms to buy LNG from Oman

PAN EMIRATES IS NOW

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H O M E



HOME COMES FIRST

Renewed call for tunnel to connect Amerat, Bousher

Shaddad al Musalmay
Muscat

Following the closure of the Amerat-Bousher Mountain Road due to the damage caused by heavy rains on Tuesday, commuters have renewed their calls for a permanent solution to this recurring problem - with many suggesting construction of a tunnel to connect the two wilayats instead.

According to commuters, the road has become a lifeline which has supplemented Wadi Adai road.

"Despite the government's efforts over the years to build more roads as a solution to frequent traffic jams in the capital, one road that remains dangerous over the years is Amerat-Bousher Mountain Road. This road needs a tunnel instead," Khalfan al Khaldi, a retired government employee from Amerat, said.

For the safety of all, the Royal Oman Police (ROP) closes the road during every rain or whenever there is any accident on the road. As a result, the Amerat-Wadi Adai Road faces massive traffic jams on the days of the Mountain Road's closure.

Maulid al Dhawi, an Amerat resident who uses the road daily to connect to the expressway to go to his work place in Ghala, said, "Whenever there is an accident on the Amerat-Bousher road or rain, the road is temporarily closed leading to traffic congestion on the Amerat-Wadi Adai Road.

"There is a need for a permanent solution. I feel, a tunnel con-



I feel, a tunnel connecting Amerat and Bousher will be ideal. Authorities need to consider constructing a tunnel just like the one in Wadi Al Aq

MAULID AL DHAWI

necting Amerat and Bousher will be ideal. Authorities concerned need to consider constructing a tunnel just like the one in Wadi Al Aq," he added.

The road does not become dangerous only during rains. It becomes a cause of great distress whenever there is an accident. A number of major accidents occurred on the road including the one involving a truck and a car, in which one person died.

This is in addition to two Asian men who died in an accident on the same road when the water tanker that they were trav-

elling in lost control after colliding with an oncoming car from the Bausher side.

There were also accidents which resulted in severe injuries of people. In one of such accidents, eight people were seriously injured when their bus overturned on this road.

"One cannot imagine that we are living in the 21st century and some people in the capital of Oman cannot reach their homes due to the unreliable road infrastructure!" exclaimed Shabir M al Yousef, a Muscat resident.

"God has given us mountains standing tall within our capital

area. It seems to be unfair to go and cut these mountains for building a road rather than making a safe and a reliable tunnel through them," he too suggested.

"We only wish our beloved country to keep up with the developments happening around the world; our entities to think and act as a developed country; and our people to live safely and comfortably in Oman," Yousef added.

Others, however, feel that the same road with some alterations and additions of more safety measures can suffice - if constructing a tunnel is too difficult.

"The portions that are very steep can be scrapped altogether and re-routed through newly constructed segments avoiding any steepness. A proper study is needed on that if a tunnel is not a possibility," Taher al Musalmi, a Bousher resident, said.

Campaign launched to fight Aedes Aegypti in Muscat

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) in partnership with Muscat Municipality and Oman Environmental Service Holding Company (be'ah) on Tuesday launched a mission to fight mosquito menace in the capital Muscat.

A statement by MoH said that the Directorate General of Health Services in Muscat governorate initiated the campaign after receiving reports on Aedes Aegypti mosquito infestation in the wilayat of Seeb.

Field teams were organised to look into the Aedes Aegypti mosquitoes' habitat, particularly their breeding grounds.

The campaign will continue until January 12, 2023 and will cover areas around the Mawaleh Central Fruits and Vegetables Market, Seeb Market and Mabelah North.

The Ministry of Health has urged people to take necessary steps to eliminate mosquito breeding sites by properly covering water tanks and cleaning



them every five days. The ministry also requested people to clean water tanks, dispose water from air conditioners, change water of fountains, swimming pools and of those reservoirs used for agricultural purposes every five days.

It also called for changing water containers meant for animals and birds every five days.

'Used tyres, empty cans and damaged household utensils should be disposed appropriately,' it further suggested.

Aedes aegypti is a mosquito that can spread dengue fever, chikungunya, Zika, Mayaro and yellow fever viruses. The mos-

quito can be recognised by black and white markings on its legs and a marking in the form of a lyre on the upper surface of its thorax.

Dengue fever spreads through female Aedes aegypti mosquitoes after they bite any infected person.

The virus infects the mosquito's mid-gut and subsequently spreads to the salivary glands over a period of 8-12 days. After this incubation period, the virus can be transmitted to humans.

Mosquitoes breed in stagnant water, mostly in disposed containers left outdoors.

51 rescued as heavy rains lash Muscat

Continued from Page 01

Major Fahd bin Saeed al Kalbani, in charge of Traffic Department at ROP, said that the police was carrying out patrols to monitor the traffic situation closely to deal with the exceptional weather and to ensure the flow of traffic and secure safe access for road users.

Classes suspended

The rains led to the Ministry of Education (MoE) announcing the suspension of classes in all the

public and private schools in Muscat governorate on Tuesday. 'Classes will be suspended in afternoon and evening schools in Muscat governorate on Tuesday due to thunderstorms that the governorate is witnessing. Classes and examinations will resume on Wednesday,' it had stated in the morning.

OPD cancelled

Khoulah and Al Nahdah hospitals cancelled all outpatient appoint-

ments on Tuesday, due to rains.

A statement from the Ministry of Health (MoH) said, 'The weather condition prevented medical staff from reporting to work, so all outpatient appointments stand cancelled in the two hospitals on Tuesday.'

'The two hospitals are operating at their capacity and continue to provide accident and emergency services. All cancelled appointments will be rescheduled,' it added.



NAMA Sustainability Week Concludes in Musandam

Nama Group, represented by Majan Electricity Company SAOC, has concluded Sustainability Week Initiative in Musandam Governorate which was held from December 18 to 22 with the objective of promoting community awareness on the importance of electrical safety and the optimization of power consumption by creating integrated community and institutional partnership in the Governorate.

Various activities and campaigns have been carried out within the initiative, which targeted different age groups across Musandam, including beach clean-up in coordination and coopera-

tion with The Directorate General of Education, Environment Public Authority, non-governmental organizations, charities, and several local community members. The initiative has cooperated with Volt National to take part in the implementation of "Naqla" program, which aims to provide electricity inspectors with training and qualification courses supervised by licensed engineers and technicians to grant them electrician licenses. Another program has been implemented during this week is "Baiti Aamin" which aims to examine the electrical wirings in different houses across Musandam and ensure its safety.

Raising community awareness of electricity conservation and electrical hazards, the Sustainability Week conducted several lectures targeting different schools and Omani Women Associations.

Ultimately, Nama Group has made substantial progress towards implementing sustainability strategies and reinforcing the positive contribution in all aspects, economic, social, and environmental across Oman since it was established in 2014. The Group takes a leading role in delivering safe and sustainable services to enhance value for Oman.

Advertorial



MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

Advertisement No. 51 /2022

Muscat Municipality invites interested companies to the following tenders:

Tender No.	Tender Description	Document Fee	Last date for inquires submission	Last date for obtaining Tender Docs.	Last date for Submission
9/2022/MM/PA-1 Recall-4	Supply of Spare Parts for Chain Saw Machines	25/- OMR	15/01/2023	31/01/2023	05/02/2023
64/2022/MM/PA-20 Recall-2	Supply of Carpenter Material	25/- OMR	15/01/2023	31/01/2023	05/02/2023
66/2022/MM/PA-21- Recall-2	Supply of Plumbing Materials	25/- OMR	15/01/2023	31/01/2023	05/02/2023
67/2022/MM/PA-22- Recall-2	Supply of Painting Materials	25/- OMR	15/01/2023	31/01/2023	05/02/2023
116/2022/MM/PA-27 Recall-1	Supply of Containers for Collecting Coal	25/- OMR	15/01/2023	31/01/2023	05/02/2023

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

Website: www.mmm.gov.om

RO38.66mn flood protection dam on Wadi Adai approved

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Tender Board awarded a number of projects costing RO131.43mn during its 7th meeting of the year on Monday.

The meeting, chaired by H E Dr Said Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, Chairman of the Tender Board, approved a project for the construction of a flood protection dam at the gorge of Wadi Adai in the wilayat of Amerat, in Muscat at a cost of RO38.66mn.

The board also okayed a five-year project to supply, design and install the 'Government Financial System' for the Ministry of Finance at a cost of RO21.34mn.

Some of the other development projects approved for financing include the maintenance of asphalt roads in Dhahirah and North Batinah governorates for a



(Picture for illustrative purpose)

period of five years costing RO11.5mn and RO9.43mn respectively.

A tender worth RO9.28mn for supply of computers for schools - affiliated with the Ministry of Education and the Secretariat General of the Tender Board - was also approved at the same meeting.

According to officials, the 'Government Financial System' project will be undertaken by the Mohsin Haider Darwish (MHD) Group and a number of international partners specialised in electronic financial systems. The tender also offers rights to small and medium enterprises to implement a few tasks of the project,

which will be operational after five years.

The Ministry of Finance pointed out that the users of the country's financial system will move gradually to the new electronic system 'Maliyah' in the next five years, with the support of the project's team based at the ministry.

Ministry fines Dhofar firm for violating Exhibitions Law

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) on Tuesday fined a company in Dhofar for violating the Exhibitions Law.

A statement issued by the ministry said, 'The Directorate General of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion in Dhofar governorate fined a company for organising an exhibition in violation of the regulations on organising and managing meet-

In October, MoCIIP amended regulations on organising and managing meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions

ings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE).'

In October, MoCIIP had issued a decision amending regulations on organising and managing MICE.

The decision stipulated conditions for companies to organise exhibitions that include having a minimum staff strength of two employees, one of whom must be an Omani administrative manager. The Omani employee should also be registered with the Public Authority for Social Insurance.

The decision also stipulated that a licence holder must have a fixed headquarters, a bank account, and must pay the prescribed fees to the ministry for running a company.

WEATHER WATCH		
	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	24	17
Doha	20	14
Kuwait City	18	10
Manama	21	14
Muscat	26	18
Riyadh	17	5

With Omanisation rate of up to 95%, ChampionX continues to recruit Omanis



The Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL) recently recognized ChampionX with its 2022 Best Large Contractor in the Energy Sector award in the category of Omanization. This annual award acknowledges ChampionX's ongoing efforts to hire, train, and promote Omani citizens at all levels of our business in the country.

Following a call for nominations from members, ChampionX successfully showcased its Omanization achievements to a panel of judges on two occasions and fielded follow-up questions. The award ceremony was held December 13 where Mohammed Al Sibani, director of Oman services, presented ChampionX's case to all attendees and we were ultimately chosen to receive the Best Large Contractor award in the category of Omanization.

ChampionX has been serving the Oman market for more than 15 years from its Middle East, Europe, and Africa headquarters in Muscat. Championx offers a full range of production technologies and services for artificial lift, digital automation, and production chemistry. Additionally, the firm opened a one-of-a-kind coiled rod manufacturing plant in 2011 in Salalah. In 2015 ChampionX expanded its footprint in Oman with a rod pump and progressing cavity pumping system maintenance facility. Currently the company has more than 200 employees in the

country and 95% are Omani. ChampionX also invests in its local talent by partnering with institutions like the Salalah College of Technology to advance employees' skills. ChampionX also has a technical cooperation agreement with Dhofar University to test materials.

"We are so pleased to be recognized by OPAL - particularly for our achievements in Omanization. Since our entry into the country, it's been important to us that we help build the local economy by investing in Oman's talented workforce and by furthering Oman's industrial sector," said Fouad Eid, ChampionX vice president of the Europe, Middle East, and Africa geomarket. "This award validates our contribution to Oman's strong business community. We are excited about the future expansion of our business in the country, which will allow us to provide even greater opportunities to local talent."

OPAL has more than 450 members from oil and gas producers, operators, contractors, and suppliers. In addition to Omanization, the organization's yearly awards recognize companies for excellence in the areas of health and safety, impactful environmental practices, recognizable energy transition, operational excellence, high-class Omani products and services, and research and development in the energy and minerals sector.

Advertorial



UNESCO opens door for King Hamad Prize for the Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Education

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has announced the opening of the door to vie for the 2022 UNESCO - King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa Prize for the Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Education.

The prize this year is held under the theme "Using Public Platforms to Ensure Universal Access to the Contents of Digital Education" in response to the UN call to better the quality of digital education.

It should be noted that UNESCO has set January 23, 2023 as the deadline for submitting nominations. The candidate can obtain the nomination form through the UNESCO website:

<http://www.unesco.org/ict-in-education-prize>

Embassy of Bahrain Cultural Attache



Sultan Qaboos University Announcement of extension of bidding

The Investment & Revenue Department at Sultan Qaboos University would like to announce the extension of bidding as follows:

S/N	Type of Business	Location	Date of site visit	Tender #
1	Rent and operate Coffee Shop	Female complex No. (2)	19/1/2023	SQU.IRD. 18/22
2	Rent and operate Coffee Shop	Female complex No. (3)	19/1/2023	SQU.IRD. 19/22
3	Rent and operate a sweet corn and ice cream kiosk	Female complex No.(3)	19/1/2023	SQU.IRD. 20/22
4	Rent and operate a sweet corn and ice cream kiosk	Female complex No.(5)	19/1/2023	SQU.IRD. 21/22
5	Rental and operate a mobile cafe site	Administration Building Extension	19/1/2023	SQU.IRD.22/22
6	Construction & rental & operation Outlet for stationery, office supplies, copying and printing services	Independent Learning Center	19/1/2023	SQU.IRD.23/22
7	Electric Scooter Service	Various locations at Sultan Qaboos University	19/1/2023	SQU.IRD.24/22
8	Rent and operate Coffee Shop	Family and Community Health Clinic	19/1/2023	SQU.IRD.25/22

- The priority will be for the Small and Medium Establishments (SME), which fulfils the quality requirements.
- The last date for submission of the quotations: 19/1/2023. The quotations should be submitted in a sealed envelope addressed to the Director of The Investment & Revenue Department, located on the first floor of the commercial building at Sultan Qaboos University and deposited in the Tender Box kept in the Department, before 10:00 a.m.
- The exterior of the envelope should be marked with the name and number of the Tender being presented and should bear no identification or mark of the Tenderer.
- The Tenderer should submit (enclose) with his tender a Bank Guarantee Document for sum of 1% of the total Duration of contract rental value quoted by the Tenderer and valid for 90 (ninety) days from the date specified for submission of Tender. Tenders submitted after the deadline or without a Bank Guarantee will be excluded.
- The Tenderer should prepare the Site in accordance with the health requirements of Muscat Municipality and the requirements of civil defense in cooperation with the concerned authorities.
- Sultan Qaboos University reserves the right to reject any quotation not fulfilling the requirements and does not bid itself to accept the highest rent or any other quotations.

Investment & Revenue Department

P.O BOX 50, P.C. 123, ALKHOD, SULTANATE OF OMAN
Tel: 24142691 – 24142682- 24142685- 24142684
E- mail: investment@squ.edu.om



MARKET WATCH

MSX30 4,845.40
Sensex 60,927.43

FOREX RATES

(ROI equals)	
Indian	215.13
Pakistan	588.85
Bangladesh	266.54
Philippines	144.84
Sri Lanka	949.70

*Rates as on December 27
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

UK economy contracts more than expected in third quarter

Britain's economy contracted slightly more than thought in the third quarter, revised official data showed.

Gross domestic product shrank 0.3 per cent in the July-September period compared with an original reading of minus 0.2 per cent, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement. The ONS added that the UK economy grew weaker than expected in the first half of 2022. It comes after the UK government said it believes the economy is already in recession on fallout from sky-high inflation. Darren Morgan, director of economic statistics at the ONS, said the "revised figures show the economy performed slightly less well over the last year than we previously estimated, with manufacturing and electricity generation notably weaker". It comes as Britain experiences severe strike action by workers across public and private sectors, as wage increases fail to keep pace with the country's annual inflation rate of nearly 11 per cent.

AFP

Japanese firms sign long-term deals to buy LNG from Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Three Japanese companies have signed long-term agreements with Oman LNG to import 2.35mn tonnes of liquefied natural gas (LNG) annually from the sultanate.

According to an Oman News Agency report, Oman LNG has signed three binding sheet agreements with Japan's biggest power generation company JERA Co and trading firms Mitsui & Co and Itochu Corporation for the production and delivery of LNG starting from 2025. Total volumes of LNG to be delivered is 2.35mn metric tonnes per annum (MTPA).

These agreements will see Oman LNG supplying LNG based on contracts varying from five to ten years. The amount of LNG to be delivered is as follows: 0.8 MTPA to Itochu Corporation, 0.8 MTPA to JERA Co and 0.75 MTPA to Mitsui & Co.

H E Eng Salim Nasser al Aufi, Oman's Minister of Energy and Minerals and Nishimura Yasutoshi, Japan's Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry were present during the signing ceremony in Muscat.

The agreements were signed by Hamad al Nu'amani, CEO of



Oman LNG, Tetsuya Yamada from Itochu Corporation, Hitoshi Nishizawa from JERA Co and Motoyasu Nozaki from Mitsui & Co.

These new deals come as a significant milestone for Oman LNG, as it complements the company's strive to renew its contracts with a strong interest to leverage partnership with Japan.

H E Aufi said that the agreements were signed after the end of the current contracts. The new contracts take into consideration the notes submit-

ted to the Ministry of Energy and Minerals regarding the previous MoUs and agreements. The notes were submitted by the State Audit Institution (SAI) and the Shura Council.

On his turn, Nu'amani pointed out that this move complements Oman LNG's efforts to further grow, reach international markets and explore new opportunities. It will also leverage the enhanced production and Oman LNG's nationwide commitment towards diversifying the economy, while ensuring economic growth, he

added.

Japan's JERA Co, in a statement on its website, said that based on the key term sheet agreement, it will purchase up to 12 cargoes (approximately 0.8mn tonnes) per year of LNG produced from the Oman LNG project from 2025 for 10 years.

"LNG procurement competition has been intensifying and thus, stable procurement of fuel in a timely manner in line with the domestic electricity supply-demand situation is needed to secure a stable supply of energy in Japan," JERA Co said.



Oman, Japan sign MoUs in energy field

Muscat - Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals and Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry on Tuesday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in the field of hydrogen, fuel ammonia and carbon recycling.

The two countries also signed the third extension of the MoU signed between the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security in the field of crude oil, natural gas and clean energy.

The MoUs were signed by H E Eng Salim Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals and Yasutoshi Nishimura, Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry.

The first MoU aims to accelerate the Oman-Japan en-

ergy and resources cooperation and acknowledge the continued role and contribution of Oman to Japan's energy security.

The MoU will support efforts to accelerate cooperation, exchange information and research results and hold workshops, trade missions, site visits and working groups in the field of hydrogen, fuel ammonia and carbon recycling that includes methanation.

Moreover, the term of the third extension of the MoU is from January 9, 2023 and for a period of three years, thus enhancing collaboration in dealing with commercial and technical issues pertaining to clean energy.

ONA

Bank Muscat Oryx Fund ranked as best performing MENA equity fund

Muscat - Bank Muscat Oryx Fund has been recognised as the best performing MENA equity fund by the CityWire® rankings.

These ranking are based on the returns generated by the fund for its investors against 20 other funds focusing on MENA region during the one-year period ended on October 31, 2022. The Oryx fund has delivered 13.3 per cent return for the one-year period ended October 31, 2022 as against a return of 0.1 per cent by S&P GCC Index during the same period.

Delivering the double digit returns is a remarkable achievement by Oryx Fund considering the challenging investment environment during 2022. Consistency has been the hallmark of Bank Muscat Oryx Fund in absolute as well as relative performance, across time periods, through its long track record spanning 28 years.

In addition to the attractive returns, the fund has also been consistently rewarding its investors with regular income distributions (through dividends)

for past 28 years. In 2022, Oryx Fund distributed dividend of 66bz per unit, thus maintaining its consistent and growing income distribution track record since 2016.

On the back of the robust track record, Oryx Fund has witnessed significant inflows over the years, making it the largest open-ended equity fund in Oman and one of the largest open-ended equity fund in the GCC region.

Bank Muscat Oryx Fund has won several accolades for gener-

ating wealth for its investors and for significant outperformance compared to peers. Many times, it has been top rated by various renowned global fund reviewers such as Lipper, MENA Fund Manager and Emerging Market Finance.

Oryx Fund represents an attractive investment proposition for long-term investors. The fund's strategy to follow bottom-up approach, that is focused on selection of quality stocks, has been proven over various market cycles and time periods.

CBO issues RO26mn treasury bills

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A tender of the government treasury bills, issue number 168, was issued this week by the Central Bank of Oman.

Total value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO26mn, for a maturity period of 182 days, from December 28, 2022 until June 28, 2023.

The average accepted price reached RO97.589 for every RO100 treasury bill, while the minimum accepted price arrived at RO97.550. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 4.8351 per cent and



4.9546 per cent, respectively.

The interest rate on the repo operations with CBO is 5.0 per cent, while the discount rate on the treasury bills discounting facility with the central bank is 5.5 per cent.

Treasury bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of

Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the opportunity to invest their surplus funds. The Central Bank of Oman acts as the issue manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (repo).

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

ONA

new

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Russia plans to increase oil and gas exports to new markets

Moscow, Russia – Russia plans to increase oil exports by 2025 to 260mn tonnes and pipeline gas supplies to the eastern direction to 48bn cubic meters, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said in an interview with Russian state news agency TASS.

"As for oil, there likely will be an increase in exports to 260mn tonnes by 2025, also taking into account the Asia-Pacific countries," he said.

"In terms of gas, the execution of projects such as the Power of Siberia and the Far Eastern route will increase gas supplies to the eastern direction to 48bn cubic meters by 2025 and 88bn cubic meters by 2030," Novak added.

He noted that Russian energy supplies cannot be replaced and that the world cannot exist without them. He added that Russia is the world's largest energy player, accounting for 20 per cent of global gas exports, more than 20 per cent of global oil exports and the third largest coal exporter.

According to the Federal Customs Service, Russia exported 229.9mn tonnes of crude oil worth US\$110.1bn at the end of 2021. In comparison, Russia de-



livered 238.6mn tonnes of oil overseas in 2020.

Novak said Russia will be capable to produce at least 490-500mn metric tonnes of oil in conditions of the EU embargo on Russian oil imports that's been in place since December 5 and the upcoming embargo on oil products that will take effect on February 5.

"I do not rule out risks of production decline in certain periods in 2023. We will probably reduce it by 7-8 per cent at the peak. Nevertheless, we will produce at least 490-500mn metric tonnes over the year. Still, I reiterate much will depend on logistics," he noted.

Oil and petroleum products from Russia will enjoy the de-

mand in 2023, Novak said in his interview with TASS.

"We see so far there will be plenty of uncertainties related to operations on foreign markets in 2023. Nevertheless, it is obvious that our product enjoys the demand on the international market," he added.

The embargo on Russian oil supplies to the EU became effec-

'OPEC+ cautions against West's bid to create buyers' cartel'

Moscow, Russia – OPEC+ has criticised the US-led West's 'unacceptable' gamble to create a cartel of energy buyers by introducing price caps, warning that this type of intervention leads to market imbalances, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak told Russian news agency TASS during an interview.

"Our OPEC+ colleagues have already said that this is unacceptable for the market. When consumers start to interfere in the market economy, this only leads to imbalances," he cautioned.

Novak added that OPEC+ countries continue to maintain cohesion, and the sanctions imposed by Western



Alexander Novak

countries just work to strengthen it.

"Cohesion was and is there. It is based on an understanding of what is happening in the market. It is influenced by various factors, and one of them is the sanctions," he stressed.

TASS

Iraq PM summons central bank chief

Baghdad, Iraq – Iraq's premier summoned the central bank governor Tuesday amid worries sparked by a currency drop against the dollar, with lawmakers calling for an extraordinary session of parliament.

One US dollar traded at 1,580 Iraqi dinars on the street Tuesday, against the central bank rate of 1,470 dinars, state news agency INA reported.

The drop, which began about two weeks ago, has sparked alarm in the media in the oil-rich country, and on Tuesday Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani met the central bank governor to discuss the issue.

The central bank has blamed the slump on "temporary pressures" sparked by the "adoption of new mechanisms to protect the banking sector, customers, and the financial system".

Iraq's Association of Private Banks said the rate had risen as a result of changes to the "mechanism" of foreign currency sales due to international requirements.

The government has sought to ease tensions, including by ensuring a flow of dollars at the official rate.

AFP

Turkey announces new gas discovery in Black Sea

Ankara, Turkey – Turkey's president announced the discovery of an additional 58bn cubic meters of natural gas in the Black Sea.

"Our drill ship Fatih has explored 58bn cubic meters of natural gas reserves, 3,023 meters under the sea, at the Caycuma 1 block," said President Recep Tayyip Erdogan following a Cabinet meeting at the Presidential Complex in Ankara.

Stressing that Türkiye's natural gas reserve in the Black Sea totals 710bn cubic meters (25tn cubic feet) with a market value of US\$1tn, Erdogan said the country's ultimate goal is to declare energy independence from foreign oil and natural gas as soon as possible.



Recep Tayyip Erdogan

"Our new exploration will pave the way for similar explorations in other geological fields adjacent to the region. We will launch new drilling as soon as possible," Erdogan added.

Anadolu Agency

Markets rise after China ends quarantine

Paris, France – European and Asian markets advanced on Tuesday after China said it would end quarantines for overseas arrivals, spurring hopes for the revival of the world's second-largest economy.

China has abruptly reversed its strict pandemic restrictions even as a surge in infections overtakes the country.

The curbs had torpedoed the economy and sparked nationwide protests.

The latest easing will see three years of border controls end on January 8, when Beijing downgrades Covid-19 to a Class B infectious disease.

People in China have since gone rushing to search for overseas flights, with the reopening set to be a boon for the travel industry.

China's benchmark Shanghai



index and the second index in Shenzhen both posted healthy gains, while Tokyo ended a shade higher with Seoul, Singa-

pore and Mumbai also all up.

Markets in London, Hong Kong and Sydney were still closed for a holiday.

Paris was up almost one per cent and Frankfurt rose 0.7 per cent in early afternoon trades.

"Inbound tourism is not a huge economic bounty for China relative to domestic tourism but policy fast-track and early zero-Covid exit means growth could recover enormously," said Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management.

Markets have also been buoyed by fresh data last week that indicated a slowing of US inflation, as well as an uptick in consumer spending, which saw Wall Street take gains into the Christmas break.

But the news was not definitive and all eyes will be on how the Federal Reserve raises interest rates to balance inflationary concerns alongside the possibility of a recession caused by increased borrowing costs.

Following a holiday for commodities traders on Monday, oil continued its surge after a senior official said Russia could cut up to seven percent of its production next year.

Production was also curtailed by freezing conditions in the United States, where more than 1.8mn barrels a day of oil processing capacity in Texas was hit by the extreme weather, according to Bloomberg News.

Both Brent Crude and West Texas Intermediate were up on the supply shortfalls and expectations of renewed demand from China.

"The Chinese reopening news could give a helping hand to oil bulls for an extension of the rally to the US\$88 per barrel level," said Ipek Ozkardeskaya, analyst at Swissquote bank.

AFP

Tunisia to raise new taxes to close budget deficit

Tunis, Tunisia – Tunisia's finance minister unveiled a budget Monday aiming to use new tax revenues to claw the deficit back to near five percent of GDP, as the cash-strapped country awaits an international bailout.

The 2023 budget comes as the North African country grapples with eye-watering public debt, shortages of goods from sugar to petrol and inflation at nearly 10 per cent.

The latest plans aim to cut the budget deficit from 7.7 per cent of gross domestic product to 5.2 per cent, Finance Minister Sihem Boughdiri told journalists.

The state, saddled with a crippling public wage bill and politically sensitive subsidies, is set to take in around 46.4bn dinars (US\$14.8bn), Boughdiri said.

It will need to borrow some 23.5bn dinars to cover state needs for the coming year, she added.

To find the cash, it will seek more than US\$4bn from overseas as well as some US\$3bn



Tunisia's Economy Minister Samir Saied (left) and Finance Minister Sihem Nemsia at a press conference in Tunis (AFP)

from local banks, according to the fiscal plan.

To boost revenues, the government has imposed a new tax of half a percent on real estate assets worth over three million dinars (US\$960,000).

Cash payments of over 5,000

dinars will be taxed at 20 per cent, while taxes on some professional services such as legal services will be hiked to 19 per cent, up from 13 per cent.

The budget is based on assumptions of 1.8 per cent GDP growth, oil at US\$89 a barrel and

a deal with the International Monetary Fund for a US\$1.9bn bailout loan.

Economy Minister Samir Saied has predicted 2023 would be "a very difficult year" and that inflation would hit 10.5 per cent.

AFP

Spain announces \$10.6bn package to ease inflation pain for consumers

Madrid, Spain – Spain on Tuesday announced €10bn (US\$10.6bn) worth of measures to ease the pain of inflation in the third major package this year, bringing total aid to 45bn euros since early 2022.

According to Reuters, quoted Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez as saying that the package includes a one-off bonus of €200 for about 4.2mn households with annual incomes up to 27,000 euros and the extension of tax cuts for energy bills into the first half of next year.

The package follows similar announcements in March and June that included direct aid, tax cuts, soft loans and rental controls.

The measures, coupled with an agreement negotiated with the European Union to place a limit on gas prices for electricity production, have had some success. Inflation for the past 12 months slowed to 6.7 per cent in November, the lowest rate in the 27-country EU bloc.

Slowing inflation has been aided by a sharp fall in electricity



Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez

prices, which decreased by 22.4 per cent from a year earlier in November. But food prices have continued to hit Spaniards' wallets, climbing 15 per cent during October and November from a year earlier.

The government said it will cut value added tax on essential foods such as bread, cheese, milk, fruit and vegetables and cereals to zero per cent from 4 per cent. Pasta and cooking oils will have VAT slashed by half to 5 per cent, Sanchez said.

Sanchez also announced 12-month extensions on subsidies for train travel for commuters and limits on rental increases. However, a rebate on the price of petrol for consumers except for the haulage sector will be discontinued.

He said the aid provided so far had helped Spain register strong economic growth this year, which he put at over 5 per cent, above the government's previous forecast of 4.4 per cent.

WAM

Bank Nizwa participates in ICAI's 12th International Seminar



Bank Nizwa, the leading and most trusted Islamic bank in Oman participated in the 12th International Seminar titled, 'Success through Synergy', organised by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI), Muscat Chapter.

The seminar witnessed an attendance of more than 250 members, dignitaries and guests from across the globe, a press release said.

Narasimhan, general manager

of Wholesale Banking Group at Bank Nizwa participated by delivering a presentation on 'The role of Islamic Banking in the Synergetic Contribution to the Growth of Oman Economy'. He shed light on the Global Islamic Finance landscape and Islamic Banking and its outlook in Oman.

Furthermore, he highlighted the general operating difference between Islamic and conventional banking and also spoke about the critical role Bank

Nizwa has played in advancing Islamic banking in the country, making Oman the fastest-growing Islamic finance market in the GCC.

"Islamic Banking Industry is growing very fast in Oman. As of June 2022, according to the statistics issued by the Central Bank of Oman, Islamic Banking Entities (IBEs) share in the industry has increased to 18 per cent. At the forefront of this growth is Bank Nizwa, continuously in-

creasing its market share. Within Islamic Banking Industry, the bank holds a total of 23 per cent share in the financing, 26 per cent in deposits and 24 per cent in assets," said Mr Narasimhan.

He added, "Bank Nizwa focuses on continuous innovation through re-engineering processes and launching digital ventures and new business models. Furthermore, it aims at growing and strengthening existing segments, supporting Small and

Medium Enterprises and expanding its offerings. The bank is also working to improve customer experiences by investing heavily in digitalisation, reskilling society and equipping them with cutting-edge digital tools and capabilities.

"In alignment with the country's Vision 2040 agenda, we are also focusing on our sustainability strategy and roadmap. Bank Nizwa is the first Bank in Oman to launch sustainable financing.

Conference on technical security in banking held

The Technical Security in the Banking and Financial Sector Conference, organised by Element Technology Company, in partnership with Microsoft and the Central Bank of Oman, was launched on December 27 under the patronage of H E Tahir bin Salim al Amari, CEO of the Central Bank of Oman.

The conference was attended by Eng Saeed bin Abdullah al Manthari, CEO of Ithra Group, and in the presence of a number of high level dignitaries, entrepreneurs and those interested in the financial, banking and techni-



cal sectors, as the conference was intended to provide technical solutions to the modern technical challenges facing the security of the financial and

banking sector in the Sultanate of Oman and the world, a press release said.

The conference began with a review of the latest technical se-

curity solutions developed by OnsorTechnology for institutions operating in the financial and banking sectors. In partnership with Microsoft, Onsor was able to develop a technical security solution known as 'Secured-Core PCs' in the TURS device designed and manufactured by Onsor Technology, which is the first secure tablet developed for industries whose owners deal with intellectual property, sensitive security information, or customers' personal data, including personally identifiable information (PII).

In addition, the customised technical solutions provided by Onsor to companies and sectors of all kinds that will enhance data security and provide a smarter and easier user experience were reviewed. A review of the capabilities of Onsor in creating smart technical solutions to face various technical challenges and threats that may arise in the future was also held.

The forum included specialised workshops, presented by specialists from OnsorTechnology Company, Microsoft and the Central Bank of Oman.



OOMCO hosts occupational health and safety week

Committed to creating a safe, healthy and efficient work environment, Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) recently hosted its annual Health, Safety, Environment and Quality (HSEQ) Week.

The five-day initiative included practical workshops, awareness seminars, safety tests, basic medical checks for employees and other activities. The event brought together the board, senior executives and other team members who all play an integral part in this area, as well as stakeholders such as the Central Blood Bank and Oman International Hospital, a press release said.

During the week, OOMCO employees were able to learn

more about effective preparatory approaches that will help minimise potential risks. Additionally, the company conducted a contractors' HSE Forum to award best drivers, best contractor in maintenance, best contractor in construction and best contractor in transportation.

Samah al Shahaibi, expert - Quality Assurance and SD at OOMCO, said, "The main aim of this year's event was to raise awareness about the importance of occupational health and safety standards and to engage our team members with our company's policy in this regard to help them stay safe and to ensure the safety of our customers. Meanwhile, it also provided us with an opportunity to brain-

storm and come up with recommendations for further actions for even more sustainable solutions and standards."

Throughout the week, OOMCO's senior management members shared a few practical examples in view of the safe cleaning of solar panels and carried out Health and Safety Executive inspections of fuel transporter fleets yards, VIP commercial sites and warehouses.

With an aim to promote healthy lifestyle habits, employees were also provided with the opportunity to donate blood and undergo a basic health check-up. Furthermore, OOMCO engaged with the wider community by having teams visit sites to conduct health and safety seminars.

OOC Board of Directors holds 4th meeting

The Board of Directors of Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) held the 4th meeting for this year on Monday, headed by Khalid bin Muhammad al Zubair, OOC chairman.

During the meeting, the minutes of the 3rd meeting held on August 23 were reviewed and approved, and the decisions and recommendations issued by it were implemented, besides the minutes of the 3rd and 4th Executive Office meetings held on July 17 and November 2.

The OOC plan and budget for 2023 was reviewed and approved - which included the budget for international participation - while the financial statement until the end of November 2022 was also reviewed.



The board reviewed the draft regulations and controls that will be implemented during the coming period, and approved the project of the Technical Office for Sports Studies and Development, which aims to create a technical umbrella that brings to-

gether a number of experts with expertise and knowledge, specialised academics and to be a participatory work team that provides technical support as well as to advice to the Board of Directors, the sub-committees and the interested sports bodies,

in particular.

The attendees also reviewed the work regulations of sub-committees, and the controls for international participation. It was agreed to make some amendments to them and to implement them directly.

SEZAD to organise Second Environmental Forum

The management of the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) is organising the Second Environmental Forum titled, 'Together for reducing our carbon footprint in Duqm', which is to be held on January 9, 2023.

A number of lecturers and specialists from government and private entities, concerned in climate change and carbon emissions reduction, will be participating, in the presences of the companies operating in the zone, a press release said.

The Forum aims at finding innovative mechanisms to solve potential environmental chal-



lenges resulting from various construction and industrial works in SEZAD. The forum will shed light on the necessity for combining efforts to raise awareness of preserving the environ-

ment, reducing environmental impacts, and supporting and developing foundations of joint co-operation between various organisations and companies operating in the Zone in aspects

related to climate affairs.

It will also highlight greenhouse gases inventory, setting up plans to reduce carbon emissions and adapt to climate changes, in an effort to achieve zero neutrality in Duqm.

The forum will complement the efforts of SEZAD management represented by the Environmental Awareness Team of Environmental Sustainability Department, in its commitment to protect and preserve the environment and share with the world its emissions reduction plans, after the success of the First Environmental Forum.



beIN SPORTS announces new viewership record

BeIN MEDIA GROUP (beIN) is marking a World Cup victory of its own by revealing record viewership figures for FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. It recorded more than 5.4 billion cumulative views throughout the month-long tournament on its flagship channel BeIN Sports across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and 1.1 billion views on its official social media channels.

The highly anticipated final match that ended with Argentina becoming FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 winners with a 4-2 victory on penalties against France, was watched by a staggering 242.8 million viewers on the free-to-air channel. This figure equates to 68%, more than two-thirds, of the MENA's total adult population and, when analysed per country, results show viewership was particularly strong in Qatar where 93% of the adult population tuned in.

In Morocco 91% of adults watched, followed by Lebanon (89%), Algeria (79%), and Egypt (72%). Meanwhile, on its official YouTube channel, the final match drew in a cumulative viewership of 25 million with viewership peaking at 4.44 mil-

lion during the penalty shootouts.

The overall viewership across BeIN's 24-country coverage area across MENA for all matches is a 135% increase compared with the Qatar-based network's broadcast of the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018. The final of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 attracted 88 million more viewers on BeIN Sports than the final of FIFA World Cup Russia 2018. Average TV viewership per match throughout the tournament saw a significant rise in 2022 reaching 80.6 million, compared to that of 36.2 million for 2018's coverage.

Mohammad al Subaie, CEO of BeIN - MENA, said, "It's incredibly special for us that the first World Cup in the Middle East has broken regional viewership records with more than 5.4 billion cumulative views across the month-long tournament. This is evidence of the appetite for football and similar tournaments across the Arab World and we are honoured to have been the exclusive rights holder. We are excited to be preparing for many more extensive broadcasts as we continue to inspire, educate, entertain viewers."

HONOR X6 Debuts in Oman Market

MHD-ITICS officially announced its appointment as the exclusive distributor for HONOR mobiles in Oman during an event held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, in Qurum, to launch the Honor X6. Delegates present from Honor included House Ma, GCC CEO, Amol Govind Sonake, VP, GCC Sales, Jack Chen, product manager, GCC and Russell Huo, country manager, Oman, who attended the event along with the management team of MHD-ITICS. Addressing the event, House Ma said, "Honor team considers Oman as one of our key strategic markets in the Middle East. Our partnership with the Consumer Division of MHD-ITICS is the result of our study of their excellent distribution network, logistics capabilities, and infrastructure. Through this strategic partnership, we are targeting accelerated growth in market share for Honor.



"Their inherent zeal for business, responsible and practical distribution practices and an unwavering commitment to delivering best-in-class customer service is what inspired Honor to work with MHD-ITICS. This alliance will also improve the availability of our products in the market, enhance the shopping experience of our customers and will help us achieve our ambitious business goals." Honor launched its new smartphone - Honor X6, which is the latest addition to its state of the art 'X series'. The Honor X6 is equipped with a triple camera system that includes a 50MP main camera, 2MP macro camera and a 2MP depth camera, an ultra-large 5000 mAh battery and expandable storage to go along with 4GB+64GB memory.



'ahliExpress' provides 24x7 digital services

In line with its digital transformation strategy and its drive to match the global digitalisation trends, Ahlibank's newly opened Madinat al Sultan Qaboos branch is home to the bank's first multi-functional device. Named 'ahliExpress', this multi-functional device caters to the demand for express banking services, aims to expedite banking processes, and present a quick and efficient avenue to serve its existing and new customers at their own time, a press release said.

As part of the 'ahliExpress' device, Ahlibank customers can carry out their banking transactions digitally, round-the-clock, including the opening of accounts for new customers, opening of additional accounts for existing customers, updating profiles and Civil ID/resident cards, printing account statements and chequebooks instantly, issuance of debit cards, and contacting ahliconnect. AhliExpress device is equipped to issue new and supplementary debit cards and enable debit card activation, replacement, etc. In addition, customers can also change their purchase limit, thus availing the freedom to carry out all their banking needs at any time.

Commenting on this, Hassan al Zaabi, head of E-Channels, Digital Banking at Ahlibank, said, "We at Ahlibank are always reaching to expand our services and enhance the bank's digitalisation strategy and journey. Our 'ahliExpress' device, provides comprehensive and advanced digital banking solutions."

OSHRM to host prestigious 2023 Awards

The Omani Society for Human Resource Management (OSHRM) is getting set to honour and award excellence in the field of Human Resources Management with their hosting of the prestigious 2023 OSHRM Awards in February. The awards function will be held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre in Muscat under the auspices of H H Dr Mona bint Fahad al Said, assistant vice-chancellor for International Cooperation at Sultan

Qaboos University, a press release said. The event will take the form of a glamorous gala awards ceremony, where the winners in each of the OSHRM Awards categories will be presented their prestigious OSHRM Award title and accompanying OSHRM Awards trophy. The 2023 OSHRM Awards is also the climax to the 6th Annual OSHRM Conference, which will be held from February 7 - 9 at the same venue, and which will

welcome a high-profile mix of HR industry leaders and representatives for a three-day schedule of workshops, panel discussions, and networking opportunities. Dr Ghalib Saif al Hosni, chairman of the OSHRM Board, said, "Exceptional Human Resource Management demands exceptional recognition. So, we are exceptionally honoured to host a multitude of HRM practitioners and to place these HRM professionals' achievements in international media spotlight."

Thawani launches eGift Cards service

Future-ready Thawani Technologies has recently added a new feature to its platform allowing customers to purchase eGift Cards, catering to all generations. Users of the Thawani Application can now redeem digital gift cards to stream movies, TV shows, play games, and buy other products from the Apple and Google Play Stores, a press release said. Zainab al Amri, project manager at Thawani Technologies, said, "With the launch of the eGift Cards service, we aim to provide a seamless and efficient



Zainab al Amri user experience as recipients can pay directly using the Thawani Application.

"We are excited to offer these digital gift cards to our users, while they can send them to their friends who can choose from a wide variety of digital products. We are looking forward to launching more services that will meet the needs of all our users." Aiming to provide users with unique digital solutions and services, Thawani Technologies plans to add a wide range of new features and services to its platform in 2023. Thawani prides itself for using local innovation labs, in addition to exploring and implementing the best international practices in

financial technology (FinTech) compliance to continuously develop digital services that meet the needs of the local market. Founded in 2016, Thawani Technologies is an Omani company that specialises in providing smart digital payment solutions while it adheres to global card security compliance. Licensed by the Central Bank of Oman, the company has been providing innovative solutions in FinTech to optimise and simplify digital payments by making the process safer, faster, and easier as it aims to improve user experience.

maserati.com site is now online



The website is the starting point for the development of an integrated digital experience for Maserati customers, made possible by sales support tools that result in a personalised customer journey online, a press release said. Maserati.com consists of three main sections - Models, Brands and Ownership. The Models section has a new layout, offering all the information there is on the range and trims. In the Brand section, the digital experience is made immersive by the area focusing on the values, history and fascinating facts about the Trident Brand. In particular, the 'Stories of Audacity' page is a veritable magazine with a live feed of the latest and greatest Maserati stories, news and events. Finally, Ownership is a content-packed section directly linked to the Maserati Owner Apps.

The customer journey online has changed purchasing behaviour, especially in the luxury segment where digital services have become key elements. Maserati's response is to make digital the linchpin of the sales and ownership experience, including services such as the new OTO Retail project ('OTO' stands for 'online to offline', and vice versa) and Maserati membership. In the coming months, the maserati.com/global/en site will continue to implement new features. With the arrival of the Folgore range, a series of support tools will also be provided for the future owners of 100% electric Maseratis.

Since the Reno series was first introduced in 2019, OPPO has continued to evolve its camera technologies to meet growing demand in smartphone imaging capabilities. From 10x hybrid optical zoom, FDF portrait video technology, IMX709 RGBW sensor, self-developed AI enhanced algorithms, to OPPO's first self-developed imaging NPU - MariSilicon X. a press release said. The dedicated imaging NPU delivers both the immense computing power and the low power consumption that is needed for advanced image processing performance on mobile devices.

Capture New Year festivities using OPPO imaging NPU

Say farewell to 2022 and ring in the New Year with OPPO's self-developed imaging NPU, MariSilicon X found in the Reno8 Series, allowing users to capture the most breathtaking memorable moments with loved ones with ease and simplicity. Since the Reno series was first introduced in 2019, OPPO has continued to evolve its camera technologies to meet growing demand in smartphone imaging capabilities. From 10x hybrid optical zoom, FDF portrait video technology, IMX709 RGBW sensor, self-developed AI enhanced algorithms, to OPPO's first self-developed imaging NPU - MariSilicon X. a press release said. The dedicated imaging NPU delivers both the immense computing power and the low power consumption that is needed for advanced image processing performance on mobile devices.

ISG students attend social service project at Mayo College in Ajmer

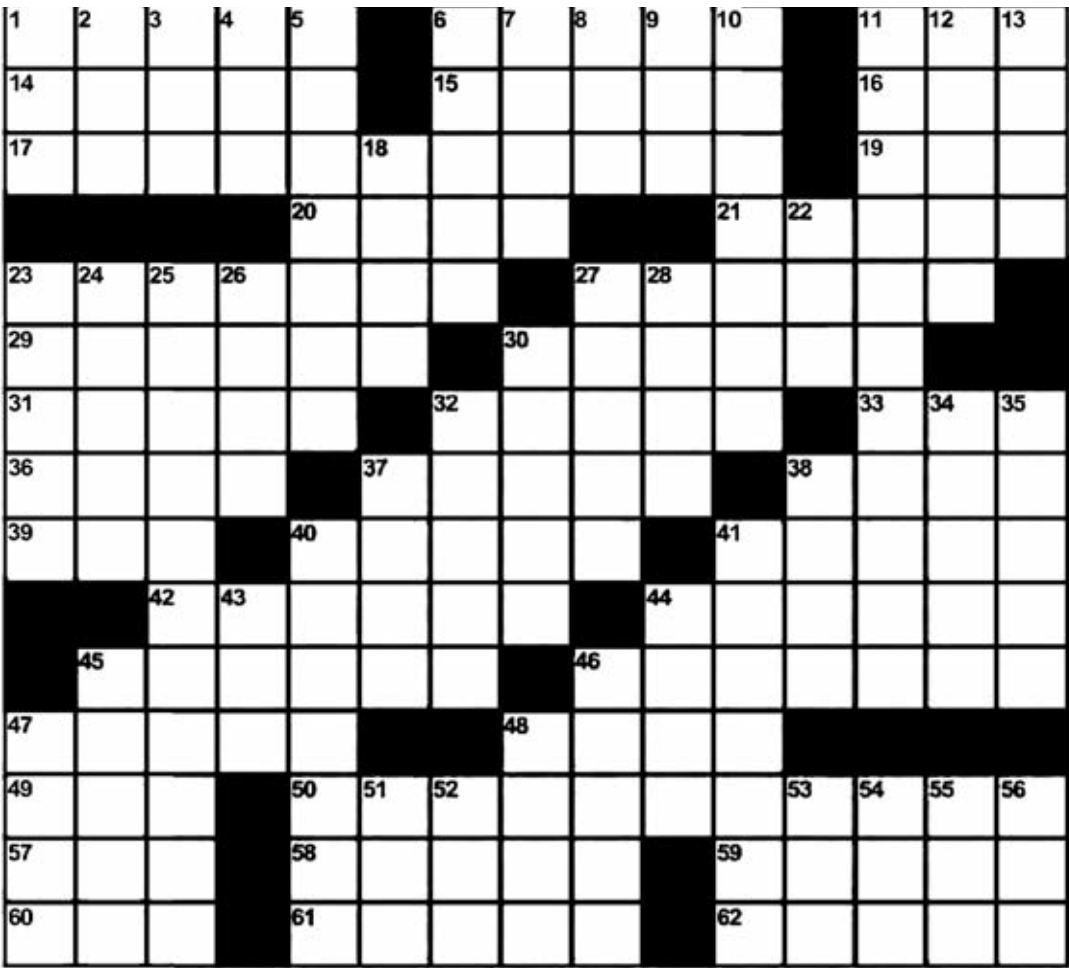
A delegation consisting seven students from Indian School Al Ghubra, accompanied by their teacher Noella Vaz, attended the Mayo International Social Service Project hosted by the prestigious Mayo College, Ajmer, in collaboration with Rajasthan Mahila Kalyan Mandal and Minu Manovikas Mandir Inclusive School at Ajmer between November 28 and December 5. The students included Simran Kawatra, Chitrangada Chaturvedi, Diya Nibukumar Nair, Ananthakrishnan Unnikrishnan, Bhavesh Shabu Nair,



Diya Krishna, Niranjana Sunil. The project aims to increase opportunities for inclusive students to develop and showcase their talents in the field of their choice. For example Minu Manovikas Mandir had students who were selected for the state level Shot put. The delegates from eight schools had the opportunity to take part in the development of the Activity Park and renovation of the Sensory Park at Minu Manovikas, Chachiyawas and the introduction of a Sensory

Park with wall paintings at the Early Intervention Centre at Panchsheel. The activities instilled values of selflessness, team spirit, and hard work. Mayo College also organised fun-filled activities such as equestrian, golf, campfire, pizza party, DJ party, a trip to the Xcape Adventure Park and an evening at the shopping district in Pushkar. Also, the talent night, wherein students from every school participated, made the trip a memorable one.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1) Construction girder
 - 6) All thumbs
 - 11) It offers resistance
 - 14) Artemis, to the Romans
 - 15) Ark contents
 - 16) JFK overseer
 - 17) Ghost story, e.g.
 - 19) J. Edgar Hoover's org.
 - 20) Luce's periodical
 - 21) Fanatical
 - 23) Some metalware items
 - 27) Tiny village
 - 29) "Mourning Becomes Electra" playwright
 - 30) Record promotion scandal
 - 31) Mean moods
 - 32) Actor's memorization
 - 33) Atlanta-based station
 - 36) Continental currency
 - 37) Hunts for
 - 38) Falling flakes
 - 39) Rescued from (with "of")
 - 40) Blackens on a barbecue
 - 41) Cry of accomplishment
 - 42) Sags
 - 44) Go from site to site?
 - 45) Timber problem
 - 46) Intense, as eyes
 - 47) Kennel club classification
 - 48) Freshman, probably
 - 49) Senatorial affirmative
 - 50) Scraps
 - 57) Type of cap
 - 58) Twofold
 - 59) Practice piece for one instrument
 - 60) Begley and Harris
 - 61) Separated
 - 62) Virgil put him through hell
- DOWN**
- 1) Bar requirements
 - 2) It may be boring
 - 3) Common ringbearer
 - 4) Collector's suffix
 - 5) Fireplace frames
 - 6) Agenda entries
 - 7) Fridge posting
 - 8) History class subject
 - 9) Amigo
 - 10) Lunch box item
 - 11) Cause of some chuckles
 - 12) Something to kick
 - 13) Domestic
 - 18) Young lady
 - 22) "Is that _?"
 - 23) Brain teaser
 - 24) Cause of many yawns
 - 25) Products of exotic foods before bedtime
 - 26) One of the Jackson brothers
 - 27) Actor Tom
 - 28) "The have it"
 - 30) Mooring sites
 - 32) Bounded
 - 34) Like Erik the Red
 - 35) Bird call
 - 37) "Beat it!"
 - 38) Boutique
 - 40) City in Spain or Argentina
 - 41) Showed a general tendency
 - 43) Bread type
 - 44) "... waiting long?"
 - 45) Great fear
 - 46) Delivered a hand
 - 47) Modern information unit
 - 48) Bygone autocrat
 - 51) Appetizer selection
 - 52) "CSI" proof
 - 53) In-flight info, for short

- 54) One with a mother spray
- 55) Dangerous '50s crop
- 56) Take in



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Conveying your emotions to the people who have affected them (whether in a negative or positive way) is a good thing to do, but you have to be careful not to overwhelm anyone. Being sensitive to other people is extremely important today. Your conscientiousness will go a long way toward keeping them from getting defensive about what you say. Gentle praise will go a lot further than wildly enthusiastic gushing too. Keep a lid on your enthusiasm and play it cool.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You have more free time than you think you do, so use it wisely. Devote more energy to research, and look at the issues you're struggling with a bit more deeply. Your attitude about your physical self needs to change, and if it takes some research to help you find an answer, then you can find that answer today. Invest some time in exploring a different philosophy or religion. You don't have to adopt it, but there is more to life than what you currently believe.

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. Sit with yourself and look at the big picture. Figure out what it is that you want, not what they want for you.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Despite the guilt trips you've been given in the past from militant authority figures, there is nothing wrong with taking a pass on projects and choosing to explore the more recreational side of life every once in a while. Things in your life are loosening up, and you have a lot more wiggle room than you've had for a while. So put off the boring stuff for a bit longer and put some time into fun and frivolity. No harm should come of it.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Don't hesitate to prioritize investigation over cooperation today. You're feeling much more intellectually curious than usual, and you should honor that urge. Take time to figure out what's really going on. Your period of willingness to just do what you're told without questioning why is over. Right now, you know that in order to do anything, you have to feel confident that it's the right thing to do. Your morals aren't to be changed now. They're the only thing you should rely on.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Moving from where you are to where you want to be in life is a lot easier than you think. Today, new energies are coming into your life and wiping the slate clean. Keep in mind that no matter how major or minor the alterations you want are, change always takes some effort. Be aware that you're going to use muscles that haven't been used before, so you could wake up feeling a bit sore. The pride you feel will offset any aches, though.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You might want to call up somebody you haven't seen in a while. And if the yearning to connect with someone from your distant past comes over you, you should do just that! Look them up and then say hello. Maybe they've got something (a memory, an insight) that you've been missing. Maybe you'll both just be glad to see that, yes, things change and people lose contact, but there's still some core self that remains the same and still appreciates the connection it once had with a kindred core self.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

If you're diving into a new subject, book, job, task, project, or relationship today, it doesn't matter how prepared you are. Just go deep and you'll navigate these waters, no problem! Preparation is usually a valuable way to empower yourself in an unfamiliar situation, but today your instincts are sharp and flexibility good. You'll be able to handle anything that comes your way, so don't worry about looking silly or getting lost.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

If you're feeling a bit stuck in a rut at work right now, a new career isn't the answer. What you really need is a new attitude! In order to infuse your daily grind with more positive energy, pretend you're a newbie again. Research your employer as an outsider would and you'll get a whole new outlook on what it does and how you can help do it. Pretend that you're starting all over again, and you'll start to feel like you're starting all over again in a good way!

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

It might seem like an obvious thing, but it doesn't hurt to remind yourself about it one more time: don't get involved with stuff that you aren't sure about! This latest deal might seem too good to pass up, or that person might seem like just the perfect match you've been looking for, but until you're a hundred percent sure that what you think is correct, hold off a little while longer. Acting too impulsively isn't very wise right now.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You've got a lot of things going on right now, but you don't have time to deal with them all. Solution? Delegate. Give away as many errands, tasks, and jobs as possible. You have plenty of family members, coworkers, and friends who would be happy to take something off your hands, so give them a call and find out who can help you. By the end of the day things should start getting back to normal. Don't forget to thank them for their help so they'll want to help you again!

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

If you feel unsure about what the next steps should be in a romantic or work relationship, look for signs that indicate the right path. They are there. You just need to see them. Doubting yourself is absolutely normal, and it has given you the healthy skepticism to recognize a solid thing when you see it. Just don't be too rough on people who are putting pressure on you. They care about you and want you to succeed. They just haven't figured out how to show you.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which of these characters drives around in the "Mystery Machine"?

- A. Garfield
- B. Batman
- C. Scooby-Doo
- D. Sherlock Holmes

02. What was the first US Federal statute to limit cartels and monopolies, passed in 1890, that still forms the basis for most antitrust litigation by the United States federal government?

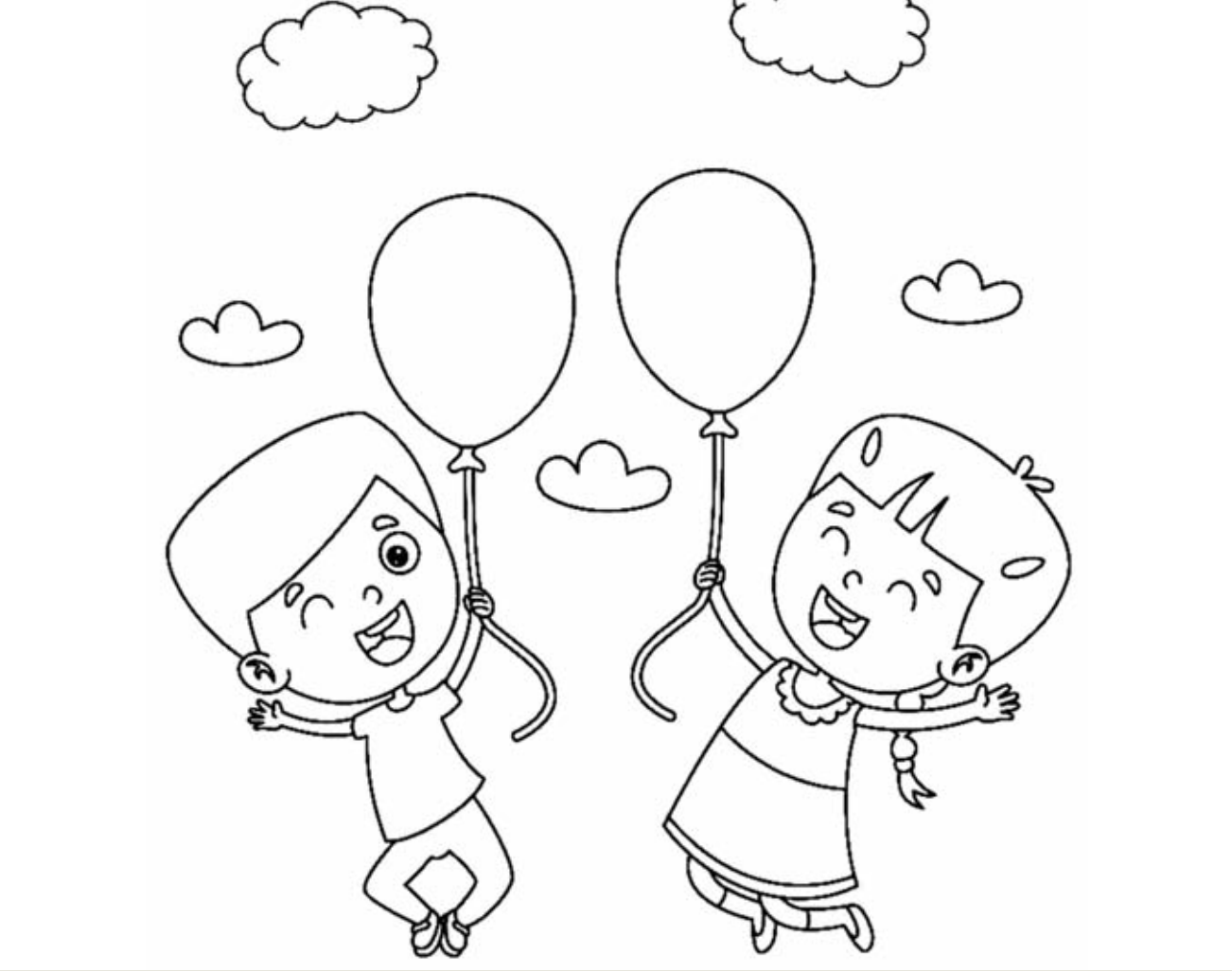
- A. The Monroe Doctrine
- B. The Act of Union
- C. The Sherman Act
- D. The Parker Brothers Act

03. Found in the human body, what are the "venae cavae"?

- A. Appendices
- B. Cavities in the stomach
- C. Holes in teeth caused by decay
- D. Veins that return deoxygenated blood from the body to the heart

Answers: 1. C 2. C 3. D

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

A	S	D	E
A	A	K	E
O	N	H	N
M	Y	S	E

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Days of freezing weather leaves 49 dead, more than 15,000 US flights cancelled

New York state authorities described ferocious conditions with bodies being discovered in vehicles

Buffalo, United States - Temperatures were expected to be moderate across the eastern and midwest United States on Tuesday, after days of freezing weather from "the blizzard of the century" left at least 49 dead and caused Christmas travel chaos.

Blizzard conditions persisted in parts of the northeastern US, the stubborn remnants of a sprawl of extreme weather that gripped the country over several days, causing widespread power outages, travel delays and deaths in nine states, according to official figures.

In New York state, authorities described ferocious conditions, particularly in Buffalo, with hours-long whiteouts, bodies being discovered in vehicles and under snow banks, and emergency personnel going "car to car" searching for survivors.

The perfect storm of fierce snow squalls, howling wind and sub-zero temperatures forced the cancellation of more than 15,000 US flights in recent days, including nearly 4,000 on Monday, according to tracking site Flightaware.com.

Buffalo - a city in Erie County that is no stranger to foul winter weather - is the epicenter of the crisis, buried under staggering amounts of snow.

"Certainly it is the blizzard of the century," New York Governor Kathy Hochul told reporters, adding it was "way too early to say this is at its completion."

Hochul said some western



First responders check on abandoned vehicles along a road on December 26 in Buffalo, New York. The historic winter storm Elliott dumped up to four feet of snow on the area leaving thousands without power and twenty five confirmed dead in the city of Buffalo. (AFP)

New York towns got walloped with "30 to 40 inches (0.75 to one meter) of snow overnight."

Later Monday, Hochul spoke with President Joe Biden, who offered "the full force of the federal government" to support New York state, and said he and First Lady Jill Biden were praying for those who lost loved ones in the storm, according to a White House statement.

Biden also approved an emergency declaration for the state, the White House said.

The National Weather Service

forecast up to 14 more inches of snow Monday, in addition to the several feet that had already left the city buried, with officials struggling to get emergency services back online.

"Temperatures are expected to moderate across the Midwest and the East over the next few days ahead of this system," the NWS said in its latest advisory early on Tuesday, but warned that "locally hazardous travel conditions" would persist.

Erie County executive Mark Poloncarz tweeted Monday af-

ternoon that the blizzard-related death toll had climbed to 27 across the county, including 14 people who were found outside and three who were discovered in a car.

Speaking at a press conference earlier in the day, Poloncarz said Erie's death toll would likely surpass that of Buffalo's infamous blizzard of 1977, when nearly 30 people died.

With more snow forecast and most of Buffalo "impassable," he joined Hochul in warning residents to bunker down and stay in

place.

'Gut-wrenching'

National Guard members and other teams have rescued hundreds of people from snow-covered cars and homes without electricity, but authorities have said more people remain trapped.

Erie County Sheriff John Garcia called the storm "the worst" he has ever seen, with periods of zero visibility and authorities unable to respond to emergency calls.

Winter storms and cold snaps since 1993

2021: A DEADLY COLD SNAP

A deadly cold snap hit Canada, the US and Mexico from February 13-19, paralyzing parts of the southern and central United States and claiming more than 70 lives, media reports said. It also left millions of Americans struggling without electricity. Across the southern border in Mexico six people died.

2016: 'SNOWZILLA'

A blizzard dubbed "Snowzilla" blanketed the US East Coast, especially New York, from January 22-24.

It was blamed for at least 33 deaths as it slammed much of the coast. More than 11,000 flights were canceled. Some 27 inches (67 centimeters) of snow fell in New York's Central Park, the second-highest accumulation since records began in 1869. In Washington, Dulles International Airport was buried under 22 inches of snow in 24 hours.

2007: COLD SNAP KILLS 42

A cold snap accompanied by ice and snow left 42 dead in mid-January, most of them dying in traffic accidents on slick roads in Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, Iowa, Michigan, New York and Maine.

1996: 'BLIZZARD 1996'

A big Eastern Seaboard snowstorm from January 7-9 left dozens dead, most of them in road accidents. It was dubbed "Blizzard 1996" by the press. It was followed days later by another storm, and then by flooding. The blizzard caused 154 deaths, directly or indirectly, according to the US National Weather Service (NWS).

1993: 'STORM OF THE CENTURY'

On March 13-14, what was dubbed the "Storm of the Century" dumped record snowfalls up and down the US East Coast, leaving 270 dead, according to the NWS.

"It was gut-wrenching when you're getting calls where families are with their kids and they're saying they're freezing," he told CNN.

Hochul, a native of Buffalo, said she was stunned by what she saw during a reconnaissance tour of the city.

AFP

Ethiopian Airlines to resume flights to Tigray

Nairobi, Kenya - Ethiopia's national carrier Ethiopian Airlines said it would resume commercial flights to the war-torn region of Tigray on Wednesday after a shutdown lasting 18 months.

The announcement comes a day after an Ethiopian delegation made the first high-level government visit to the rebel-held region since the signing of a peace deal last month.

The airline, the biggest carrier in Africa, said on Tuesday that it would operate daily flights from the national capital Addis Ababa to the Tigrayan capital of Mekele.

The schedule will increase in

frequency depending on demand, it said in a statement.

"We are truly pleased with the resumption," Ethiopian Airlines Group CEO Mesfin Tasew said.

"These flights will enable families to reunite, facilitate the restoration of commercial activities, stimulate tourist flow and bring many more opportunities which will serve the society."

Aid has started trickling back into Tigray since the peace deal was signed on November 2, going some way to alleviating chronic shortages of food, fuel, cash and drugs.

But the region of six million

is still largely without electricity and phone lines, while internet and banking services have only partly been restored.

Mekele was hooked up to the national electricity grid on December 6, and the country's biggest bank, the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, announced on December 19 that financial operations had resumed in some towns.

The war began in November 2020 when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent in troops after accusing the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the region's ruling party, of attacking army bases.

AFP

Musk says 100 Starlinks 'active' in Iran

San Francisco, United States - Nearly 100 Starlink internet terminals are currently operating in Iran, SpaceX chief Elon Musk said Monday.

The tycoon had promised to bring the satellite internet network to the country in September as Iranian authorities imposed increasingly severe access restrictions, in a move activists called a campaign to limit information about protests that had broken out nationwide.

"Approaching 100 Starlinks active in Iran," Musk tweeted Monday.

Starlink has more than 2,000 tiny satellites orbiting just a few hundred kilometers above Earth, providing internet access to



Elon Musk

users below.

The land-based terminals are then wired up to basic routers that create small wifi spots.

Earlier this year, controversial billionaire Musk gained hero status in Ukraine after sending thousands of Starlink terminals

to the country in the days after Russia's invasion.

Ukraine now has 20,000 of the small white receivers throughout the country.

Twitter head Musk's Monday message was posted in response to a user whose video they said was taken in the "streets of Iran," where there is now "more freedom for the women to choose whether they cover their hair or not."

The post appeared to reference protests that swept Iran and the world after the September death of 22-year-old Iranian-Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini following her arrest in Tehran for an alleged breach of the country's strict dress code for women.

Iran has unleashed a crackdown arresting around 14,000 people, according to the UN, and killing 469 protesters according to Norway-based Iran Human Rights (IHR).

The country's top security body in early December gave a toll of more than 200 people killed, including security officers.

The authorities had already restricted access to Instagram and WhatsApp - until this autumn the last remaining unfiltered social media services - and then clamped down on apps like the Google Play Store as well as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) that seek to circumvent local access restrictions.

AFP

The end is nigh? Climate, nuclear crises spark fears of worst

Washington, United States - For thousands of years, predictions of apocalypse have come and gone. But with dangers rising from nuclear war and climate change, does the planet need to at least begin contemplating the worst?

When the world rang in 2022, few would have expected the year to feature the US president speaking of the risk of doomsday, following Russia's threats to go nuclear in its invasion of Ukraine.

"We have not faced the prospect of Armageddon since Kennedy and the Cuban missile crisis" in 1962, Joe Biden said in October.

And on the year that humanity welcomed its eighth billion member, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that the planet was on a "highway to climate hell."

In extremes widely attributed to climate change, floods submerged one-third of Pakistan,

China sweat under an unprecedented 70-day heatwave, and crops failed in the Horn of Africa - all while the world lagged behind on the UN-blessed goal of checking warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels.

Biggest risk yet of nuclear war?

The Global Challenges Foundation, a Swedish group that assesses catastrophic risks, warned in an annual report that the threat of nuclear weapons use was the greatest since 1945 when the United States destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in history's only atomic attacks.

The report warned that an all-out exchange of nuclear weapons, besides causing an enormous loss of life, would trigger clouds of dust that would obscure the sun, reducing the capacity to grow food and ushering in "a period of chaos and vio-



UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres delivers remarks during the End of Year Press Conference in New York City on December 19 (AFP)

lence, during which most of the surviving world population would die from hunger."

Kennette Benedict, a lecturer at the University of Chicago who led the report's nuclear section, said risks were even greater than during the Cuban Missile Crisis as Russian President Vladimir Putin appeared less restrained by advisors.

While any Russian nuclear strike would likely involve small "tactical" weapons, experts fear a quick escalation if the United States responds.

"Then we're in a completely different ballgame," said Benedict, a senior advisor to the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, which in January will unveil its latest assessment of the

"doomsday clock" set since 2021 at 100 seconds to midnight.

Amid the focus on Ukraine,

I think there's been a kind of steady erosion of the ability to manage nuclear weapons

KENNETTE BENEDICT

US intelligence believes North Korea is ready for a seventh nuclear test, Biden has effectively declared dead a deal on Iran's contested nuclear work and tensions between India and Pakistan have remained at a low boil.

Benedict also faulted the Biden administration's nuclear posture review which reserved

the right for the United States to use nuclear weapons in "extreme circumstances."

"I think there's been a kind of steady erosion of the ability to manage nuclear weapons," she said.

Charting worst-case climate risks

UN experts estimated ahead of November talks in Egypt that the world was on track to warming of 2.1 to 2.9 C - but some outside analysts put the figure well higher, with greenhouse gas emissions in 2021 again hitting a record despite pushes to renewable energy.

Luke Kemp, a Cambridge University expert on existential risks, said the possibility of higher warming was drawing insufficient attention, which he blamed on the consensus culture of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and scientists' fears of being branded alarmist.

"There has been a strong incentive to err on the side of least drama," he said.

"What we really need are more complex assessments of how risks would cascade around the world."

Climate change could cause ripple effects on food, with multiple breadbasket regions failing, fueling hunger and eventually political unrest and conflict.

Kemp warned against extrapolating from a single year or event. But a research paper he co-authored noted that even a two-degree temperature rise would put the Earth in territory uncharted since the Ice Age.

Using a medium-high scenario on emissions and population growth, it found that two billion people by 2070 could live in areas with a mean temperature of 29 C (84.2 F), straining water resources - including between India and Pakistan.

AFP

Mystery endures in 2013 Paris murder of Kurd activists

Paris, France - The unsolved 2013 murder of three Kurdish women activists in Paris has been an open wound for their community, with lingering frustration over France's failure to bring those responsible to justice.

That wound was compounded after Friday's attack in which a white French gunman allegedly killed three Kurds, just minutes' walk from the scene of the slayings nine years ago.

The new attack has brought the 2013 murders back under the spotlight with the Kurdish community asking why French authorities have still been unable to fully elucidate the case and say if there were accomplices or backers. On January 9, 2013, Sakine Cansiz - one of the founders of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) - was murdered along with Fidan Dogan, 28, and 24-year-old Leyla Soylemez. The PKK is blacklisted by Ankara and its Western allies as a terrorist group.

They were shot in the offices of the Kurdistan Information Centre in Paris, just a 10-minute walk away from the Kurdish cultural centre targeted on Friday.

Turkish national Omer Guney was charged with murdering the three but died in hospital of brain cancer in December 2016, just before his case came to trial.

The activists' families point to documents they say prove the involvement of Turkey's spy agency (MIT). In 2014, MIT officially denied any role.

After Friday's shooting, some



French riot police in a street during clashes following a demonstration of members of the Kurdish community, a day after a gunman opened fire at a Kurdish cultural centre killing three people, in Paris on Dec 24 (AFP)

Guney was suspected of being an ultra-nationalist Turk and there was little doubt over his links with Turkish secret services

XAVIER NOGUERAS

in the Kurdish community accused France of failing in their duty to protect them, and some clashed with police at protests.

Demonstrators have drawn parallels between the 2013 murders and the latest attack, with some holding images of the three activists.

Some have also accused Turkey of involvement in last week's shooting, but French investigators have not provided any announcements to that effect.

The 69-year-old suspect, who authorities say has admitted racist beliefs, was charged Monday with murder motivated by race, ethnicity, nationality or religion.

Murky profile

Guney denied involvement in the 2013 killings, and it was surveillance footage that led to his arrest after he was seen entering the crime scene and one of the victim's DNA was allegedly found on his coat.

But the murky profile of

Guney, a maintenance worker at Charles de Gaulle Airport, added further complication to the case.

Initially police sources said he presented himself as a PKK member, which the group denied, and then he was suspected of being close to ultra-nationalist Turkish groups and accused of infiltrating France's Kurdish community from late 2011 onwards.

The PKK has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984, at first seeking a Kurdish homeland and then in pursuit of greater political autonomy for Kurds.

The group and its supporters defend the PKK as a national liberation movement.

The 2013 murders came as the Turkish state and jailed PKK

leader Abdullah Ocalan entered into tentative peace talks to resolve the conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

After the 2015 collapse of a ceasefire, fighting flared again.

Despite MIT's denial, Turkish media published the recording of a conversation between a man believed to be Guney and two Turkish spies as well as a document resembling a "mission order".

"His links with Turkish (intelligence) services were proven by several elements in the case," Antoine Comte, a lawyer for the family of one of the activists killed, told AFP this week.

Grey areas

The investigation, which closed in May 2015, had pointed to the "involvement" of Turkish agents but without referring to any backers.

So the question remained as to whether the agents were involved "officially" and "with their bosses' approval" or if Guney was a rogue actor, a source close to the case said.

Guney "was suspected of being an ultra-nationalist Turk and there was little doubt over his links with Turkish secret services", his former lawyer Xavier Nogueras said.

"But the question the judges were asking was whether the order came from MIT or if he had gone to MIT to find out if he could be useful to them", Nogueras told AFP.

AFP

Syria's Kurdish-led forces 'on alert' for IS attacks: Official

Qamishli, Syria - Syrian Kurdish-led forces boosted security a day after foiling a deadly Islamic State group assault on a prison fearing that the extremists will strike again, a spokesman said.

Authorities on Monday declared a state of emergency in Raqa, the jihadists' former de facto capital in northern Syria, after gunmen launched an attack on a security complex near a prison holding fellow militants.

Six members of the Kurdish-led security forces and one jihadist were killed.

Farhad Shami, spokesman for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), said they had "declared a state of alert" and security forces sweeping the area. "We have information about potential IS attacks during end-of-year holidays", he said, listing the northern Syrian cities of Raqa, Hasakah and Qamishli.

Shami said that a new IS leader - who took over after his predecessor was killed in October - wanted to assert the group's presence.



Farhad Shami

Following the attack, SDF commander Mazloum Abdi had warned that "terrorist cells" were "preparing dangerous plots".

The failed assault on Monday targeted a Kurdish security complex, which includes a military intelligence prison housing hundreds of jihadists, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor said.

IS claimed responsibility for the attack, saying two of its fighters had carried it out to avenge "Muslim prisoners" living in the Kurdish-administered Al-Hol camp.

AFP



Dec 25 photo shows student Marwa protesting alone against the ban on women's higher education, outside the Kabul University (AFP)

'Proud and strong': Solo protest against Taliban university ban

Kabul, Afghanistan - An 18-year-old Afghan student endured Taliban taunts and insults at the weekend as she staged a solo protest against the ban on women attending university.

"For the first time in my life, I felt so proud, strong and powerful because I was standing against them and demanding a right that God has given us," Marwa told AFP, asking not to be further identified.

Women-led protests have become increasingly rare in Afghanistan since the Taliban's return - particularly after the detention of core activists at the start of the year.

Participants risk arrest, violence and social stigma.

But Marwa was adamant.

Her sister shot a video of the silent protest with a phone from a car as Marwa held up a poster just metres from the entrance to the Kabul University campus, the country's biggest and most prestigious institution.

In their latest assault on women's rights, the Taliban last week banned university education for women, prompting international outrage.

Some women have tried to protest the ban, but they have been swiftly dispersed.

On Sunday, in front of Taliban guards deployed at the Kabul University gates, Marwa courageously carried a placard that read "Iqra", the Arabic word for "read".

AFP

UN urges Taliban to end 'terrible' restrictions on women

Geneva, Switzerland - The Taliban must immediately revoke their policies targeting women and girls in Afghanistan, the UN rights chief insisted Tuesday, condemning their "terrible" consequences.

"No country can develop - indeed survive - socially and economically with half its population excluded," Volker Turk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in a statement.

"These unfathomable restrictions placed on women and girls will not only increase the suffering of all Afghans but, I fear, pose a risk beyond Afghanistan's borders."

He said the policies risked destabilising Afghan society.

"I urge the de facto authorities to ensure the respect and pro-



UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk on Dec 19 (AFP)

tection of the rights of all women and girls - to be seen, to be heard and to participate in and contribute to all aspects of the social, political and economic life of the country," said Turk.

On Saturday, Afghanistan's

hardline Islamist rulers banned women from working in non-governmental organisations. The Taliban have already suspended university education for women and secondary schooling for girls.

"This latest decree by the de

facto authorities will have terrible consequences for women and for all Afghan people," Turk said.

"Banning women from working in NGOs will deprive them and their families of their incomes, and of their right to contribute positively to the development of their country and to the well-being of their fellow citizens."

The move is the latest blow against women's rights in Afghanistan since the Taliban reclaimed power last year.

"The ban will significantly impair, if not destroy" these NGOs' capacity to deliver essential services, Turk said, calling it all the more distressing with Afghanistan in the grip of winter, when humanitarian needs are at their highest.

Several foreign aid groups an-

nounced on Sunday they were suspending their operations in Afghanistan.

Women have also been pushed out of many government jobs, prevented from travelling without a male relative and ordered to cover up outside of the home, ideally with a burqa, and not allowed into parks.

The international community has made respecting women's rights a sticking point in negotiations with the Taliban government for its recognition and the restoration of aid.

"Women and girls cannot be denied their inherent rights," said Turk.

"Attempts by the de facto authorities to relegate them to silence and invisibility will not succeed."

AFP

Iran's Raisi vows 'no mercy' for hostile protest movement

Tehran, Iran - President Ebrahim Raisi said Tuesday Iran would show "no mercy" towards "hostile" opponents of the Islamic republic, gripped by more than 100 days of protests sparked by Mahsa Amini's death.

The "riots", as Tehran generally refers to them, were triggered by the September 16 death in custody of Iranian-Kurdish Amini, 22, after her arrest for an alleged breach of the strict dress code for women. Addressing a crowd in Tehran, Raisi accused "hypocrites, monarchists and all anti-revolutionary currents".

"The embrace of the nation is open to all those who were lured," said the ultraconservative president at a funeral procession for unidentified soldiers who perished during its eight-year war in the 1980s with neighbouring Iraq.

"The embrace of the nation is



Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi speaks in Tehran on December 27 (AFP)

open to everyone, but we will show no mercy to those who are hostile."

Iranian officials say hundreds of people have been killed, in-

cluding members of the security forces, and thousands have been arrested nationwide.

Foreign-based rights groups have put the death toll among

protesters at more than 450.

Earlier in December, Iran executed two people in connection to the protests. The judiciary has said nine others have been sentenced to death, two of whom have been allowed retrials.

Campaigners say about a dozen other defendants have been charged with offences that could see them receive the death penalty.

Iranian officials have accused hostile foreign powers, including the United States and some European countries, of stoking the unrest. They aim "to derail the Islamic society from its high goals" by "spreading rumours and fracturing society", said Raisi.

But foreign countries are "wrong" to think that would achieve their goals, Raisi argued, calling their moves miscalculated.

AFP

Israel arrests suspect over twin bombings that killed two

Jerusalem, Undefined - Israeli authorities said Tuesday they had arrested a suspect in Jerusalem twin bombings that killed two people last month, charging that he identified with the Islamic State group.

Aslam Farouh, 26, an Arab with an Israeli residency card, lived between Kufr Akab, a neighbourhood of Jerusalem, and Ramallah, said the Shin Bet domestic security agency and Israel Police in a joint statement.

"The Shin Bet, the police and the army have arrested Aslam Farouh, suspected of carrying out the bombing in Jerusalem

last month," it said about that attacks at two bus stops.

"The suspect acted on his salafi-jihadi ideology, identifying with the Daesh organisation and acting alone after a long period of preparation in order to target Israeli citizens in Jerusalem," the statement added, using another term for IS. A Carlo makeshift submachine gun and an explosive device were found in the possession of Farouh, the statement said, adding that he would be indicted "in the coming days".

An Israeli-Canadian teenager and an Israeli aged in

his fifties were killed and 13 others wounded in the first bombings to hit the contested city since 2016.

At least 150 Palestinians and 26 Israelis have been killed this year across Israel, the occupied West Bank and Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem.

A further 49 Palestinians died during three days of fighting between Gaza Strip militants and Israel in August.

According to United Nations data, 2022 has been the deadliest year since the 2002-2005 Palestinian uprising, known as the Second Intifada.

AFP

Moscow accuses Ukraine of air base attack

Moscow said it had foiled a new Ukrainian drone attack on a strategic bomber military base

Moscow, Russia - Moscow said Monday it had foiled a new Ukrainian drone attack on a strategic bomber military base hundreds of kilometres from their joint border, as Kyiv called for Russia's ouster from the United Nations.

Russia said it had downed the drone at Engels, a base for the country's strategic aircraft that Kyiv says have been used to strike Ukraine. Three servicemen were killed by falling debris, regional authorities said.

The same day, Russia's domestic security agency said it killed four Ukrainian "saboteurs", who allegedly attempted to enter Russia via a border region.

Moscow has accused pro-Kyiv forces of targeting Russian military sites and civilian infrastructure, including blowing up a bridge linking annexed Crimea to Russia. Russia's defence ministry said on Monday it downed a Ukrainian drone at its Engels airfield in the southern Saratov re-



Workers dismantle a heavily damaged residential building in Irpin, northwest of Kyiv, on December 23, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine (AFP)

gion located more than 600 kilometres (370 miles) from the border with Ukraine.

It was the second attack on the Engels airfield in less than a month and the deepest strike into Russian territory since President Vladimir Putin sent troops to Ukraine on February 24.

In early December, the Russian defence ministry said Ukrainian drone attacks caused explosions at two airfields including Engels, leaving three dead. The airfields were targeted with Soviet-made drones, the ministry said at the time.

Separately, Russia's FSB secu-

rity service claimed Monday it had killed a group of armed saboteurs from Ukraine that attempted to cross into the Bryansk region carrying "improvised explosive devices".

A video released by the FSB showed several bloodied bodies sprawled on the ground, wearing

winter camouflage and carrying guns.

There was no immediate comment from Kyiv.

The attacks came 10 months into Moscow's offensive in Ukraine where Russian strikes have been battering the country's energy grid, leaving millions

in the cold and dark in the middle of winter.

'Unite the Russian people'

Ukraine on Monday urged the exclusion of Russia - a permanent member of the UN Security Council - from the world body.

"Ukraine calls on the member states of the UN... to deprive the Russian Federation of its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and to exclude it from the UN as a whole," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

"We have a very simple question: Does Russia have the right to remain a permanent member of the UN Security Council and to be in the United Nations at all?" Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Sunday. We have a convincing and reasoned answer - no, it does not."

The five permanent members of the 15-seat Security Council have veto power that can block any resolution.

In Kyiv, President Volodymyr Zelensky said rolling blackouts were continuing across the country with 9 million people left without power on Monday evening, as engineers were working over the winter holidays to patch up the country's battered energy grid.

Despite mounting human and material losses and growing international isolation, Russian President Vladimir Putin has shown no readiness to change tactics.

On Sunday, Putin said his assault on Ukraine aimed to "unite the Russian people", accusing his country's "geopolitical opponents (of) aiming to tear apart Russia, the historical Russia".

AFP

Serbia troops on 'highest level' of alert over latest Kosovo tensions

Belgrade, Serbia - Serbian armed forces were on "the highest level" of alert, Defence Minister Milos Vucevic said Monday, highlighting the Balkan country's increasingly strained relations with neighbouring Kosovo over recent shootings and blockades.

Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, but Belgrade has refused to recognise it and encouraged Kosovo's 120,000 ethnic Serbs to defy Pristina's authority - especially in the north where ethnic Serbs make up the majority.

The Serbian army has been put on a heightened state of alert over tensions with Kosovo multiple times in recent years - the last time in November after claiming that several drones entered Serbian airspace from Kosovo.

On December 10, Serbs in northern Kosovo set up barricades to protest against the arrest of an ex-policeman suspected of being involved in attacks against ethnic Albanian police officers.



Italian soldiers serving in a NATO-led international peacekeeping mission in Kosovo patrol near a road barricaded with trucks by Serbs in the village of Rudare near the town of Zvecan on Dec 26, 2022 (AFP)

The blockades have coincided with a rise in reported shootings, the latest on Sunday, according to NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR.

"Serbia's president... ordered

the Serbian army to be on the highest level of combat readiness, that is to the level of the use of armed force," Defence Minister Milos Vucevic said in a statement.

He added that President Aleksandar Vucic also ordered the special armed forces to be beefed up from the existing 1,500 to 5,000.

Serbia's interior ministry also

announced that "all units (will) immediately come under the command of the chief of general staff".

These orders from Vucic come after army chief General Milan Mojsilovic was dispatched to the border with Kosovo on Sunday.

"The situation there is complicated and complex," Mojsilovic said Sunday.

Defying authorities

Northern Kosovo has been especially on edge since November when hundreds of ethnic Serb workers in the Kosovo police as well as the judicial branch, such as judges and prosecutors, walked off the job.

They were protesting a controversial decision to ban Serbs living in Kosovo from using Belgrade-issued licence plates - a policy that was eventually scrapped by Pristina.

But the mass walkouts created a security vacuum in Kosovo.

AFP

Seoul military fails to shoot down N Korean drones, apologises

Seoul, South Korea - South Korea's military apologised on Tuesday for failing to shoot down five North Korean drones that crossed their shared border after facing wide criticism over its lack of readiness.

Monday's incursion prompted Seoul to fire warning shots and deploy fighter jets and attack helicopters to shoot down the drones, one of which flew close to the capital.

"Yesterday, five enemy drones invaded South Korean airspace, and our military detected and tracked them, but we apologise for not being able to shoot them down," the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said in a statement.

All of the drones appeared to have returned to the North despite an operation to hunt them down that lasted five hours.

The JCS acknowledged that, while the military can

counter "attack drones that pose a real threat", there is a limit to their ability to detect and strike smaller spy drones.

"As a result, the military's lack of readiness has caused a lot of concern to the public," it said. South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol said at a Cabinet meeting on Tuesday the incident showed that the military's readiness was "greatly lacking".

Yoon ordered an acceleration of a plan to launch a drone unit to carry out surveillance and reconnaissance operations on North Korea's key military facilities. The plan includes introducing advanced stealth drones.

The incursion was the first time in years that North Korean drones had entered the South's airspace and closely followed a recent flurry of sanctions-busting weapons tests by Pyongyang.

AFP

Taiwan extends military service for citizens over China threat

Taipei, Taiwan - Taiwan on Tuesday announced an extension in mandatory military service from four months to one year, citing the threat from an increasingly hostile China.

Beijing considers self-ruled, democratic Taiwan a part of its territory, to be taken one day, by force if necessary, and the island lives under the constant fear of a Chinese invasion.

China's sabre-rattling has intensified in recent years under President Xi Jinping, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further deepened worries in Taiwan that Beijing might move similarly to annex the island.

China's "intimidation and threats against Taiwan are getting more obvious", President



Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen

Tsai Ing-wen told a press conference after a high-level government meeting on national security. "No one wants war... but my fellow countrymen, peace will not fall from the sky." "The current four-month military service is not enough to meet the fast and ever-changing situation," she said.

AFP

Israel parliament passes laws ahead of Netanyahu return

Jerusalem - Israel's parliament on Tuesday passed controversial legislation paving the way for the return of veteran hawk Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister.

Following his November 1 election win, Netanyahu secured a mandate to form a government backed by ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties and an extreme-right bloc.

Netanyahu will present what analysts have said will be the most right-wing government in Israel's history to parliament on Thursday.

On Tuesday, lawmakers passed legislation that now allows anyone convicted of offences but not given a custodial sentence to serve as a minister.

Before the law was passed, there had been uncertainty over



Israel's prime minister-designate Benjamin Netanyahu speaks during the funeral of Jewish rabbi Haim Drukman, on Dec 26 (AFP)

whether Aryeh Deri, a key ally from the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, would be able to serve as he had previously pled guilty to tax offences.

A second law passed allows

for two ministers to serve in the same office. The measure is aimed at the defence ministry, where Bezalel Smotrich, leader of the extreme-right formation Religious Zionism, is to be the min-

Lawmakers passed legislation to allow anyone convicted of offences but not given a custodial sentence to serve as a minister. The powers of the national security minister have also been expanded

ister with control over civil affairs in the occupied West Bank.

The Knesset also voted to expand the powers of the national security minister, a portfolio set to be handed to Itamar Ben Gvir,

another extreme-right figure.

The morning session also saw Netanyahu ally Yariv Levin resign as interim speaker of the Knesset, ahead of his expected appointment to a ministry.

Rules require that he had not been in the speaker's post for 48 hours before any ministerial appointment. Netanyahu, who is fighting corruption allegations in court, has already served as premier longer than anyone in Israel, including a 1996 to 1999 stint and a record 12-year tenure from 2009 to 2021.

His incoming government has sparked fears of a military escalation in the West Bank amid the worst violence in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory for nearly 20 years.

AFP

GRAND OPENING

New Zealand openers foil Pakistan in first Test after Agha Salman's maiden ton

Karachi, Pakistan - New Zealand openers Devon Conway and Tom Latham blunted Pakistan bowlers to guide their side to a solid 165 without loss at close on the second day of the first Test in Karachi on Tuesday.

Conway became the fastest New Zealand batter to complete 1,000 runs in his 11th Test when he reached 82 at close and was ably supported by Latham who was unbeaten on 78.

The tourists are now 273 runs behind Pakistan's first innings total of 438 which was spiced up by a brilliant maiden hundred from middle-order batter Agha Salman.

Conway, the South African born left-hander who migrated to New Zealand to boost his career, was lucky to survive a caught behind dismissal on 57 off spinner Nauman Ali.

Pakistan did not challenge home umpire Aleem Dar's not out decision but television replays showed the batter had



New Zealand's Devon Conway (R) and Tom Latham celebrate their 150 runs partnership on the second day of the first Test against Pakistan in Karachi on Tuesday (AFP)

edged the ball. Before Conway, John Reid had reached 1,000 career runs in 12 Tests in 1985. Conway has so far struck 12 boundaries while Latham has eight hits to the rope. The highlight of Pakistan's batting was 103 by Salman, who anchored the innings after skipper Babar Azam fell in the first over of the day without adding to his overnight score of 161. Fast bowler Tim Southee forced an edge off Azam's bat to

wicketkeeper Tom Blundell to give a kickstart to New Zealand. Azam struck 16 boundaries and a six in his 365-minute knock.

Pakistan also lost Nauman (seven) and Mohammad Wasim (two) in the first session, which produced just 60 runs.

Salman added 54 runs for the seventh wicket before New Zealand took two wickets in the space of three runs.

Pacer Neil Wagner had Nauman caught off a short-pitched delivery before Wasim was caught behind off spinner Ish Sodhi.

Salman then cut loose, hitting two successive boundaries off Sodhi to complete three figures. His previous best of 62 was against Sri Lanka at Galle in July.

Southee, who finished with 3-69, finally ended the innings by trapping Salman leg before, completing 350 wickets in his 89th Test.

He is the third New Zealand bowler behind Richard Hadlee (431 in 86 Tests) and Daniel Vettori (362 in 113) to take 350 or more wickets in Tests.

Salman hit 17 boundaries during his 155-ball knock. Ajaz Patel, Michael Bracewell and Sodhi took two wickets apiece.

The two-match Test series is New Zealand's first in Pakistan since 2002.

AFP

Warner retires in pain after making 200 as South Africa struggle

Melbourne, Australia - David Warner battled through searing heat to hit an epic unbeaten 200 in his 100th Test on Tuesday before retiring in pain as Australia consolidated their advantage against South Africa at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

On a scorching day, the hosts were 386-3 at stumps on day two of the second Test, leading by 197 after the Proteas were dismissed in their first innings for 189.

Travis Head was not out 48 with Alex Carey on nine.

Steve Smith (85) and Marnus Labuschagne (14) were the only wickets to fall. But worryingly for Australia, Cameron Green, who took 5-27 in South Africa's first innings, also retired hurt after a nasty rap on the finger from Anrich Nortje.

Smith and Warner's 239-run partnership took the game further away from South Africa, whose bowlers toiled in temperatures touching 37 degrees Celsius. Opener Warner, 36, snapped a near-three-year century drought in typically aggressive and gritty fashion, reaching three figures for a 25th time after coming into the game under pressure on a lean run.

It was his first Test hundred since January 2020 and as the opposition bowlers tired, he battled the elements and converted it to 200 for only the third time.

His wife Candice told host broadcaster Fox: "You'd think by now people would know writing David Warner off is the wrong thing to do."

But it was an exhausting effort, as he passed 8,000 Test runs en route. Chairs had to be brought out for Warner and Smith to rest on in the drinks breaks, with towels draped over their heads and ice-packs on their shoulders.

Warner needed treatment for cramp several times and retired



Australia's David Warner celebrates his double century on the second day of the second Test against South Africa in Melbourne on Tuesday (AFP)

So, difficult (conditions) but nice to get us to the position where we are now. I think we're in a nice spot

STEVE SMITH

in pain after reaching 200 and dropping to his knees, eventually helped from the field by support staff.

"The boys were cramping left, right and centre," Smith told reporters. "So, difficult (conditions) but nice to get us to the position

where we are now. I think we're in a nice spot."

Australia resumed on 45-1, having lost Usman Khawaja late Monday after taking charge of the opening day, with Green's heroics helping dismiss the visitors for under 200 again.

They were all out for 152 and 99 in the first Test in Brisbane, which they lost by six wickets inside two days.

Nortje was routinely sending down 150 kph (93 mph) rockets, smacking Warner on the head when he was on 47.

But Warner put his head down to motor to 100, punching the air when he got there after a near-flawless knock.

AFP

England to tour Bangladesh in February-March

Dhaka, Bangladesh - The England cricket team will visit Bangladesh in February-March to play three one-day internationals and three Twenty20 internationals, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) announced on Tuesday.

Originally scheduled for last year's September-October session, the tour was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

It will be England's first visit to Bangladesh since 2016.

The tour will kick off with the ODI series, with the first two matches to be played at Dhaka's Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium on March 1 and 3.

Chittagong's Zahir Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium will host the third and final ODI on March 6 and then the first T20 international match on March 9.

Then on March 12 and 14, the teams will return to the capital for the remaining T20 matches.

England, the defending world champions in both formats, will arrive on February 20 and play two warm-up fixtures ahead of the ODI series.

"In a World Cup year, this series provides a wonderful opportunity for the teams to assess their respective strengths," BCB chief executive Nizam Uddin Chowdhury said in a statement.

England are the only side to win an ODI series in Bangladesh since 2015.

"There is a great passion for cricket across Bangladesh, and we expect a tough challenge against a side who have an excellent record in home conditions," said Clare Connor, the interim chief of England and Wales Cricket Board.

AFP

Didn't feel pressure of replacing Kuldeep, says India's Unadkat

New Delhi, India - Jaydev Unadkat did get his much-awaited chance with the red ball and he kept his "promise" with a spirited effort in his first Test for India after 12 years.

His love for the longer version of the game became apparent more than ever in January when he typed a tweet that went viral.

"Dear red ball, please give me one more chance. I'll make you proud, promise!" the left-arm pacer had posted.

"Everyone thought that I was referring to a national comeback. I was just missing red ball cricket in general as Ranji Trophy was postponed for a second time (due to COVID)," Unadkat told PTI after his arrival from Bangladesh.

The 31-year-old, who had played his first and only Test way back in 2010 with the great Sachin Tendulkar and current head coach Rahul Dravid being his celebrated teammates, featured in his second outing last week in remarkable circumstances.

Having not been on selectors' radar despite a record-breaking performance in the 2020 Ranji Trophy, a national recall came for Unadkat when he expected it



India's Jaydev Unadkat celebrates with team-mates after the dismissal of Bangladesh's Zakir Hasan (AFP)

the least.

He was not even part of the India A side that toured Bangladesh before the Test series, so one could not fault him for keeping his hopes to the bare minimum.

Eventually, he was flown to Bangladesh as a backup, with Mohammad Shami not regaining full fitness for the series.

The visa delays meant he could only reach Chattogram after the start of the first Test but against all expectations, stand-in skipper KL Rahul gave Unadkat the big break he was waiting for while toiling on the

domestic circuit for years.

The opportunity came at the expense of spinner Kuldeep Yadav, whose exclusion after an eight-wicket haul in the series opener triggered a selection controversy.

The scoreboard would show that Unadkat took three wickets in his comeback Test, but his impact was bigger in the game.

With years of first-class experience under his belt since his Test debut in South Africa, Unadkat relished the pressure. Getting the most out of flat tracks in Rajkot is something Unadkat had done for years, and the Por-

bandar-born cricketer found himself in similar territory in Mirpur.

It did not take long for him to make his presence felt as he removed the previous game's centurion Zakir Hasan with a ball that jumped from a good length. That was his maiden wicket in Tests, and Unadkat says that moment will remain the most special of his career.

"I was trying to extract bounce off length and I felt I could do that. The feeling (when it happened) will remain one of the most special memories of my cricketing career."

BLAZING GUNS

Arsenal win, open up seven-point Premier League lead

London, United Kingdom - Arsenal opened up a seven-point lead with a 3-1 win over West Ham as the Premier League returned on Monday, while Newcastle climbed up to second thanks to an impressive 3-0 victory at Leicester.

Liverpool also made a winning return from the World Cup break by beating Aston Villa 3-1 and Harry Kane bounced back from his heartbreak in Qatar by scoring in Tottenham's 2-2 draw at Brentford.

Arsenal's momentum towards a first league title since 2004 could have been disturbed by the six-week mid-season break.

But Mikel Arteta's men passed another test of their resolve after going in 1-0 behind at half-time to Said Benrahma's penalty.

Two goals in five minutes from Bukayo Saka and Gabriel Martinelli turned the game on its head at a jubilant Emirates before Eddie Nketiah stepped up in the absence of the injured Gabriel Jesus to seal the points.

"I'm delighted with the result and performance," said Arteta.

"We scored at the perfect time and the crowd was incredible, also in the moment we conceded the goal. They kept on believing. When we scored it got loud and we generated the momentum we needed."

Newcastle soar

Newcastle's charge towards a return to the Champions League was also not halted by the break as the Magpies scored twice in the first seven minutes at Leicester.

Chris Wood opened the scoring from the penalty spot before Miguel Almiron played a one-two with Bruno Guimaraes and slotted past Danny Ward for his eighth goal in his last eight league



Arsenal's Eddie Nketiah scores past West Ham United goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski in London on Monday (AFP)

games.

Joelinton headed home from a corner in the 32nd minute as Newcastle made it six successive league victories -- their best run in the competition since 2012.

"We can do anything," said Newcastle manager Eddie Howe on the possibility of a title challenge.

"The season is still young enough for all possibilities to exist for us. I want the fans to believe we can do anything."

In the first Premier League fixture since mid-November, Tottenham were in danger of a damaging defeat after Vitaly Janelt and Ivan Toney put Brentford in command.

But Kane netted with a 65th minute header to start the Tottenham re-

covery in his first game since missing a crucial penalty in England's World Cup quarter-final defeat against France.

Brentford have not beaten Tottenham since 1948 and their long wait for a victory over the north Londoners goes on after Pierre-

Emile Hojbjerg curled home with 19 minutes left.

Tottenham boss Antonio Conte praised England captain Kane for his contribution following his World Cup disappointment.

"When he came back he was good. We know the importance of Harry for us, his personality, his character. He's the best player we have. I'm happy that

he scored today," Conte said..

Tottenham stay fourth in the table, four points ahead of fifth-placed Manchester United in the race to qualify for the Champions League.

Liverpool too good for Villa

Liverpool closed to within five points of Spurs and with a game in hand by inflicting Unai Emery's first league defeat as Villa boss. Mohamed Salah swept home his 15th goal of the season in a frantic opening with chances aplenty at both ends.

The Egyptian then teed up Virgil van Dijk to give Liverpool breathing space before half-time.

Ollie Watkins gave Villa hope with a towering header midway through the second half but Stefan Bajcetic's first senior goal secured a third consecutive league win for Jurgen Klopp's men.

Everton suffered a damaging 2-1 defeat against relegation rivals Wolves as Rayan Ait-Nouri struck in final seconds for the visitors at Goodison Park.

AFP

Liverpool agree deal for Gakpo

Eindhoven, Netherlands - Liverpool appear to have won the race to sign Dutch international forward Cody Gakpo after PSV Eindhoven announced an agreement with the English giants on Monday.

Gakpo, who scored three goals at the World Cup for the Netherlands, had previously been linked with a move to Liverpool's rivals Manchester United.

"PSV and Liverpool FC have reached an agreement on the proposed transfer of Cody Gakpo," PSV said in a statement.

"The 23-year-old attacker will



Cody Gakpo

leave for England imminently where he will be subjected to the necessary formalities ahead of the completion of the transfer."

PSV general manager Marcel Brands said the transfer fee would be a club record for the Dutch club.

According to reports, the fee could rise to as much as 50 million euros (\$53 million, £44 million).

Gakpo's arrival is a further rejuvenation for Liverpool's front-line after the signings of Luis Diaz and Darwin Nunez in the past year.

World Cup winner Messi to return to PSG next week

Saint-Germain-En-Laye, France - World Cup winner Lionel Messi is set to return to work at Paris Saint-Germain next week, his club coach Christophe Galtier said on Tuesday.

Messi, 35, was the lynchpin of the Argentina side that won the World Cup in Qatar nine days ago, scoring twice in the final against France which finished in a penalty shoot-out victory.

He then returned to Argentina with his teammates to celebrate their third World Cup triumph.

"Leo had a very big World Cup with his victory," said Galtier on the eve of PSG's meeting with Strasbourg as Ligue 1 kicks off again on Wednesday after the World Cup break. "He had to return to Argentina for the celebrations and we decided that he was going to be off until January 1."

"He will come and join us either on the second or third (January)



Lionel Messi

uary) to pick up the season with us.

"He will have had between 13 and 14 days of recovery."

Messi looks likely to miss two Ligue 1 matches and the French Cup match at Chateauroux, possibly making his return at home against Angers on January 11.

He is also expected to sit down with PSG president Nasser Al-Khelaifi and other top club officials to pen a one-season extension to his current

deal in the French capital which expires in the summer.

PSG's other World Cup players, notably Kylian Mbappe and Neymar "will be available for the match tomorrow (Wednesday)", said Galtier.

Mbappe could even start, having returned to training just three days after the disappointment of losing the World Cup final, in spite of his hat-trick.

"We made sure to manage on a case-by-case basis," said Galtier.

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Djokovic back in Australia, a year after deportation

Sydney, Australia - Former world number one Novak Djokovic arrived in Australia on Tuesday almost one year after he was deported for refusing to be vaccinated against Covid-19, tennis officials said.

The nine-time Australian Open champion was initially banned from the country for three years after losing a high-stakes legal battle in January over his vaccine status. Australia has since lifted its requirement for visitors to show proof of vaccination against Covid.

The government confirmed in November that the unvaccinated Serb was no longer barred and had been granted a visa allowing him to play in the opening Grand Slam of the year, which starts next month.

Tennis Australia chief executive Craig Tiley said he hoped local fans would embrace Djokovic's return.

"We welcome him back to Australia," he told reporters.

"I think as we speak he's landing in Adelaide and I think that he is going to be again the player to beat.

"I have a great deal of confidence in the Australian public. I have a lot of confidence that the fans will react how we hope they will react."

Tennis Australia confirmed that Djokovic had touched down.

Djokovic, who has won 21 Grand Slams, has been criticised for his part in the saga, which played out as rolling anti-vaccination protests took place in Australia's major cities.

He is scheduled to play in the Adelaide International, beginning Sunday, as he warms up for the Open in Melbourne.

"Over the years I've been really fortunate to start very strong in Australia and I love playing there," the world number five said in Dubai last week after ending 2022 with a record-equalling sixth ATP Tour Finals crown.

AFP

WIZARDS IN OZ

Djokovic, Nadal to kickstart bid for 2023 supremacy in Australia

Sydney, Australia - Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal kickstart their 2023 campaigns this week in Adelaide and Sydney respectively, with the superstar veterans and great rivals eyeing up yet more Australian Open glory.

With the pair sharing 43 Grand Slam titles between them - Djokovic has 21 and Nadal 22 - the scene is set for an epic showdown at Melbourne Park in January. Nadal is the defending Australian Open champion and Djokovic is a nine-time winner.

Djokovic returns Down Under for the first time since being sensationally detained and then deported ahead of the 2022 Australian Open because of his refusal to get vaccinated for Covid-19.

He starts his bid for an incredible 10th Australian Open title at the Adelaide International from Sunday, following a troubled and truncated year in which he missed two majors because of his vaccine status.

Djokovic was initially barred from entering Australia before 2025, but a new government in Canberra reversed the ruling and he is now gunning for more silverware at his most successful Grand Slam venue.

"Over the years I've been really fortunate to start very strong in Australia and I love playing there," said the world number five in Dubai last week, after ending



Rafael Nadal

2022 with a record-equalling sixth ATP Tour Finals crown.

"After obviously what happened earlier this year, hopefully I can have a decent reception there and hopefully that can help me play some good tennis."

He will face a top-notch field in Adelaide, including Felix Auger-Aliassime, Daniil Medvedev and Andrey Rublev, ranked six, seven and eight respectively.

In Djokovic's absence this year, Spanish great Nadal swept past Medvedev to win the Aus-

tralian Open in an epic five-setter - then backed it up with a 14th French Open.

Nadal will begin his preparations in Sydney at the United Cup, a new mixed-teams event, where a blockbuster showdown with Australian showman Nick Kyrgios will test his credentials.

Eighteen countries will compete in the event across 11 days from Thursday, with Brisbane, Perth and Sydney hosting group games in a round-robin format.

Ties comprise two men's and



Novak Djokovic

two women's singles matches and one mixed doubles. The finals series will be in Sydney.

Women's world number one Iga Swiatek will acclimatise in Perth with her Polish teammates at the United Cup on the back of winning the French Open and US Open in 2022.

The three-time Grand Slam champion is targeting a first Australian Open title after losing in the semis this year to Danielle Collins, who then crashed to Ashleigh Barty in the final.

American world number three Jessica Pegula and French world number four Caroline Garcia, fresh from beating Aryna Sabalenka to win the WTA Finals, also feature at the United Cup.

Four of the other top 10 women begin the year in Adelaide, with second-ranked Ons Jabeur, world number five Sabalenka, world number eight Daria Kasatkina and world number nine Veronika Kudermetova all entered.

AFP

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Andoo Comanche on course for Sydney-Hobart win

Sydney, Australia - Australian supermaxi Andoo Comanche was barreling towards a line honours victory in the Sydney-Hobart yacht race Tuesday, but its hopes of smashing the course record have faded.

The boat, skippered by owner John Winning, pulled clear of its competitors in fast downwind conditions in the blue water classic.

Andoo Comanche was more than 20 nautical miles ahead of second-placed LawConnect on Tuesday evening, 30 hours after the 109-strong fleet set sail from Sydney Harbour.

Just seven nautical miles sep-



Yachts Moneypenny (L) and Andoo Comanche compete at the start of the Sydney to Hobart yacht race on Monday (AFP)

arated the other 100-foot supermaxis - LawConnect, Black Jack

and Wild Oats - in a tight scramble for second place.

With less than 100 nautical miles remaining, Andoo Comanche was poised to reach the Tasmanian state capital late on Tuesday evening.

"We always think we're going to be the best boat out there and do as well as we can," Winning said ahead of the race.

"We'll just try and out sail the others and win it on that."

The gruelling Sydney-Hobart course has been a happy hunting ground for the Comanche boat, which set the current race record under a different skipper in 2017.

Favourable weather early in the race raised the prospect of

toppling that mark, which sits at one day, 9 hours, 15min and 24sec.

While north-to-northeasterly gusts pushed the fleet quickly through treacherous Bass Strait, it was unlikely to be enough for any boat to go under the best time for the 628-nautical mile event.

Although there are only four yachts in the supermaxi class this year, the competition for line honours is fierce.

Black Jack is the defending champion, and Wild Oats is a perennial favourite that has won the race nine times.

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TAILORING TRAUMA

Hong Kong tailors livestream in pandemic survival fight

Assistants wielding multiple livestreaming mobile phones are now as crucial to Roshan Melwani's tailor shop as the measuring tapes, needles and fabrics that have made his Hong Kong family business so famous.

The Melwani family has dressed everyone from American presidents to aristocrats and celebrities over the decades. But the pandemic nearly sunk them - and many of Hong Kong's once thriving tailoring businesses have not survived.

Few places remained internationally cut-off during the coronavirus pandemic for as long as Hong Kong, a self-imposed isolation that the city's government has only begun to lift in the last two months.

As a result, Melwani's shop - Sam's Tailors - has been reliant on online sales for most of the last two and a half years, long after rivals in Saville Row, Milan and New York reopened their doors.

"Understand that if I did not have 60 years of cash behind me, I could not operate," Melwani, a third-generation tailor, tells AFP as a frenetic day of video calls with customers and livestreams to showcase new designs gets underway.

"Pre-pandemic I had a minimum 20 people that I would work with per day, sometimes 40 people, up to six days a week."

Quality and speed

Tim, a client in the United States, is the kind of customer that has helped keep Sam's Tailor afloat. During the pandemic, he ordered an entire new wardrobe and now he's on the look-out for something more.

With the help of assistants broadcasting a dizzying array of choices over video call, Melwani steers Tim towards a burgundy three-piece with an inner lining featuring pin-up girls.

"Yeah, let's get to it," Tim says over the phone as assistants frantically jot down all the extra details in yellow notebooks.

Before the pandemic Hong Kong's tailors were a must-visit for many tourists thanks to their reputation for quality - and their ability to turn a bespoke suit around as little as 24 hours.

The walls of Sam's Tailors are festooned



Roshan Melwani (L) of Sam's Tailor is filmed by his team as he talks to a client in the US during a video call at his shop in Hong Kong.

with photos of famous patrons, from Bill Clinton, George Bush and Boris Johnson, to Bruno Mars, Russel Crowe and Meghan Markle.

The city's tailoring scene traces its origins back to Shanghai, which was renowned for its quality and craftsmanship at the start of the twentieth century. Many of those tailors relocated to Hong Kong in the aftermath of the Chinese Communist Party's civil war victory in 1949.

"People can get 10 suits in Hong Kong with the frequency they get one suit in Saville Row," Andy Chan, President of the Hong Kong Tailors Association, said. "This is why everybody came to Hong Kong to get a custom-made suit for them."

Tourist desert

In recent years Hong Kong's tailoring industry has struggled against fast fashion and online sales. But the pandemic has been especially brutal.

Hong Kong went from welcoming 65 million people in 2018 to just 91,000 in 2021 at the height of the pandemic, when all overseas arrivals had to pay for hotel quarantine of up to three weeks.

"We estimate for these four years (2018-2021) we had over 40 per cent of the tailors that shut down," Chan lamented.

Hong Kong only scrapped mandatory hotel quarantine in September, long after rival hubs like Singapore had reopened to the world.

Even after that, the city was still restricting where tourists could go for the first three days after arriving as they waited for test results, a measure that was removed earlier this month.

Roshan Melwani says there are times he feels angry but he tries not to dwell. "You think it doesn't hurt my father, all his years of saving money, all that cash gone?" he said. "I don't have time to feel that hurt, I have to devote my time to taking us forward."

AFP

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Austria's Admont Abbey library with its Baroque grandeur takes online stardom in its stride

Ancient monasteries in deepest provincial Austria do not normally feature on the bucket lists of the TikTok generation. Nor do libraries. But the Admont abbey library in the small Styrian town - which claims to be the largest monastic library in the world - is also the most Instagramable, with Baroque interiors so breathtaking they almost look like they have been Photoshopped.

"Go for Baroque in Austria and visit the Admont Abbey library," Oprah Winfrey's book club urged its two million members last year. And Britain's Daily Mirror gushed that the library could give Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel a run for its money with its beauty.

Once far from the beaten track, the near 950-year-old Benedictine abbey now struggles on some days in summer to accommodate all the influencers and selfie hunters who want to immortalise themselves amid its frescos and checkerboard marble floors reminiscent of the library in Disney's 'Beauty and the Beast'.

Media-savvy monks
Two of its 23 monks are active in the monastery's online promotion, as at ease with concepts like 'content' as with the finer points of theology, even offering 'online spiritual advice'. A virtual tour of the library is also available.

"We have succeeded, together with the monks of our house, to transmit content that captivates and interests people," communications manager Mario Brandmueller told AFP. The abbey's Facebook reach has rocketed to 25 million people per month - 2,500 times its audience back in 2018.

From being something of a local gem nestled amid the mountains of central Austria, it



So you have to be very careful, and I'm also very strict to evaluate what makes sense... After all, it's a monastery

FATHER MAXIMILI SCHIEFERMUELLER

has become an international crowd puller, Brandmueller said, with photos and videos of the 18th-century library featured on travel and culture platforms in a dozen countries.

The abbey's promotional work even earned it an Austrian government prize for 'special achievements in the field of public relations and institutional communication'.

This summer, however, the monastery was pushed to its organisational limits handling the 15,000 visitors a month it was getting, although Brandmueller said more visitors could still be accommodated in winter.

Fashion shoots
The library's 70m long hall is packed with 70,000 books. While it was opened in 1776, the oldest manuscripts date

from the eighth century and were miraculously spared from a 1865 fire that engulfed much of the town and the monastery.

One of the library's hidden architectural gems is a secret staircase leading to a reading platform that is only accessible to the masses virtually.

Father Maximilian Schiefermueller, 41, who takes care of the archives, told AFP that as well as receiving queries from researchers and historians, they also get very diverse requests - from people who want to do a photo shoot to those who want to do a fashion show within its hallowed halls.

"So you have to be very careful, and I'm also very strict to evaluate what makes sense... After all, it's a monastery," he says.

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