



Royal decree ratifies taxation agreement between Oman, Qatar

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has issued Royal Decree No 4/2022 on the ratification of an agreement between the governments of the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Qatar on avoidance of double taxation and prevention of income and capital tax evasion, signed in Doha on November 22, 2021, after

presenting the same before the Majlis A'Shura.

Article 1 ratifies the above-mentioned agreement in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article 2 states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and take effect from its date of issue. ONA

Old strain of barley found in Musandam

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Specialists of Oman Botanical Garden have found one of the oldest strains of barley - called *sukhb* - in Musandam, according to the Government Communication Centre (GCC).

GCC stated that this type of plant of the grass family is indigenous to the mountains of Musandam.

GCC confirmed that specialists also discovered new types of plants recorded for the first time in the sultanate. The team is currently working on registering *sukhb* in a list of indigenous plants.

The team found a new type of wild lavender in the Western Hajar Mountains, which has been scientifically documented and named after Omani scientist

Sheikh Nouredin al Salmi.

Additionally, Oman Botanical Garden's team of specialists succeeded in cultivating species that are difficult to grow, including *mahaleb*.

In over 700 field trips, the specialists collected about 1,100 types of plant species. Their efforts have saved more than 2,000 species of flora at risk due to urban expansion and facilitated planting more than 70,000 seedlings.

According to GCC, Oman Botanical Garden aims to collect and cultivate Omani plants, conduct botanical research, prepare plans and strategies to preserve biodiversity, and preserve the environment and plant diversity.

Currently under development, Oman Botanical Garden is located in Al Khoudh, in the Seeb area of Muscat.

RAFO CELEBRATES GRADUATION OF NEW BATCH



Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) celebrated the graduation of a new batch of recruits on Wednesday, following completion of their military training and qualification process. The ceremony was held under the auspices of Maj Gen Muslim bin Muhammad bin Taman Jaaboub, commander of Sultan's Special Force, at the military parade ground of Ghala Air Base and Sultan Qaboos Air Academy (ONA)

Thank you for help during pandemic: Pakistan minister

Muscat - Sayed Zulfikar Abbas Bukhari, Special Advisor to Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, Minister of Overseas & Human Resources Development and Chairman of Tourism Board, is on a three-day visit to Oman to thank the Pakistani diaspora here for extending support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaking exclusively to *Muscat Daily*, Bukhari said that he has also come "with all humility" to express gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and his government as well as his Omani counterparts with whom he worked closely during the ongoing pandemic.

"I came here to pay my special thanks to the Pakistani diaspora in Oman who gave hundreds and thousands (of rials) to the Prime Minister's COVID-19 fund which helped with rations and necessities during the pandemic in Pakistan."

"The Pakistani diaspora helped us and made the repatriation of over 600,000 people from around the world easy. Oman was one of the easiest experiences of repatriation due to the efforts of Ambassador Ahsan Wagan."

He also thanked the concerned government authorities for waiving various fines and charges during repatriation of Pakistani citizens.

Elaborating on the purpose of his visit, Bukhari said he will also follow up with a business delega-



Sayed Zulfikar Abbas Bukhari and H E Ahsan Wagan

We are reviewing our visa policy... I am sure we can put Oman in the next batch for visa on arrival

SAYED ZULFIKAR ABBAS BUKHARI

tion that visited Pakistan recently "showing that we are very serious about it (boosting trade)".

After a gap of 20 years, the chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry and a delegation of distinguish Omani businessmen visited Pakistan.

"The delegation was well received by the president, ministers and Prime Minister Imran Khan. With the visit, we realised there is so much synergy and scope for further collaboration. We need to

work with Oman. We have not been able to focus on Oman as much as we should have," he added.

In reference to Oman Vision 2040, he said Pakistan is keen to play a key role in furthering the vision. "We want to be involved in not only providing manpower but also in transfer of technology, be it in IT or other sectors. Pakistan has some of the best blockchain workers in the world."

Speaking on the tourism po-

tential of the country, he said, "We eased our visa system and made it a lot easier for people to visit with online visas. We got rid of the restrictions of intercity travel within Pakistan for foreigners. Earlier, tourists needed NOC to travel intercity. For instance, if foreign tourists wanted to go to Islamabad from Lahore, they would require an NOC, which we have abolished now."

"We are reviewing our visa policy and recently we have added 30 countries on our visa-on-arrival list and allow passengers from 180 countries to travel with e-visas. I am sure we can put Oman in the next batch for visa on arrival."

(Text and Photo by Syed Fasiuddin)

International showjumping event on Jan 28-29

Muscat - A total of 110 horse riders, representing 12 countries, will compete in the second round of Oman Masters International Showjumping Championship, which will be organised by Mojo Equestrian Centre, Barka, on January 28 and 29.

Oman Equestrian Association made the announcement at a press conference held on the Olympic Committee and Sports Associations premises in Ghubra, Muscat, on Wednesday.

Khalid Mohammed al Saifi, director of Equestrian Activities Department - Oman Equestrian Association, said that the one-star championship will be held in partnership with private stables, both local and international.

Saifi explained that the association accords significance to Olympic sports, notable showjumping. He welcomed the competitors and wished them an enjoyable experience.

Hassan Mahboob Hashmani, CEO of the showjumping championship, said that the event is seeing an increase in participating countries - Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Britain, United States of America, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Canada, Italy, Iraq and Morocco, besides Oman.

Also addressing the press conference, Majid Hamad al Hassani, technical director of the event, informed that the championship paves the way for an Arab competition in November 2022.

ONA

UK to end all COVID-19 restrictions starting next week

London, UK - The UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Wednesday said most restrictions deployed to fight the latest wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in England would be lifted from next week.

People will no longer have to wear masks in closed spaces, work from home and prove vaccination to enter public spaces such as nightclubs, Johnson told parliament.

"Because of the extraordinary booster campaign... we can return to Plan B in England and allow Plan B regulations to expire," Johnson said.

Last month, England switched to 'Plan B' in order to cope with what Johnson called a "tidal wave" of expected infections



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson attending Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons in London on Wednesday

from the Omicron variant.

But he had to fight his own party to get the changes into law, as Conservative colleagues called the restrictions a step

too far and a curb to public freedoms.

The relaxing of restrictions have been seen as a concession to critics angry at revelations that

he and his staff broke COVID-19 lockdown rules by holding parties at Downing Street.

Johnson told MPs: "While there are some places where

cases are likely to continue rising, including in primary schools, our scientists believe it is likely that the Omicron wave has now peaked nationally."



COVID-19 UPDATE

Hospitalisations go up in Oman

Muscat - The Ministry of Health (MoH) announced 1,619 new infections, including 42 new hospitalisations, registered in a 24-hour period on Wednesday. Two more COVID-19 deaths were also reported in this period.

With this, the total number of COVID-19 cases registered in the country rises to 316,472.

There were 42 new hospitalisations in the last 24 hours, accounting for 121 COVID-19 patients in health institutions, including 14 in ICUs.

Secondary school pupils will no longer be required to wear face masks from Thursday, Johnson said, calling for a review of self-isolation rules to be brought forward from March 24.

Pandemic 'not over'

After the Omicron variant emerged, Britain's daily caseload for COVID-19 topped a record 200,000 infections in early January, but has now dropped to less than half that.

"As COVID-19 becomes endemic, we will need to replace legal requirements with advice and guidance, urging people with the virus to be careful and considerate of others," Johnson said.

AFP

Global HSE 2022 from Feb 13 to 16 at OCEC

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman will host a global health, safety and environment (HSE) conference and exhibition in February. Global HSE 2022 will be held under the patronage of H E Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Minister of Energy and Minerals, and hosted by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, Petroleum Development Oman, Saudi Aramco, OQ and OPAL.

Scheduled from February 13 to 16 at Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC), this is the eight edition of Global HSE being held under the theme of HSE Excellence - Leadership, Sustainability and Technology.

Addressing a press conference at Sheraton Oman Hotel, Dr Hisham al Siyabi, exploration director at PDO and chairman of Global HSE 2022, said, "Guided



The conference will stress the importance of health, safety and environment for the development of human capital and its impact on economic and social development

DR HISHAM AL SIYABI

by the sultanate's Vision 2040, the conference will stress the importance of health, safety and environment for the development of human capital and its impact on economic and social development aligned with the industrial modernisation and production ef-

ficiency in Oman."

He added that the conference also aims to provide a network platform for energy professionals to exchange ideas on the various challenges of health and safety in the oil and gas industry. "Multi-national participation from indus-

try people will surely enhance the work flow of our fraternity."

The conference will have more than 100 expert speakers in the field of HSE and is expected to welcome over 1,500 participants from 25 countries. In addition to the conference, an accompany-

ing exhibition will be held with more than 50 local, regional and international organisations showcasing the latest technologies and expertise related to safety, health and environment, including devices, equipment and modern system applications.

Zainab Ali al Saadi, director of HSE in the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and steering committee of the conference, said, "Participants will have the opportunity to network and meet a large number of global companies participating in this event from all around the world."

The conference will include keynote addresses, panel discussions, technical sessions and workshops that will address several important topics, including Process Safety Management, International HSE Management Standards, Pandemic Risk and Response Management.

Oman and Austria discuss ties, economic cooperation

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Sayyid Badr Hamad al-Busaidi, Foreign Minister, received Dr Margarete Schrambock, Federal Minister for Digital and Economic Affairs in Austria, on Wednesday.

The two sides reviewed ways of enhancing bilateral relations and cooperation in the fields of economy, digital technology and exchanging expertise.

The meeting was attended by several senior officials from both sides.

Earlier on Tuesday, H E Dr Said Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, also received the Austrian minister, following which a statement issued by the Ministry of Economy said, "The two sides reviewed bilateral relations and explored areas of economic cooperation. The two sides also discussed possibilities of cooperation in areas of renew-



able energy and hydrogen.'

The discussions included Oman Vision 2040, which coincides with Austria Vision 2040, especially in the fields of environmental sustainability and governance.

According to statistics of the Ministry of Economy, the volume of trade exchange between Oman and Austria in the first half of 2021 was RO773,573.

Statistics show that Omani

exports accounted for RO15,573, including RO12,477 for re-exports.

The goods exported included fish and car brakes, while re-export goods included knives, parts for air pumps and metal casting machines.

Imports from Austria included electrical equipment and parts of devices to purify liquids and gases. The volume of imports was RO758,000.

MoHERI, ASYAD ink pact to finance scholarships in logistics field

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) has signed an agreement with ASYAD Group to finance scholarships in the field of logistics for General Education Diploma holders in the academic year 2021/2022.

The agreement, signed by H E Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqi, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, and Abdulrahman bin Salem al Hatmi, CEO of ASYAD Group, is realisation of the two sides' endeavour to enhance and develop cooperation between them in the academic field and in an effort to enhance the labour market with specialists in the logistics sector.

Through the agreement, the ministry seeks to strengthen partnership with private sector institutions and urge cooperation to contribute to providing educational opportunities for students



with General Education Diploma to study in Oman.

Lara bint Ghassan Obeidat, director general of missions in MoHERI, said, "The ministry appreciates ASYAD Group's initiative in supporting efforts aimed at creating educational opportunities for students in various dis-

ciplines and keeping pace with the rapid transformation of jobs in the world, as these grants will contribute to the development and training of Omani youth."

According to Abdul al Balushi, head of Human Capital Unit at ASYAD Group, the partnership with the ministry is within the

The step will contribute to reducing the skill gaps in the sector and supplying it with national competencies that meet the continuous developments taking place in the logistics industry

ABDUL AL BALUSHI

framework of the group's keenness to make the logistics sector a major partner in adapting education as the main engine for development and innovation in the sector.

"The step will contribute to reducing the skill gaps in the sector and supplying it with national competencies that meet the continuous developments taking place in the logistics industry," Balushi said.

Winning research project finds alternative wound dresser

Muscat - The 8th National Research Award, organised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, saw an array of research projects in various fields. In the field of Health and Social Services in the Young Researcher's category, a research led by principal investigator Saeid Vakilian from the Laboratory for Stem Cell & Regenerative Medicine at the Natural and Medical Sciences Research Centre in University of Nizwa was one of the winning projects in the latest edition of the award.

The research is titled 'A Competitive Nature-derived Multilayered Scaffold based on Chitosan and Alginate, for Full-thickness Wound Healing'.

According to Vakilian, the project aimed to evaluate a bioactive multilayer wound dressing based on chitosan and alginate. To enhance healing potential, Dracaena Cinnabari and Aloe Vera were loaded as separate layers into the scaffold. The bare and bioactive multilayered scaffolds were fabricated by an iterative layering freeze-drying technique.

Following topographical, chemical and physical assessment, the performance of the scaffolds were evaluated in vitro and in vivo. The results revealed adequate attachment and proliferation of human foreskin fi-



Saeid Vakilian (Supplied photo)

broblasts, indicating excellent biocompatibility of the bioactive scaffold. In vivo, the performance of the multi-layered scaffold loaded with the bioactive materials was comparable with Comfeel Plus. The wounds treated with the bioactive scaffold exhibited superior hypergranulation, fibroblast maturation, epithelialisation, and collagen deposition, with minimal inflammation and crust formation.

Through the study, it was concluded that the synergism of extracellular matrix-mimicking multi-layered scaffolding with Aloe Vera and Dracaena Cinnabari could be considered as a supportive wound dressing. Vakilian maintained that a nature-derived bioactive multilayered scaffold, based on chitosan

and alginate, has been represented as a nature-derived wound dressing in this study. This multilayered scaffold was loaded with Dracaena Cinnabari and Aloe Vera in separate layers to improve wound treatment and prevent further complications. He believes that this study represents a new and versatile class of nature-derived scaffolds as wound dresser that hold clinical promise.

Vakilian believes the study represents a practical and alternative nature-derived wound dresser, addressing several challenges involving chronic wound regeneration. Due to the biocompatible nature of this bioactive wound dresser, it can be used in clinical trials for human chronic wounds upon obtaining required ethical approvals.

Violations registered against hotels in N Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has registered violations against two establishments for running hotels without obtaining tourist licences in North Batinah governorate.

The ministry called on all unlicensed establishments to stop engaging in tourism activities until they obtain the necessary approvals and licences in order to avoid legal procedures in accordance with the executive regulations of the Tourism Law.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	26	17
Doha	20	12
Kuwait City	17	5
Manama	20	11
Muscat	28	22
Riyadh	20	4

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.32am
Sunrise	6.51am
Duhr	12.23pm
Asr	3.28pm
Maghrib	5.50pm
Isha	7.04pm



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specialized Companies in the field of tender shown below and registered with Tender Board, may obtain tender documents from the website through the following link: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) against non-refundable fees until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No.	No E- Tender	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/22/003	2022/MM/HQ-3	Cleaning Work at Muscat Municipality Buildings (E- Tender)	Rial 40	07/02/2022	27/02/2022	Specialized
PRE/19/002	022/MM/QS-1	Maintenance Works of MEP Services for Muttrah Fish Market (E- Tender)	Rial 25	07/02/2022	27/02/2022	Specialized

Tender Conditions :-

- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
- Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond and to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) .
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@mtcit.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).

‘The Golden Talent’ attracts 1,982 participants

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Following the launch of a digital competition in search of ‘The Golden Talent’ by Sayyid Khalid bin Hamed al Busaidi last month, a total of 1,982 submissions were received during the initial 3-week application phase via a custom-built website.

The competition aims to showcase the most talented and artistic individuals in Oman whilst also providing a platform for more unusual talents.

Sayyid Khalid, who is now personally reviewing all the submissions and filtering the best to move to the third stage – the Social Media Knockout round – said, “I’m really delighted that the money raised via SMS voting will be donated to the UNICEF youth training programme which has been launched in Oman in partnership with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and the private sector. It’s an innovative approach to develop young people’s resilience and skills and to promote social entrepreneurship in Oman, which I am happy to support.”

SMS voting will be used to allow the public to participate and vote for their favourite contestants. In an exciting development, money raised will be donated to UNICEF which will use it to fund youth training



Sayyid Khalid al Busaidi

ing programmes in Oman. To encourage voting, all voters will enter a weekly raffle and eight lucky winners will be selected to instantly win RO500.

“UNICEF’s youth training programme in Oman focuses on helping young people identify and nurture their talents to contribute to the country’s future development. The partnership with Sayyid Khalid, under ‘The Golden Talent’ competition, reflects our shared values and the funds will help bring the youth training programme to scale,” said Liibaan Dahir, UNICEF Oman’s Officer in Charge and Head of Programmes.

The open category includes all talents which means participants can showcase any talent. After the Social Media Knockout round, qualifiers will move to stage 4 where they submit a second performance (in same discipline). Top performers will then be selected to perform at the finals to compete to see who would be declared as ‘The Golden Talent’.

Mawaleh market to move to Khazaen Economic City, Barka

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Central Fruits and Vegetables Market in Mawaleh will soon be shifting to the Khazaen Central Market, in Khazaen Economic City. As part of the efforts focused on relocating the fruit and vegetable market’s storage and wholesale activities from Seeb to Barka, project financing agreements were signed on Wednesday.

The first agreement of the shareholders’ capital subscription, while the second was a bank financing agreement with Sohar Islamic Bank signed under the patronage of H E Eng Essam bin Saud al Zadjali, chairman of Muscat Municipality.

The agreements were signed in pursuance of Royal directives that called on the private sector and businessmen to invest in local ventures in all sectors to boost Oman’s position as an attractive and leading investment destination.

The first agreement was concluded to complete the equity subscription with Oman Infrastructure Fund (Rakiza), Salim & Partners, Al Kalbani Group and Khazaen Development and Investment Company, as shareholding partners in Khazaen Fruit and Vegetable Central Market, which will fund, develop and manage the new market in Khazaen Economic City.

H E Zadjali disclosed that the intention was to shift wholesale activities to Khazaen Central



(Muscat Daily)

The project is relevant to the main pillars of Oman Vision 2040 through its empowerment of the private sector to be a major driver of the national economy

ENG KALAT AL BULUSHI

Market while retail activities continue at Mawaleh.

“We plan to expand the retail activities and give operations to the private sector,” he said.

The bank financing agreement was signed between Sohar Islamic Bank and Khazaen Fruit and Vegetable Central Market to provide financing facilities for the new market project.

Eng Kalat al Bulushi, board chairman of Khazaen Economic City, said, “The signing of both agreements marks the completion of the project capital subscription and total financing, amounting to about RO40mn, which will be allocated to the de-

velopment, establishment and operation of the Khazaen Central Market.

“We are happy with this strategic partnership with major partners from the private sector, and we highly value and appreciate the trust of the government, represented by the Muscat Municipality, and its support in enabling the private sector to play its part in the development of quality and national projects that contribute significantly to achieving food security and economic revenue for the country.”

He said that the project is relevant to the main pillars of Oman Vision 2040 through its empow-

erment of the private sector to be a major driver of the national economy.

“As soon as we signed the agreement with Muscat Municipality to relocate the fruit and vegetable warehousing and wholesale activities from Mawaleh to the Khazaen Fruit and Vegetable Central Market, in May 2021, we immediately proceeded to appoint a consultant to prepare the engineering drawings and tender documents for the construction works,” Bulushi said.

He affirmed, “The main objective of relocating the fruit and vegetable warehousing and wholesale activities to the new market is to improve the performance and quality of work in the fruit and vegetables sector and to provide new, modern and advanced integrated logistics facilities, including an air-conditioned wholesale and retail market, and the centralised cold and dry storage of various fruit

and vegetable products to serve the growing consumer demand for fresh fruits and vegetables in the sultanate, which is increasing at more than ten per cent per year.”

Muneer al Muneeri, CEO of Oman Infrastructure Fund (Rakiza), said, “The benefits of this investment are not limited to monetary returns, but also contribution to building an integrated national logistics platform that meets the requirements and needs of stakeholders in the local market by developing the much needed social infrastructure at the national level, and providing the appropriate facilities with the best standards.”

Abdul al Murshidi, head of the Islamic Banking Group in Sohar International, stated, “The Khazaen Fruit and Vegetable Central Market is one of the national development projects that the bank is keen to contribute to due to its economic returns.”

886 violations of fishing law reported in past three months

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat - As many as 886 violations of fishing law were reported in the past three months, according to statistics recently released by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR).

The statistics show that 297 Marine Fishing Law violations were reported in December 2021 for non-compliance with regulations for fishing of marine resources, besides 108 violations of fishing licence regulations.

Officials from the ministry arrested 14 expatriates in this connection for violating provisions of the Marine Fishing Law and Protection of Living Aquatic Resources. “In all, 279 items were seized, including boats, engines, nets, tracking devices, and other



(Supplied photo)

fishing equipment,” a MAFWR official said, adding that a total of 3739.3kg of fish was also confiscated in December 2021.

In November 2021, 317 violations were registered for non-compliance with regulations for fishing of marine resources, besides 208 violations of fishing licence regulations. Forty-five

expatriate workers were arrested for violating fishing laws and legislations.

According to MAFWR, 272 Marine Fishing Law violations were also reported in September 2021. Officials from the ministry arrested 46 expatriates for violating provisions of the Marine Fishing Law and Protection of Living

Aquatic Resources.

MAFWR also recently conducted several campaigns and arrested violators of the fishing law in various governorates. On January 18, the Fisheries Control Team in the ministry arrested many fisherman for violating the fishing law and for using unauthorised nets, besides arresting many other expatriates for violation of the labour law.

On January 10, the directorate in Al Wusta governorate with the support of the Mahout Police Station, seized 14 illegal nets in the wilayat of Mahout. Legal procedures have been initiated against the violators.

The ministry has urged everyone to abide by the fishing law and avoid any violation. MAFWR also disclosed that it uses the latest technologies to monitor fishing boats via satellite.

Oman Air to operate charter flights to Iran

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Air will operate charter flights to Iran twice a week from January 21, the Civil Aviation Authority said.

“The Civil Aviation Authority issued approval to the national carrier, Oman Air, for fly charter flights to Iran with a frequency of two flights per week,” a statement said. One of the two flights will fly to Tehran, while the other will fly to Shiraz, it added.



(Supplied photo)

Initiative to support street vendors in Dhahirah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to support street vendors and productive families, the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) has launched an initiative in Dhahirah governorate.

OCCI’s Dhahirah branch has completed construction of shades for street vendors and productive families in the wilayats of Yanqul and Dhank.

Saif bin Said al Badi, chairman of OCCI’s Dhahirah branch, said, “Work on the shades project has been completed and the places are ready for use by the target groups. The project aims to find suitable sites and outlets for buying and selling for productive families and street vendors.”

He added that this initiative



(Supplied photo)

will provide a good and appropriate place to stimulate commercial and economic activities, including buying and selling of

local products, to street vendors who come from various villages and towns.

“OCCI will continue to launch

various projects and support small and medium enterprises and productive families in the governorate.”

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

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* Rates as on January 19
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

P&G profits up on strong demand, higher pricing

Procter & Gamble (P&G) raised its full-year forecast on Wednesday as robust consumer demand enabled the company to notch higher sales even as it increased prices on consumer goods.

The maker of Tide detergent and Bounty paper towels, P&G saw a 6 per cent jump in net sales in the quarter, with half of the increase coming from volume and half from higher prices taken to offset increased commodity costs.

"We are taking pricing generally," said P&G chief financial officer Andre Schulten, adding that 'we've seen a good pass through of pricing' with retailers.

Net income for the quarter was up 10 per cent at US\$4.2bn on a 6 per cent increase in revenues to US\$21bn.



Central bank approves Sohar International-Bank Nizwa merger due diligence process

Our Correspondent Muscat

Sohar International Bank and Bank Nizwa have received the approval from the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) to start the due diligence process for a merger between the two entities.

In a disclosure to Muscat Stock Exchange on Wednesday, Sohar International stated, 'The board of directors of Sohar Inter-

national is pleased to announce that it received approval from the Central Bank of Oman for its application to go ahead with the due diligence process with respect to the proposed merger, on January 18, 2022.'

On November 23 last year, Sohar International had expressed its intentions to merge with Bank Nizwa, subject to regulatory and shareholders' approval.

Bank Nizwa also stated in a separate disclosure with the MSX that it was pleased to announce the receipt of the approval from CBO to initiate the due diligence process. 'Shareholders will be kept informed with all the updates in this regard, as per the rules and regulations,' Bank Nizwa stated.

According to the preliminary unaudited financial results submitted by Sohar International to

the MSX, the bank's profit for the full year ended December 31, 2021 increased 41.6 per cent to RO28.34mn against RO20.01mn reported in the same period of 2020.

Mergers between the banks are quite rare in Oman. Alizz Islamic Bank was merged with Oman Arab Bank's Islamic banking window in 2020 and Oman International Bank was merged with HSBC Oman in 2012.

'GCC consumers remain unaffected by global pressures'

Dubai, UAE - Despite a general decline in net positivity across all global markets, the GCC consumers remained mainly immune to many of the global agitators regarding business, economy and employment confidence, according to the latest research by leading consumer intelligence platform, D/A.



Paul Kelly

The data, which is based on algorithmic AI analysis of over 100mn Arabic social media posts, was highlighted in the December 2021 Sila Consumer Sentiment Index (CSI) report, which revealed that the GCC remained relatively immune to the key issues affecting consumer sentiment on a global level.

Overall, GCC consumer confidence in December 2021 declined 1.2 per cent, down to 65.3 per cent from 66.5 per cent in November and 66.3 per cent in October.

These modest declines are attributed to global dynamics, including inflationary pressure on consumer spending, uncertainty around variants of COVID-19 and the resulting impacts on daily life, and government support for the economy via maintained spending and reforms.

Business confidence has sustained a more considerable set-

back of almost 2 per cent month-on-month, from 61.3 per cent in November to 59.5 per cent in December. However, it is still registering net positivity and trending above pre-pandemic levels.

From an economic perspective, macro/government intervention in GCC economies saw a 3.7 per cent increase in confidence in December, marking a two-year series high in economic growth sentiment.

Paul Kelly, the managing partner of D/A, said, "We have seen a clear uptick in consumer confidence from an economic perspective. The extensive vaccination programme across the region has undoubtedly had a positive impact, and consumers have become more optimistic about the future economic situation in the region."

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Madayn and Iranian business delegation discuss cooperation prospects, incentives

Muscat - An Iranian business delegation visited Al Rusayl Industrial City, which falls under the umbrella of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), to get familiarised with the investment climate and business opportunities in the sultanate.

Mustafa bin Maqbool al Lawati, CEO of Oman Investment and Development Holding Company (Mubadrah), discussed with the Iranian delegation cooperation prospects in various areas and briefed them on the incentives offered by Madayn to attract investments to its industrial cities, a press release said.

The delegation was briefed on the vision of Madayn in enhancing the sultanate's position as a



leading regional centre of manufacturing, ICT, innovation and entrepreneurship excellence, and its mission in attracting industrial investments and providing continued support, through region-

ally and globally competitive strategies, good infrastructure, value adding services, and easy governmental processes.

Moreover, Madayn officials elaborated on the available in-

vestment opportunities in its industrial cities in light and medium industries, and the incentives and facilities offered by Madayn to the investors in its various industrial cities.

These incentives include lease period of lands and facilities for up to 30 years, renewable for the same period; right to waive the lease right for the remaining period of the contract; right to sell constructions and buildings on the leased land; right to involve new partners in the lease contract; fair evaluation of buildings and facilities upon the termination of the lease contract; developed and equipped lands with basic services; and transparent legal frameworks; punctuality in service delivery; in addition to other incentives.

Workshop held on Oman's AI infrastructure

Muscat - Oman Data Park organised a workshop on Wednesday to highlight the readiness of Oman's infrastructure for Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The workshop reviewed the ministries' AI roadmaps, cybersecurity solutions and the framework of planning AI projects.

The event, which saw the participation of 30 government



units, discussed the technical support provided by Nebula AI

through Oman Data Park, which is powered by Nvidia and hosted

in Oman, among other topics.

Eng Maqbool al Wahaibi, CEO of Oman Data Park said that the workshop contributes to achieving the goals of Oman's National Programme for Artificial Intelligence. The national programme aims to enhance the productivity of targeted sectors for economic diversification and to develop human resources in the AI field, among other goals.

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MSX rises 0.53%; volumes down

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) rose 0.53 per cent to close at 4,239.04 points on Wednesday.

While turnover rose 13.61 per cent to RO3.38mn, volumes fell 2.14 per cent to 16.6mn shares.

While Industrial index fell 0.69 per cent, Financial and Services indices rose 0.72 per cent and 0.43 per cent, respectively.

The MSX Shariah index closed up by 0.32 per cent at 516.23 points.

Market breadth remained highly positive as 23 companies closed up, while five companies closed down. The rest 18 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

Top gainers were Oman & Emirates Investment Holding (8.77 per cent), Muscat Finance (5.26 per cent), Taageer

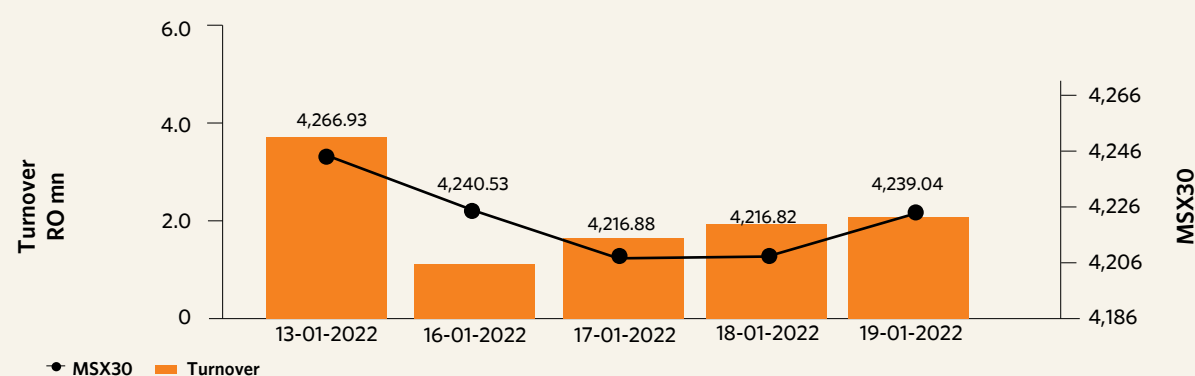


Finance (3.8 per cent), National Aluminium Products Company (3.54 per cent) and Al Sharqia Investment (3.33 per cent).

Top losers were SMN Power Holding

(-8.77 per cent), Raysut Cement (-7.37 per cent), Oman Fisheries (-3.64 per cent), Oman Cables industry (-0.99 per cent) and National Gas (-0.78 per cent).

MSX INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



Omicron will pinch, not derail US economic growth, says Yellen

New York, US - The latest coronavirus variant will weigh on US economic growth in the months ahead but will not derail it, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen assured the nation's mayors on Wednesday as they gathered in Washington.

"Yes, Omicron has presented a challenge and will likely impact some of the data in the coming months, but I am confident it will not derail what has been one of the strongest periods of economic growth in a century," Yellen will say according to remarks released ahead of her speech.

"None of this was guaranteed. I think it's important we recognize that," she adds in her appearance before the US Conference of Mayors.

"There's a very real counterfactual where Omicron did derail our recovery; a scenario where the new variant hurdled our economy backwards towards its state on Inauguration Day 2021" when Joe Biden assumed the presidency.

Omicron has led to a surge in infections and quarantine cases, keeping many Americans away



US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen (AFP)

from their jobs. Airlines, for example, have cancelled thousands of flights since Christmas due to staff shortages.

As a result of the COVID-19 surge, economic growth is expected to slow in the first quarter of 2022, economists forecast.

But Yellen will insist the American Rescue Plan passed by Congress in March 2021 under the impetus of Biden, just weeks into his White House job, 'acted like a vaccine for the American economy, protecting our recovery from the possibility of new variants'. "The protection wasn't complete, but it was very strong - and it prevented communities

from suffering the most severe economic effects of Omicron and Delta," she will say, noting that US\$350bn in emergency funding was funneled to local governments.

The first year of the pandemic 'decimated government budgets' and forced mass layoffs and the collective furlough of some 1.3mn workers including teachers and health care workers deemed essential personnel, Yellen said. But the funding allowed communities to better prepare against and battle Omicron when it began spreading, she added.

AFP

Britain's inflation hits decades high

London, UK - British annual inflation accelerated to a near 30-year high in December, official data showed on Wednesday, stoking fears over a cost of living squeeze as wages fail to keep pace. Economies worldwide are battling decades-high inflation that is forcing central banks to lift interest rates, including the Bank of England (BoE) which last month raised its key borrowing cost for the first time in more than three years.

The UK's inflation rate hit 5.4 per cent last month, rising further above target on price gains for clothing, domestic energy, food and furniture, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said. The BoE, whose chief task is to keep inflation close to a 2 per cent target, is now expected to hike again at its next meeting in February amid easing concerns over economic fallout from the Omicron coronavirus variant.



coron coronavirus variant.

The pound on Wednesday hit a 22-month peak versus the euro on increased hopes of another rate rise. Finance Minister Rishi Sunak insisted the Conservative government understood the cost of living squeeze.

However, the main opposition Labour Party argued that families would be rocked by 'substantial' tax rises and 'huge' increases in energy bills.

The cost of living in Britain is forecast to soar even higher in April owing to a tax hike and further planned increases to domestic energy bills, according to analysts. National insurance, paid by workers and employers, is being lifted to help fund social care for the elderly.

Analysts expect more painful tax increases to foot the vast bill for COVID. In addition, electricity and gas prices are set to rocket higher when the UK government shortly lifts a cap on energy bills.

UK annual inflation was last higher in March 1992 when it had stood at 7.1 per cent. The rate had already forged a decade-high of 5.1 per cent in November. "The inflation rate rose again at the end of the year and has not been higher for almost 30 years," said ONS chief economist Grant Fitzner.

AFP

US biotech tycoon opens Africa's first end-to-end COVID-19 jab plant

Cape Town, South Africa - US biotech billionaire Patrick Soon-Shiong on Wednesday opened a plant in Cape Town that will be the first in Africa to produce COVID-19 vaccines from start to finish.

The factory should churn out its first vials of second-generation coronavirus vaccine 'within the year' and produce a billion doses annually by 2025, said Soon-Shiong.

The plant will be South Africa's third COVID vaccine manufacturing facility but the first in the continent to make the formula across every stage, rather than producing it from semi-finished batches.

Africa currently manufactures less than 1 per cent of all vaccines



South African President Cyril Ramaphosa (left) and Patrick Soon-Shiong cut the ribbon during the launch of NantSA in Cape Town on Wednesday (AFP)

administered on the continent, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, speaking at the inaugural event, hailed the plant as a sign of African self-reliance.

"Africa should no longer be the last in line to access vaccines against pandemics, African should no longer go cap in hand to the Western world begging and begging for vaccines," said Ramaphosa.

"We will stand on our own," he vowed.

He thanked Soon-Shiong, a South African-born and now United States-based doctor-turned-entrepreneur - for returning 'home' to invest in vaccine production.

Born in South Africa to Chinese parents and now a US citizen, the billionaire said the launch was 'one of the momentous moments of my life -- this is a homecoming'.

"We have now developed this SN (spike nucleic) T-cell vaccine, a second-generation vaccine, and we want to manufacture this in Africa, for Africa, and export it to the world," said Soon-Shiong.

AFP

Turkey restarts ruptured Iraq oil link

Istanbul, Turkey - Turkey's state oil operator said on Wednesday it had resumed crude flows through a ruptured pipeline linking Iraqi energy fields with international markets. Tuesday's blast along the Kirkuk-Ceyhan link in southern Turkey contributed to a rise in international crude oil prices to a seven-year high.

The pipeline normally carries more than 450,000 barrels per day (bpd) from oil fields in northern Iraq to a Turkish port on the Mediterranean Sea.

The Iraqi Oil Ministry said that the halt should not affect its overall volume of exports. The Iraqi government pumps about 75,000 bpd through the oil link.

Turkish officials near the site of the explosion in the city of Kahramanmaraş said the rupture and subsequent blast appeared to have been caused by 'an electricity pole that overturned in adverse weather conditions'.

AFP

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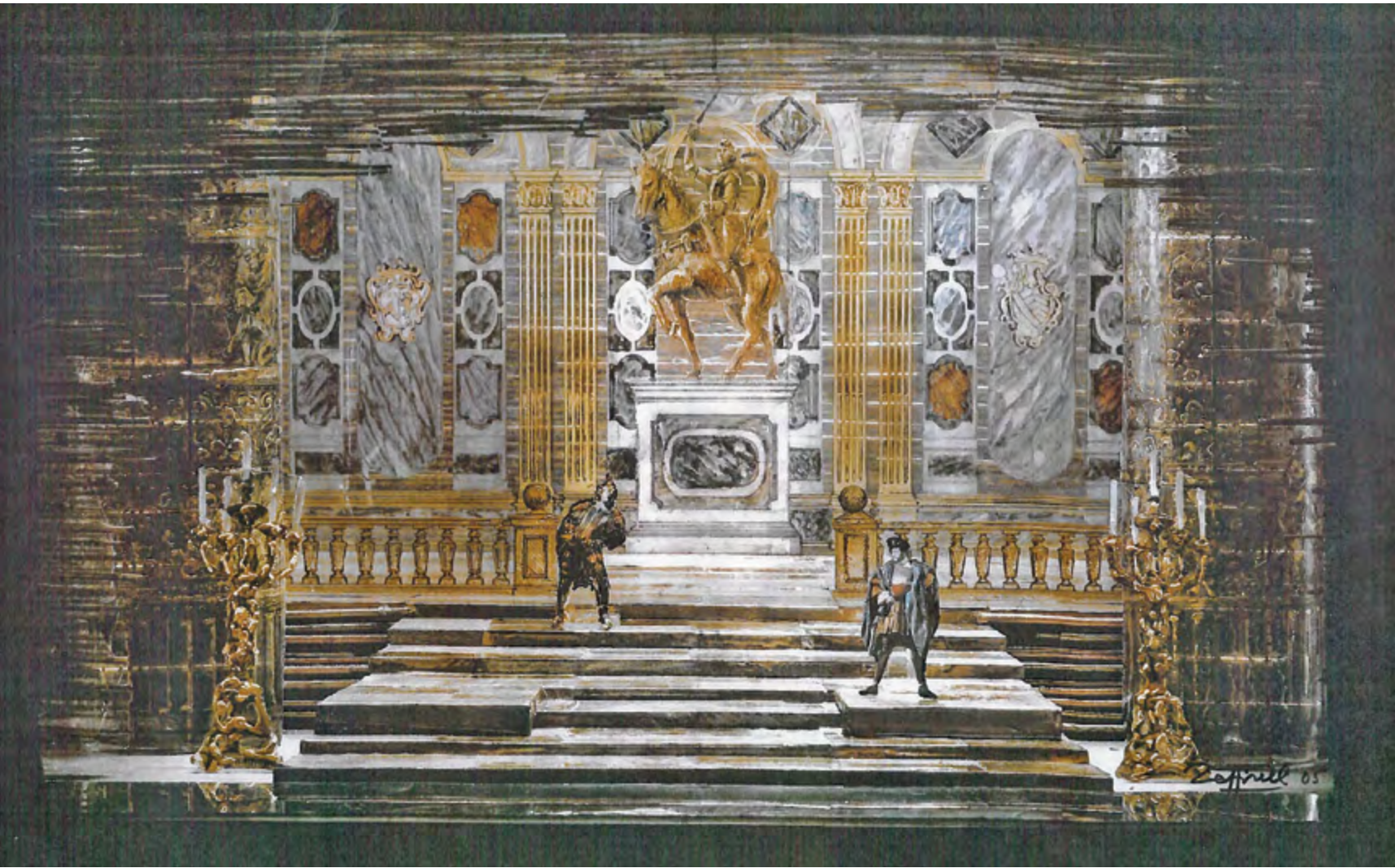
Commercial Land for Sale Rusayl Industrial Area, Muscat Plot Size: 20,000 Square Meter

Halliburton Worldwide Limited would like to dispose (sell the development) a land plot in the Rusayl Industrial area. Plot is levelled (no mountains), close to all types of utilities and located on 30 feet wide black top road. All interested parties must send a non-binding 'letter of intent' on the address below by 27th Jan 2022. Proposals after this date may not be entertained.

Attention: Real Estate Services
Building#353, Way#5003, PO.Box#2721, Ghala

**FREE
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Muscat Daily now offers free classified listings for individuals in the following categories:
Situations Wanted/Accommodation Wanted or Available/Sale of Household Items/ Car for Sale or Wanted/Matrimonial Alliances (Word limit is 35)
Please email your listing to dailyclassifieds@apexmedia.co.om or call 99104346



The Royal Opera House Muscat presents ‘Rigoletto’

The Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM) is delighted to present their new production of Verdi’s unforgettable opera *Rigoletto*.

The opera has been produced in collaboration with Fondazione Arena di Verona and the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre and will be performed by Fondazione Arena di Verona. With direction by the late Franco Zeffirelli, the greatest opera director of his era,

ROHM’s exceptional new production of *Rigoletto* is a landmark celebration of the 10th anniversary of the opera house.

We are delighted to be staging Verdi’s glorious opera *Rigoletto* this season particularly because this will be the world premiere of Franco Zeffirelli’s last great work.

The intrinsic synchronicity of celebrating our 10th anniversary season with a wonderful work by

the same great director with whom we opened our first season, gives this moment a special significance. With Puccini’s *Turandot* in 2011 we began a wonderful relationship and a journey full of hope for the Royal Opera House Muscat. Now, in 2021, with *Rigoletto* we mark the achievement of a decade of brilliant musical performances, with the anticipation of many more to come.

The ironic story of a cruel court jester who becomes a victim of his own crimes, this is a masterpiece which demonstrates Verdi’s astonishing brilliance in characterisation, plot dynamics and unspoken emotions in musical tapestries. Period costumes created by thrice award-winning designer Maurizio Millenotti enhance the production. With lead singers Ambrogio Maestri (*Rigoletto*), Dmitri Korchak (*Il Duca di*

Mantova), and Giuliana Gianfaloni (*Gilda*).

The orchestra and choir of Fondazione Arena di Verona performs along with the Omani Opera Choir Group under the baton of Jan Latham-Koenig.

A Pre-Performance talk for ticket holders only will be held one hour prior to each performance on 20 Thursday, 21 Friday, 22 Saturday at 7pm at the Royal Opera House Muscat.

2022 Omega Dubai Creek Men’s Amateur Open concludes

Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club hosted the annual Omega Dubai Creek Men’s Amateur Open on January 8-9, a highlight in the golfing calendar with golfers travelling from far and wide to test themselves on the famously difficult Championship Course. The course was made increasingly tough for these competitors over the course of the two days, with tees pushed back and pins tucked away, the back nine on January 9 saw a close and thrilling finale.

Held over two days, there were many prizes up for grabs. Winning best net on day one with a score of -3, (68) was Takashi Suzuno and winning best gross was Sam Mullane (-1, 70). At curtains on day one, the leaderboard was primed for a compelling final round of golf



with the leaders packed tightly at the top. Yash Majmudar led the way after a superb 67 (-4), followed by Josh Hill and Sam Mullane, both also shooting under par with rounds of 70 (-1).

After a gripping final stretch both of our leaders found the water on the treacherous 18th

hole. Yash Majmudar was able to make an exceptional up and down however to save his bogey. That was enough to secure the narrowest of victories over Josh Hill and crown him the 2022 Omega Dubai Creek Men’s Amateur Open champion with scores of 67, 71 for a total of 138

(-4) for the tournament. Behind Yash, the field remained tightly packed with Josh Hill, as mentioned, in second (139, +3), Ahmad Skaik and Miki Mirza tied for third (145, +3) and Oliver Mukherjee in fifth (146, +4). Congratulations to Yash for a brilliant performance over the

two days!

The overall net prize was won by Vedant Pal with a score of 140 (-2). In second place in the net category was Imran Qayyum (142, E) and Alistair Hess (142, +2) was in third. The best net score of day two was Harry Chandler with a 1 under 70, and best gross on day two was Dan Byrne (72, +1).

After the prize giving ceremony, assistant golf services manager, Thomas Hall, said, “As always it is a huge pleasure to host this event, and we enjoy seeing the golf course hold its own against some seriously good golf. We wanted the course to become an increasing challenge as the two rounds reached their conclusion and so it was fantastic to see this come to fruition.”

Renault Oman: Hassle-free ways to book service appointment



Renault Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles, has announced five hassle-free ways to book service appointment for its customers. To book an appointment, customers can call toll free number 80050011, SMS Type ‘Book’ and send to 99825454, email appointment@sbigh.com, WhatsApp: 97692689 or log on to www.myrenault-me.com.

A spokesperson for SBA said, “All Renault customers can book service appointment through five modes of communication for added convenience. They don’t have to stand in line to book the service. This facility is designed to offer a hassle free service experience and complete peace of mind to customers.”

perceptive design approach making it enormously user-friendly. My Renault App makes life easier by putting everything potential and existing buyers need to know about Renault, in one place. The app offers many innovative features along with functionality. With enhanced features, My Renault App caters to both sales and after-sales requirements of customers.

With growing new vehicle sales in the region, Renault is focusing on delivering the most convenient and cost-effective aftersales solutions to its customers driven by a vast network of distributors and market proximity. This enables it to offer a range of competitive maintenance packages available in all showrooms and affordable pricing to ensure greater convenience in all service centres.

Customers can become an exclusive Renault member by logging on to myrenault-me.com or by downloading the app and enjoying their my_renault ride. Enhancing after-sales services for existing buyers, My Renault App is a one stop solution with a host of advanced features. Available on Android and iOS platforms, My Renault App has a

SBA is largely committed to supporting Renault Oman’s growth in the sultanate through major emphasis on customer satisfaction and by providing world-class after-sales services in Oman. With a national network of 9 showrooms, 16 service centres and 23 spare parts outlets, SBA has further built upon its legacy of trust, excellent customer service and providing value for money to each of its customers.

Omani businesses invited to Exhibition of Sri Lanka Export Brands

The Exhibition of Sri Lanka Export Brands which is scheduled to be held at Expo Dubai from February 17-20, was introduced to the Omani business fraternity and the invitations were extended for them to visit the exhibition.

Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the Sultanate of Oman, H E Ameer Ajwad jointly with the secretary general of the National Chamber of Exporters of Sri Lanka, Shiham Marikkar, who undertook a visit to Oman from January 1-5, for this purpose, met with the chairman of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) Eng Redha bin Juma al Saleh and the Commissioner-General of Oman at Dubai Expo 2020 and the Advisor to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Invest-



ment Promotion Mohsen Khamis al Balushi in Muscat and briefed them on the details of

the Sri Lanka Export Brands Exhibition.

The Sri Lanka Export Brands

is a multi-sectoral exhibition which will display leading export brands of Sri Lankan origin. Sev-

enty five Sri Lanka exporters representing various sectors ranging from food and bever-

ages, gem and jewellery, organic and herbal products, rubber and rubber based products, spice and spice based products, tea and tea based products, coconut and coconut products, glass and glass based products, wood and wood based products, floriculture and horticulture products, artificial and natural handicrafts, packing products, water treatment systems, machinery and light engineering products, service providers to exporter sector, business and professional services, etc., will exhibit their products and services at the Expo Dubai.

Potential Oman visitors will be able to meet with the top officials of the 75 Sri Lankan organisations who will be exhibiting their products/ serv-

ices and also to discuss their requirements while viewing samples.

H E Ajwad pointed out that the Omani business fraternity would immensely be benefitted by visiting the above mentioned Sri Lankan Exhibition at the Expo Dubai as they could meet with a large number of their Sri Lankan counterparts under one roof at next door in Dubai, and interact with them to establish business links in the relevant sectors of their mutual interest.

The Embassy of Sri Lanka in Oman also arranged a series of business meetings for Marikkar with the CEOs/representatives of leading private companies including retail businesses and hypermarkets as well as the media personnel in Oman.

OABC hosts LinkedIn Hacks session, supports online networking effectiveness

Oman's most active business networking organisation, the Oman American Business Center (OABC), hosted 'Linked In Hacks' for member executives on Wednesday at the Royal Tulip Muscat Hotel.

The session was designed to equip professionals from companies within the OABC looking to level up their own Linked In skills and techniques but was especially directed towards sales, business, development, and commercial roles engaged in B2B marketing. Unlike OABC's first Linked In session hosted in 2020, this more advanced workshop required attendees to have prior experience on Linked In and an existing account on the platform. OABC member and presenter Mohammed al Tamami, known as one of Oman's top digital strategists, covered a variety of ways to 'hack the system' and get posts seen, liked, shared, and noticed by the right people, creating new opportunities to do business.

The workshop included a brief time of networking and coffee, a presentation, and time for Q & A.

Tamami said, "Linked In, similar to any social media tool, requires utilising a certain etiquette and specific methods in order to access the wealth of resources it can bring to us. Sharing my experience with others through OABC's last Linked In session for members made a big difference to those who are now actively using it, and this inspired us to hold more such workshops."

"The focus of this event was



to focus on that B2B and B2C sales aspect of Linked In: What to remember, what to avoid, and examples for those involved in online relationship building with clients," he added.

"One thing we've learnt from the COVID-19 era is that sometimes without warning, our online life takes front and center and the physical is no longer easily accessible," said Rebecca Olson, executive director of the OABC. "Linked In was a useful resource before, but now it is an essential platform for those in corporate roles. Its use is growing daily in Oman as a place to

explore new connections, vet people before you meet them, or present oneself and one's services to the business community. Creating an effective personal and business profile can open new doors for both new professionals and those who've been in the business community for a long time.

As Oman's largest and most active networking group, OABC is focused on supporting the relationships between member companies both online and in person. We're thankful for Tamami for his time in preparing the session, and for his great pas-

sion in equipping others to excel in their own online networking."

As the official affiliate of the US Chamber of Commerce in Oman (AmCham Oman), the OABC promotes understanding, partnerships and other matters of mutual economic interest between business communities in Oman and the United States.

OABC's mission is to foster the development of commercial activity between Oman and the United States. With more than 30 events annually and over 165 member companies, OABC is Oman's most active business council and networking group.



Top regional tech leaders highlight innovative solutions, opportunities in post-pandemic era at ABLF Talks

With the COVID wave showing no signs of abating, leveraging the opportunities in technology while ensuring digital inclusion should be the key to meeting the myriad socio-economic issues currently facing the world, said tech-experts at the 16th Edition of the ABLF Talks held at the cutting-edge virtual venue ABLF City.

The ABLF Talks, held under the patronage of H H Sheikh Nahayan Mubarak al Nahayan and in partnership with the UAE Ministry of Economy and Dubai Cares, saw top tech leaders from the region converge virtually to discuss the role of technology and the importance of financial and digital inclusion as they suggested ways to counter the grave problems that different sectors are grappling with in the wake of the pandemic.

Fadi Pharaon, president, MEA, Ericsson spotlighted the initiatives of the technology giant in the field of education as well as in providing climate change solutions as he out-

lined the projects the company has taken up to meet the vision of the UAE government. "We need to leverage the power of 5G to transform industries and communities," said Pharaon.

While digital transformation has been more pronounced in the finance sector, financial inclusion continues to be a challenge. In a panel discussion between Ahmed Alnaqbi, CEO, Emirates Development Bank (EDB), UAE and Sonia Gokhale, founding partner, Venturesouq, UAE the emphasis was on increasing digital inclusion. Alnaqbi recalled how the banking industry was forced to adopt new methods and adapt to the changing needs of the customer almost overnight when the pandemic struck. "Banking is people's business," said Alnaqbi.

"All our processes including the rules and regulations have had to change to cope with the digital way of working," he said.

However, EDB has been up to the challenge and have in-

creased their digital offerings besides playing a larger role in the economic diversification of the UAE. "EDB has committed to deploying AED30bn into the market in five key sectors which will have an impact on sustainability and development," said Alnaqbi.

His co-panellist Sonia Gokhale threw light on the change in the start-up sector that COVID-19 brought in. Venturesouq, the leading GCC-based venture capital firm launched the region's first fintech fund in 2021 contributing to the transformation of the sector. With governments in the region, be it Saudi Arabia or the UAE, promoting the ecosystem, companies like Venturesouq have been able to build an environment where people can grow. "COVID-19 has taught us to be nimble and we have seen that trait in the startup sector," said Gokhale.

The ABLF Talks will return next month on February 8 featuring top leaders in conversations of consequence.



Less than one month to wait until Al Mouj Muscat Marathon returns

The wait for the Al Mouj Muscat Marathon is nearly over, with just less than a month to go. Over the weekend of February 11-12, the runners will take their place on the starting line at Al Mouj Muscat and test their endurance.

Sabco Sports have teamed up with UFC Gym Oman to offer free public training sessions every Friday morning in the build up to the race and runners of all ages have taken this opportunity to learn from professionals and improve their fitness.

Taking place from 8am-9am at ABQ Seeb International School, coaches have given hundreds of runners help with training, nutrition and diet, and tips on how to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle.

"Excitement is building for

the Al Mouj Muscat Marathon 2022 and we are delighted with the number of people across the world that have taken up the challenge to compete this year. The entire weekend will be a fun-filled festival of running which brings together communities from across the country, local schools and colleges, businesses and teams to support each other from start to finish," said Nic Cartwright, managing director of Sabco Sports, organisers of the event.

He added, "Al Mouj Muscat, Oman's premier lifestyle destination, is the perfect venue for the race and we have several surprises in store to delight spectators, visitors and guests throughout the weekend as we celebrate the dedication of the athletes and welcome the return of Oman's most popular sport-

ing event."

The forthcoming event at Al Mouj Muscat features five different race distances to cater to a variety of fitness levels and experience and each category has received a very good turnout in terms of registrations.

The 42km marathon and 21.2km half-marathon and 10km runs are certified by world-running organisation AIMS, aligning the event with International Association of Athletic Federation (IAAF) standards and adding to competitive runners' rankings. Participants in all races will receive a commemorative t-shirt and a finisher's medal to mark their achievement

Registration is still open and places available in all races. For more information and to register, please visit www.muscat-marathon.om.

Pakistan School Muscat holds board elections 2022

Pakistan School Muscat got a privilege to schedule board of directors' elections 2022.

The panel observed an unopposed election, resulting Ameer Hamza as chairman board of directors, Pakistan School Muscat.

Additionally, Muhammad Kaiser Nawaz as vice chairman and Muhammad Amer Irfan as director finance have been elected in the newly elected board.

As member board of direc-

tors, Muhammad Irshad, Aamir Masood, Muhammad Moazzam Khan (president SMC, Pakistan School Musannah), Mukhtar Ali (president SMC, Pakistan School Nizwa) have been elected during the board of directors' elections 2022.

The board consists of eight members, including the chairman, vice chairman and the senior principal to run the future affairs of Pakistan Schools Oman.

Nissan Altima features expressive styling, uplifting interior and intelligent features

Nissan Altima, known for its excellent drive, superior handling, fuel efficiency and thoughtful technology solutions, is now available on low EMI. Customers can now avail an exceptionally low EMI rate of RO170 on Nissan Altima (terms and conditions apply). EMIs are calculated on the basis of 20 per cent down payment and 3.25 per cent rate of interest for six years loan tenure, subject to credit approvals.

A senior official of Nissan Oman said, "We are delighted to have Nissan Altima which is a premium mid-size sedan like no other, available on low EMI. Nissan Altima offers effortless power while furthering remarkable fuel economy. Its good looks, striking exterior, colour range, spaciousness and fashionable interior have brought the car a lifetime of fans. Its powerful high-performance engine and a range of other options adds to its appeal. Nissan Altima is cherished by owners in Oman for its classy design, fuel economy, driving performance, safety technology, and comfortability."

Expressive styling

Nissan Altima is also cherished by owners in Oman for its good looks, striking exterior, colour



range, spaciousness and fashionable interior have brought the car a lifetime of fans. The vehicle offers those who drive it an effortless power while furthering remarkable fuel economy.

Nissan Altima has advanced safety features for those seeking a more focused driving experience. Owners vouch that with its advanced technology and in-built design, Nissan Altima is a pleasure to drive.

The Nissan Altima 2.0L Turbo, which has a new standard of design, driving enjoyment and technology has been creating waves within the mid-size sedan segment since its launch. The sedan's advanced VC-Turbo engine – the company's first production-ready variable compression ratio engine – is one of the most advanced internal combustion engines ever created. Simi-

larly, Nissan Altima 2.5L features expressive styling, an uplifting interior, two powertrains, and advanced Nissan Intelligent Mobility features.

The Nissan Altima 2.0 has the world's first variable compression turbo engine. The engine is so smart that it anticipates what the driver wants. The Altima's shape-shifting VC-turbo engine lets the driver enjoy a lot. Nissan Altima 2.5L unlocks the pure joy of driving through its innovative latest technology and Nissan Intelligent Mobility feature that responds to the world around in real time.

Innovative technologies

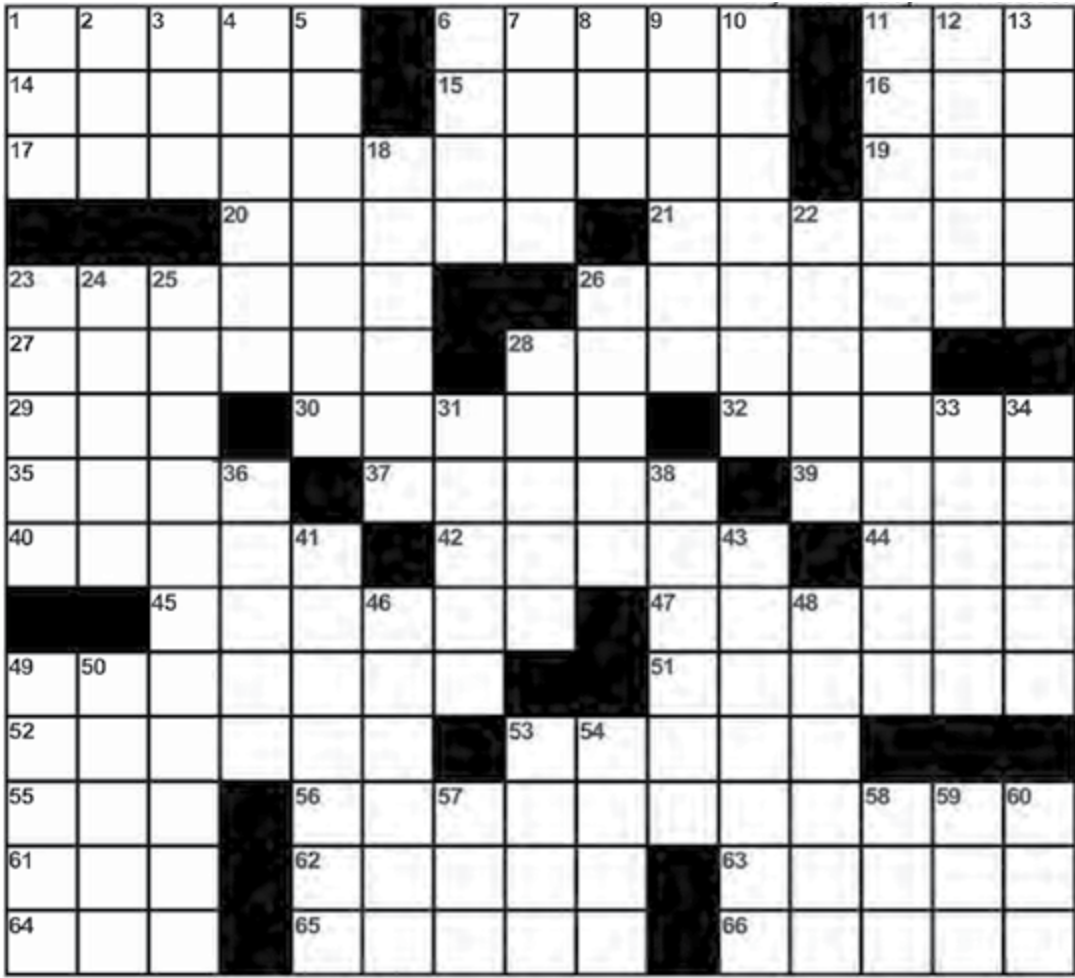
Powered by an innovative 248 horsepower, 2.0Ltr, turbocharged variable compression, four-cylinder engine, Nissan Altima con-

tinuously adjusts its compression ratio to optimise power and efficiency. Whether its turbocharged power that pushes you back in your seat or efficiency that sips fuel, even in city streets, Altima's shape-shifting VC-Turbo engine gives you the best of both worlds. The sedan is a complete technological package – it over delivers on the basics, boasts features and innovative technologies never seen in its class.

The VC-Turbo has been developed after years of research and consumer feedback. It seamlessly changes its compression ratio between 8:1 (for high performance) and 14:1 (for high efficiency) – with an advanced multi-link system continuously raising or lowering the pistons' reach to transform the compression ratio. While a high compression ratio gives greater efficiency, a low compression ratio allows for greater power and torque and avoids knocking.

Nissan Altima also comes standard with a traditional 2.5Ltr, four-cylinder engine. The 2.5Ltr inline 4-cylinder, which is standard on all Altima grades, utilises more than 80 per cent or redesigned parts. Nissan Altima 2.0 L Turbo delivers 248 horsepower.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Swap
6) Ancient calculators
11) Baby that barks
14) Lots of land
15) Man-made fiber
16) Santa_, Calif.
17) Indy 500 leaders
19) Sleet-covered
20) " _ porridge hot ... "
21) Bring under control
23) Trees with quaking leaves
26) Legendary actress Holm
27) Meeting with a medium
28) Holder of baby's milk
29) Attack, to a dog
30) Baylor of basketball fame
32) Begot
35) Looped cross
37) Japanese rice wines
39) "As " (letter closing)
40) Arizona flat tops
42) Place of pilgrimage, for some
44) English 101 verb
45) More creative, perhaps

47) Abdominal protrusion
49) Disheartens
51) Author
52) Natural, hairwise
53) Newton of science
55) Shutout score, in soccer
56) It's undone for change?
61) Part of SUV, briefly
62) French school
63) Over, as a meal
64) Faux_ (public misstep)
65) Impede the progress of
66) Ice cream serving

10) "Yo mama" jokes, essentially
11) Professional butler, for one
12) Whole, as a film
13) Check casher
18) Art-studio stands
22) Be in contradiction with
23) Black tea from India
24) Catcher in the Rhine?
25) Burdens for Grand Canyon mules
26) Like a dunce cap
28) Man on a "hog"
31) Arcade attractions
33) Creepy and supernatural
34) Dismal, to a bard
36) Built to take it
38) Unstressed vowel sounds
41) Prepared tea, in a way
43) Pumps full of bubbles
46) Bring on, as labor
48) Zigzag braid on clothing (Var.)
49) Time to rise, for some
50) "West Side Story"

girl
53) Sea-girt land
54) Tarot reader, supposedly
57) Decay

58) "What was _ think?"
59) Keanu in "The Matrix"
60) A country's output, for short

NOTE PAD

S	T	I	L	E	B	A	H	T	S	B	B	C
O	W	N	E	R	A	D	I	E	U	A	L	L
B	O	N	G	O	P	L	A	Y	E	R	N	E
S	E	L	M	A	G	A	G	E	S			
T	A	B	B	I	E	S	D	E	C	O	D	E
O	P	E	R	O	N	B	E	A	R	E	R	
T	E	N	O	N	B	I	D	D	Y	M	U	D
E	R	G	S	P	O	N	G	O	D	A	M	E
R	Y	A	H	O	A	G	Y	T	R	I	B	E
L	E	A	N	T	O	M	O	A	N	E	D	
A	T	T	E	N	D	F	I	B	B	E	R	S
C	H	I	L	D	S	A	L	L	Y			
T	O	G	B	U	N	G	E	E	J	U	M	P
U	S	E	A	F	I	R	E	U	K	A	S	E
P	E	R	G	O	T	A	T	G	E	N	I	E

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Authority figures might cause you no small amount of amusement today, and you won't be as intimidated by their bluster because they won't know as much as you do! Things are moving into your area of expertise, and the powers that be are having a hard time accepting that fact. Beware that they might start to feel the need to justify their existence, which could increase the heat on you. But you have nothing to worry about.

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

When you're in a restaurant and you don't get the service you deserve, you can talk to the manager and get the matter straightened out. But when you're in a relationship and you're not getting the level of attention you deserve, you need to go to the source. You can complain to your friends all you want, but nothing is going to change until you talk to the person who needs to hear what you have to say.

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

The odds are good that you've got fun plans coming up. That sounds wonderful, and if you're lucky, they'll go off just as expected. Watch out, though. It could be easier said than done. You need to check, double-check, and check again all your plans for a while, thanks to some odd energy coursing through your life. Just in case, make sure that you have a Plan B ready to rock.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

Going along with whatever the rest of the crowd thinks is what sheep do, not what you should do! Stand your ground when you disagree with others. Who cares if you have an unpopular opinion? It's your opinion, and it's valid for you to want people to hear it. Why would you buckle to peer pressure at this stage? Be proud of your thoughts. No one else thinks like you do, and no one can contribute the thought-provoking ideas that you can.

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Your patience is sure to be tested, and it's an extended examination! It could be most intense today, and you might start to think that you're living through Murphy's Law. The good news is that you're well equipped to handle all the messy, irritating little details, the ones that keep trying to come between you and where you want to be. Get to work and don't let up!

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Whatever you do to deal with frustration, make sure that you've got it in reserve today. None of your best-laid plans are likely to work out the way you want them to for a little while, which is hard on you. You can deal with it, of course, just as you always do, because preparedness is one of your key strengths. Make sure that you've got everyone on your side.

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

Your optimistic outlook will be growing stronger today, mostly because your subconscious is active and full of positive thoughts that are slowly but surely bubbling up to the surface of your conscious mind. Seeing the bright side of life is contagious and very attractive. Someone who has just taken a new role in your life loves the fact that you're starting to see the glass as half full, and they're going to be a much bigger part of your life.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Anything that can possibly be misunderstood or confused is exactly what you can expect for the time being. Your least favourite part of this situation is sure to be its impact on your one-on-one encounters. Keeping your appointments may not be easy. The best part, however, will be the fact that canceled business meetings will leave more time for spontaneous lunches with your sweetheart. There's always a silver lining.

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You're not exactly the soul of patience, at least according to those closest to you. Today, though, you could be even a tad less patient, but with good reason. It might seem like Murphy's Law in action, because if something can go wrong, it will. Your best bet is to always have an alternate plan set and ready to go, to allow twice as much time to get where you're going, and to try to be patient.

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

You may have more than your share of frustrating encounters with one of your superiors or maybe an important client. Believe it or not, though, the situation might not be entirely their fault. The whole world is dealing with all kinds of miscommunications, and each issue requires at least two mistakes to fully engage. While you're waiting out the worst of it, why not take a little vacation time or ask for a temporary transfer?

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Trivial chats today could evolve into philosophical conversations that explore high ideas if you give them a chance. Increase the expectations you have of other people, and they will rise to them every single time. When you want to find out something, ask everyone. Just because someone doesn't look like they're aware of what's going on doesn't mean that they're totally clueless. Give them a shot. You won't regret it.

 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Your close association with a group of people is about to get a lot closer. Are you ready for a more involved role? Take the time to evaluate the situation thoroughly before diving in. Think about the impact it will have on your free time, your romantic life, your family life, and your career. You can't anticipate every change, but you can at least be clear-eyed about the effect this group could have on your life. Proceed with caution.

Answers: 1. a 2. b 3. b

KIDS COLOURING





BOGGLER

S	Z	C	N
T	T	I	L
A	S	T	R
A	P	I	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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Israel police demolish Palestinian home in east Jerusalem eviction

Jerusalem - Israeli police demolished the home of a Palestinian family and arrested at least 18 people as they carried out a controversial eviction order in the sensitive east Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah early on Wednesday.

The looming eviction of other families from Sheikh Jarrah in May last year fuelled an 11-day war between Israel and armed Palestinian factions in Gaza.

Before dawn, Israeli officers went to the home of the Salhiya family, who were first served with an eviction notice in 2017.

Jerusalem authorities have said the land will be used to build a school for children with special needs, but the eviction is likely to raise tension in a neighbourhood that has become a symbol of Palestinian opposition to Israeli occupation.

Jerusalem deputy mayor Fleur Hassan-Nahoum has said the dispute surrounding the Salhiya home is 'totally different' from the events in May, when Palestinians risked being forced to hand over plots of land to Jewish settlers.

Israeli police said they had 'completed the execution of an eviction order of illegal buildings built on grounds designated for a school for children with special needs'.

'Members of the family living in the illegal buildings were given countless opportunities to hand over the land with consent,' a police statement said.

A bulldozer raked through rubble hours after the home was destroyed.

A police spokesman told AFP 18 family members and supporters were arrested for 'violating a court order, violent fortification and disturbing public order', but no clashes took place during the



A member of the Israeli forces stands by the ruins of a Palestinian house they demolished, in Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood on Wednesday (AFP)

eviction.

When police arrived to carry out the order on Monday, Salhiya family members went up to the building's roof with gas canisters, threatening to set the contents and themselves alight if they were forced out of their home.

Police had eventually backed off, but returned early on Wednesday amid heavy rainfall in Jerusalem.

Salhiya family lawyer Walid Abu-Tayeh told AFP police had arrested 20 people during the operation, six of them Israeli citizens, with the latter being released, adding that 'the Arab detainees were assaulted'.

He also confirmed reports that the Palestinian father Mahmud Salhiya is married to an Israeli Jew, named Meital.

In an audio recording distrib-

uted to local Arab-language media, Meital, who speaks Arabic, said the family was woken early on Wednesday by the sound of loud booms and police had cut the electricity.

"They took me out of the house with my daughter and children who were crying and arrested my husband and all the young men," she said.

'Two-time refugees'

Deputy mayor Hassan-Nahoum said on Tuesday the plot that the Salhiya family claim as theirs belonged to private Palestinian owners who then sold it to the city, which allocated it for classrooms for special needs Palestinian children.

A delegation of European diplomats visited the site during the standoff.

"In occupied territory, evic-

tions are a violation of international humanitarian law," the head of the European Union's mission to the Palestinian territories, Sven Kuehn von Burgsdorff, told AFP.

Human Rights Watch Israel and Palestine director Omar Shakir called the eviction 'cruel' and stressed that the Salhiya family had previously been forced from their west Jerusalem home during Israel's creation in 1948. Wednesday's eviction made them 'two-time refugees', he said.

Hundreds of Palestinians face eviction from homes in Sheikh Jarrah and other east Jerusalem neighbourhoods.

Circumstances surrounding the eviction threats vary.

In some cases, Jewish Israelis have lodged legal claims to plots they say were illegally taken dur-

ing the war that accompanied Israel's creation in 1948.

Israeli law allows Jewish Israelis to file such claims, but no equivalent law exists for Palestinians who lost land during the conflict.

Palestinians facing eviction say their homes were legally purchased from Jordanian authorities who controlled east Jerusalem between 1948 and 1967.

Israel captured east Jerusalem in the Six-Day War of 1967 and later annexed it in a move not recognised by the international community.

More than 200,000 Jewish settlers have since moved into the city's eastern sector, fuelling tensions with Palestinians, who claim it as the capital of their future state.

AFP



NSO Group Technologies is primarily known for its spyware Pegasus, which is capable of remote zero-click surveillance of smartphones

Israel pledges to probe alleged Pegasus use to spy on citizens

Jerusalem - Israel's justice minister on Wednesday pledged a full investigation into allegations that the controversial Pegasus spyware was used on Israeli citizens, including people who led protests against former premier Benjamin Netanyahu.

Pegasus, a surveillance product made by the Israeli firm NSO that can turn a mobile phone into a pocket spying device, has remained a source of global controversy following revelations last year it was used to spy on journalists and dissidents worldwide.

According to the business daily *Calcalist*, Pegasus was also used by police on citizens at the forefront of protests against Netanyahu last year, when he was still prime minister, as well as other Israelis.

Israeli police have firmly denied the report.

Public Security Minister Omar Barlev, a Netanyahu critic who took office as part of a new government that ousted him in June, offered a more nuanced defence.

There was 'no practice of wire-tapping or hacking devices by police without a judge's approval', he said.

Israeli security forces have wide leeway to conduct surveillance within Israel with judicial approval.

But Tehilla Schwartz Altschuler, an expert at the Israel Democracy Institute think-tank, told AFP 'you can't really ask for a court order authorising Pegasus' because Israeli law does not currently permit such invasive surveillance of its citizens.

"It is now clear that the current Protection of Privacy Law is not equipped to cope with today's reality," she said.

Probing the 'balance'

The justice ministry and State Comptroller's office both said they were looking into the *Calcalist* reports.

The Privacy Protection Authority, a division of the ministry,

said use of Pegasus to monitor Israeli citizens' would constitute a 'serious violation of privacy', announcing its investigation.

State Comptroller Matanyahu Englman said on Tuesday he would expand his ongoing investigation into law enforcement's use of surveillance technology to include the latest Pegasus allegations.

He would in particular probe 'the balance' between the 'usefulness' of surveillance tools in investigations and 'violations of the right to privacy'.

Justice Minister Gideon Saar, another Netanyahu rival, told parliament on Wednesday that he fully backed the probes.

"There is a huge difference between the claims in the *Calcalist* article and the police statements," Saar told the law committee in the Knesset, Israel's parliament.

"It's good that the state comptroller, who is an independent body, took upon himself to examine the issue," Saar said.

"In the (justice) ministry we were not aware of any activity without a court order. It is good that these things will be examined, and the public will receive the conclusions."

NSO would neither confirm nor deny it sold technologies to Israeli police, stressing that it does 'not operate the system once sold to its governmental customers and it is not involved in any way in the system's operation'.

'NSO sells its products under licence and regulation to intelligence and law enforcement agencies to prevent terror and crime under court orders and the local laws of their countries,' it said in a statement.

Israel's defence ministry, which must approve all exports of Israeli-made defence industry products, has also opened an investigation into sales of Pegasus overseas.

AFP

Bali bombings: Indonesian militant gets 15 years in jail

Jakarta, Indonesia - An Indonesian court sentenced an Al Qaeda-linked militant to 15 years in prison on Wednesday for his role in the 2002 bombings that killed more than 200 people on the resort island of Bali.

The blasts, which came just over a year after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, ripped through two bars packed with foreign tourists, and remain the deadliest militant assault in Indonesia's history.

Zulkarnaen, a high-ranking member of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) group, was on trial for the Bali bombings as well as several other attacks carried out by a special unit under his command.



This file photo shows cops escorting Zulkarnaen on December 16, 2020 (AFP)

He 'is guilty of committing terrorism and is sentenced to 15 years behind bars', said the presiding judge at East Jakarta District Court, punishing him for

assisting militants, hiding information about attacks and his association with the JI cell.

The 58-year-old Zulkarnaen, whose real name was listed with

the court as Arif Sunarso, had been on Indonesia's most-wanted list since the bombings, having evaded authorities for nearly two decades until his arrest in December 2020.

Indonesian prosecutors had said Zulkarnaen set up the special JI cell and described him as a 'key asset' for the group because of his experience as a trainer at militant camps in Afghanistan and the Philippines.

During the trial, Zulkarnaen denied involvement in the Bali bombings, but admitted they were carried out by his team.

He told the court that JI operatives did not tell him about the attack in advance and that he

was not involved in specific planning. But the judges were not convinced.

"The fact that he was the head of the team and agreed on a plan in Bali... it could be considered agreeing to the plan," the presiding judge said. The court also flagged other attacks by Zulkarnaen's cell during the sentencing, including a 2000 attack on the Philippines embassy, and a series of church bombings.

His unit was also tasked with inciting ethnic and religious violence in Sulawesi and Molucca islands, where thousands were killed between 1998 and 2002, according to the police.

AFP

Germany puts Syrian doctor on trial for crimes against humanity

Frankfurt, Germany - A Syrian doctor went on trial in Germany on Wednesday accused of crimes against humanity including torture and murder in his war-torn homeland, in the latest European court case involving loyalists of President Bashar Assad's regime.

Alaa Mousa (36), who arrived in Germany in 2015 and practised medicine there until his arrest, faces 18 counts of torturing detainees at military hospitals in Homs and Damascus in 2011-12, including setting fire to a teenage boy's genitals.

He also allegedly administered a lethal injection to a prisoner who resisted being beaten, according to federal prosecutors.

The defendant, who arrived at the court in a blue suit and wear-

ing an FFP2 face mask, has so far denied the charges.

The trial at Frankfurt's higher regional court comes after another German court last week sentenced a former Syrian colonel to life in jail for overseeing the murder of 27 people and the torture of 4,000 others at a Damascus detention centre a decade ago.

That verdict, hailed by victims as 'historic', marked the culmination of the first trial globally over state-sponsored torture in Syria.

The proceedings in Germany are made possible by the legal principle of 'universal jurisdiction', which allows countries to try people for crimes of exceptional gravity, including war crimes and genocide, even if they were committed in a different



Alaa M (second from right) has his handcuffs taken off - next to his lawyers Oussama al Aqi (second from left) and Ulrich Endres (right) - as he arrives at the court in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany, on Wednesday (AFP)

country. Other cases involving the Syrian conflict have also sprung up in France, Norway and Austria. In 2017, Sweden became the first country to convict a former Syrian soldier of a war crime.

"Over the past decade, a large amount of evidence about atrocities in Syria has been collected, and now... those efforts are starting to bear fruit," said Balkees Jarrah of Human Rights Watch.

He criticised the Frankfurt court however for not providing Arabic translations of the proceedings for the public.

Mousa left Syria for Germany in mid-2015, arriving not as a refugee but on a visa for skilled workers. He worked in several places as an orthopaedic doctor, including in the spa town of Bad Wildungen, before being ar-

rested in June 2020 after Syrian witnesses came forward.

German federal prosecutors say Mousa worked in military hospital 608 in the Syrian city of Homs and military hospital 601 in the capital Damascus, where injured detainees were brought after being arrested for opposing Assad's regime. But instead of being treated, many were tortured 'and not infrequently killed' in such hospitals as part of Assad's brutal repression of the opposition, prosecutors allege.

Reading the charge sheet at the start of the trial, public prosecutor Anna Zabeck accused Mousa of torturing detainees 'within the framework of a widespread and systematic attack on civilians'.

AFP

Putin urged to pick a ‘peaceful path’ on Ukraine

Kyiv, Ukraine - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to choose the ‘peaceful path’ on Ukraine, as he visited Kyiv in a show of support ahead of crunch talks with Russia later this week.

In Ukraine in advance of talks with European allies in Berlin and his Russian counterpart in Geneva on Friday, Blinken urged Putin to calm fears he is planning an invasion of his pro-Western neighbour.

“I strongly, strongly hope that we can keep this on a diplomatic and peaceful path, but ultimately, that’s going to be President Putin’s decision,” Blinken said at the US embassy after he landed in the Ukrainian capital.

With tens of thousands of Russian troops massed on the Ukrainian border, tensions between Moscow and the West have reached a post-Cold War high and there are real fears of a major conflict in Eastern Europe.

Moscow insists it has no plans to invade, but is demanding wide-ranging security guarantees - including a ban on Ukraine ever joining NATO - in exchange for a lowering of tensions. Blinken’s arrival on Wednesday in Europe upped the diplomatic



Antony Blinken (right) speaks to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (second from left) during their meeting in Kyiv on Wednesday (AFP)

stakes, and after Kyiv he was headed to Berlin for four-way talks with Britain, France and Germany to seek Western unity, and finally to Geneva on Friday for a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

New US military aid
On the streets of the separatist-

held city of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, residents told AFP they hoped an all-out conflict could be avoided. “Talks are good, at least it’s not war,” said Alexei Bokarev, a 77-year-old retired miner.

“The guns are quiet and negotiations are going on, it means that there is some kind of a search for a solution. How will

this end? Nobody can say.”

Speaking at the embassy ahead of talks with President Volodymyr Zelensky and his Ukrainian counterpart, Blinken warned that Russia could easily send more forces towards Ukraine. “We know that there are plans in place to increase that force even more on very short

notice, and that gives President Putin the capacity, also on very short notice, to take further aggressive action against Ukraine,” Blinken said.

A senior US official meanwhile confirmed that the United States had authorised an additional US\$200mn in security aid to Ukraine, on top of US\$450mn

I strongly hope that we can keep this on a diplomatic and peaceful path, but ultimately that’s going to be President Putin’s decision. Russia has the capacity on very short notice to take further aggressive action against Ukraine

ANTHONY BLINKEN

already delivered by President Joe Biden’s administration.

“We are committed to Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and will continue to provide Ukraine the support it needs,” the official said on condition of anonymity.

Extremely dangerous situation: Jen Psaki

As Blinken left Washington, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki warned of an ‘extremely dangerous situation’ around Ukraine, saying ‘no option is off

the table’ in terms of a US response to an invasion.

Lavrov on Tuesday said there would be no further negotiations until the West responds, in writing, to its demands for sweeping security guarantees.

As well as a permanent ban on Ukraine joining NATO, Moscow is demanding measures that would limit military activities in former Warsaw Pact and ex-Soviet countries that joined the alliance after Cold War.

Washington has rejected the demands as ‘non-starters’ and warned that any invasion of Ukraine would be met with a severe economic counter-measures. Tensions increased on Tuesday with the launch of joint military drills between the forces of Russia and Belarus, which also neighbours Ukraine.

A US official said the exercises could presage a permanent Russian military presence involving both conventional and nuclear forces in Belarus. Kyiv has been battling a pro-Moscow insurgency in two breakaway regions bordering Russia since 2014, when the Kremlin annexed Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula.

The conflict in eastern Ukraine has killed over 13,000.

AFP

3 dead in blast on Indian warship

New Delhi, India - Three Indian naval personnel were killed in an explosion on one of the country’s oldest destroyers at a naval dockyard in Mumbai, authorities said.

The blast occurred on Tuesday in an internal compartment on the Soviet-built *INS Ranvir*, commissioned in 1986, according to the Indian Navy. ‘No material damage has been reported... (A) board of inquiry has been ordered to investigate into the cause,’ the navy said in a statement on Tuesday.

Broadcaster NDTV quoted sources saying the explosion did not involve weapons or ammunition.

Media reports said 11 people were also injured and were being treated at a navy hospital.

The Indian government is in the middle of a modernisation of its armed forces to replace old equipment, much of it Soviet vintage.

AFP

Victims of twin Afghan earthquakes await aid

Qadis, Afghanistan - Survivors of twin earthquakes in Afghanistan were waiting on Wednesday for aid to arrive after spending their second night exposed to sub-zero temperatures following tremors that killed at least 22 people and wrecked homes.

Rescuers continued to comb through debris in search of survivors from Monday’s quakes, as many survivors spent a second straight night out in the open while some took shelter in tents on Tuesday night, an AFP correspondent reported.

The United States Geological Survey (USGS) said two earthquakes hours apart of magnitudes 4.9 and 5.3 rocked Qadis district in the western province of Badghis, damaging hundreds of buildings in a rural area not easily accessible by road.

Scattered aid has begun to reach the area but the vast majority of victims are still awaiting assistance.

“No aid has reached us,” Najibullah Najibi, who became homeless along with 19 other family members after their house was destroyed, told AFP on Wednesday.

“We spent the night in a tent given to us last year when we were hit by floods,” he said.

Many fear that rain could



A resident stands near a damaged house at Qadis district in the southern part of Badghis province on Tuesday (AFP)

make houses even more vulnerable to collapse, exacerbating the crisis.

“We lost everything that we had. We are homeless. Everything is buried under the rubble,” said Abdul Rahman, another survivor whose house in Qadis was damaged.

When the tremors began ‘everybody started screaming’, he said. “Everyone from every house just ran out from their homes and fled.”

‘We are alone’
Footage of the earthquake’s aftermath showed destroyed mud

houses, with survivors including children searching the ruins for their belongings.

One man, his face covered in mud, could be seen walking through the debris carrying an infant, as clothes, carpets and household items lay scattered around.

“We were buried under the walls... only our heads were out of the mud,” said Khair Mohammad, another resident of Qadis.

“We are alone here. We all live far from each other.”

The Taliban government said up to 1,000 houses had been damaged and that tents, food

and medicine were being sent to the victims.

The epicentre of the quake was near the city of Qala-i-Naw, the capital of Badghis, less than 100km from the Turkmenistan border, according to the USGS.

Afghanistan is already in the grip of a humanitarian disaster, worsened by the Taliban takeover of the country in August when Western countries froze international aid and access to assets held abroad.

The United Nations has said Afghanistan needs an aid of US\$5bn in 2022 to avert the ongoing catastrophe.

A devastating drought has compounded the crisis, with Qadis one of the worst affected areas.

Afghanistan is frequently hit by earthquakes, especially in the Hindu Kush mountain range, which lies near the junction of the Eurasian and Indian tectonic plates.

Even weak quakes can cause significant damage to poorly built homes and buildings in the impoverished country.

In 2015, more than 380 people were killed in Pakistan and Afghanistan when a 7.5-magnitude earthquake ripped across the two countries, with the bulk of the deaths in Pakistan.

AFP



Ten ambulances rushed to the scene and evacuated 71 people

Six elderly die in fire at Spain retirement home

Madrid, Spain - Six elderly people died and two others were seriously injured when a fire ripped through a retirement home near Valencia in eastern Spain, the emergency services said on Wednesday.

Ten ambulances rushed to the scene after the fire broke out around 11.20pm on Tuesday, with rescuers evacuating 71 people.

Medics initially gave a toll of five dead and three seriously hurt, although one of the injured later died.

“I can confirm that a sixth person has died, another elderly person,” an emergency services spokeswoman said as the local authority declared three days of mourning.

Three men aged 67, 79 and 85 were among the dead, along with three women aged 78, 89 and 95.

Nine fire engines were deployed to tackle the fire at the elderly residence in Moncada, just north of the eastern resort city of Valencia. The fire was raging when they arrived, consuming one wing of the residence, the emergency services said.

Local mayor Amparo Orts told Spain’s RNE radio the wing affected by the blaze had been ‘very badly damaged’ and it was not clear whether the residence would be able to continue operating.

Initial reports pointed to an electrical fault in one of the bedrooms but Orts said it was ‘too early’ to establish the cause.

“We are declaring three days of official mourning from today until Friday and will hold a minute’s silence at midday” on Wednesday, she said.

AFP

Belgian court jails trafficker of migrants found dead in lorry

Bruges, Belgium - A Belgian court sentenced a Vietnamese man to 15 years in prison on Wednesday after convicting him of being the ringleader in the trafficking of 39 migrants found dead in a lorry.

Vo Van Hong (45) was found guilty of leading a cross-Channel people-trafficking operation that has been linked to a truck found full of corpses on an English industrial estate in October 2019.

At least 15 of the 39 dead had passed through the Belgian-based trafficking network, which operated two safe houses in the Anderlecht district of Brussels for migrants heading to Britain.

The 2019 discovery on the Grays industrial park east of London was one of the worst involving migrants in recent years.

The victims - 31 men and eight

women aged between 15 and 44, all Vietnamese - died from suffocation and hyperthermia in the confined space of the container, which arrived on a ferry from Zeebrugge.

Several suspects have already been convicted and incarcerated in Britain and Vietnam in connection with the case. In France, 26 more have been charged and face trial.

‘Well-organised’
In Belgium, Vo was one of 23 suspects - both Belgians and Vietnamese - put on trial after a May 2020 police operation in which several addresses, most in the Brussels region, were raided and Vietnamese suspected of links to the gang were rounded up.

Of the 23, a total of 19 - including Vo - were convicted and



Long Nguyen and Vo Van Hong stand in the defendant box for the trial in a courtroom in Brugge on Wednesday (AFP)

four were acquitted.

The 18 others sentenced after Vo were given prison terms of under five years, most of them suspended.

Most of the defendants were allegedly members of the people-smuggling ring. The remainder were charged as accomplices, used as safe-house guards, grocery shoppers for the migrants or drivers.

Prosecutors said the ‘very well-organised’ gang was specialised in clandestinely transporting people into Europe then Britain for a fee of €24,000 per person.

Vo was convicted of running a criminal organisation in Belgium involved in smuggling a total of 115 identified people to Britain between September 2018 and the date of his arrest in May

2020.

He denied acting as ringleader and claimed he was a ‘victim’ of the smuggling ring.

He was handed a 15-year sentence, the statutory maximum, and a fine of €920,000.

Prosecutors said the gang used an Irish trucking company that regularly imported Vietnamese biscuits to get the migrants across the Channel.

Vietnamese gang members took charge of the arriving migrants once they got to Britain.

Many of the dead migrants in the truck came from a poor region in the centre of Vietnam.

Families there rack up thousands of dollars in debt to have a single family member smuggled into Britain in the hope of securing a better life.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

WHO says pandemic ‘nowhere near over’ as France, Germany post record infections

Geneva, Switzerland - The World Health Organization has warned that the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, as France, Germany and Brazil posted new records of infections in the past 24 hours.

The highly transmissible Omicron strain has spread unabated around the world, pushing some governments to impose fresh measures while speeding up the rollout of vaccine booster shots.

“This pandemic is nowhere near over,” WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters on Tuesday from the headquarters in Geneva.

Europe is at the epicentre of alarming new outbreaks, with Germany’s cases soaring past 100,000 and France reporting nearly half a million cases on Tuesday.

The UN health chief warned against dismissing Omicron as mild, as the dominant COVID strain continues to flare new outbreaks from Latin America to East Asia after it was first detected in southern Africa in November.

“Omicron may be less severe, on average, but the narra-



Protesters take part during a demonstration against the health pass and COVID-19 vaccines in front of the Palais Bourbon, France’s National Assembly, in Paris on Sunday (AFP)

tive that it is a mild disease is misleading,” he said.

European surge
Five millions cases were re-

ported in Europe last week and the WHO has predicted Omicron could infect half of all Europeans by March, filling hospitals across the continent.

Germany on Tuesday recorded 112,323 coronavirus cases and 239 deaths, officials said, with Omicron found in more than 70 per cent of the in-



Omicron may be less severe on average, but the narrative that it is a mild disease is misleading. The dominant COVID strain continues to flare new outbreaks from Latin America to East Asia

TEDROS A GHEBREYESUS

fections.

The surge has pushed German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to seek compulsory vaccinations to ramp up the immunity of the

population in Europe’s biggest economy.

Other European countries are also battling soaring Omicron rates, with neighbouring France recently averaging around 300,000 cases daily.

The latest data issued by Public Health France showed that there were 464,769 new cases in the last 24-hour period, a record number.

The record cases come days after the two-year anniversary of the announcement of the first person dying of a virus in China only later identified as COVID-19.

Since January 11, 2020, known fatalities in the pandemic have soared to more than 5.5mn.

Hopes for Europe’s tourism recovery remain bleak with the World Tourism Organization saying on Tuesday that foreign arrivals will not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2024 at the earliest, despite a rise of 19 per cent last year compared to 2020.

‘Quasi-emergency’
Elsewhere in the world, Brazil registered a new record number

of daily cases of more than 137,000 on Tuesday.

The country suffered a devastating second wave last year with deaths topping 4,000 a day, pushing its death toll to the second highest in the world behind the United States.

President Jair Bolsonaro, an avowed vaccine sceptic who has downplayed Omicron, is increasingly under fire for his handling of the pandemic, and he is on course to lose the country’s October presidential election, according to polls.

In Asia, Japan was set to tighten restrictions across the country, including Tokyo, as it battles record infections fuelled by Omicron while China partially relaxed transport restrictions in the megacity of Xi’an where millions have been confined to their homes for weeks.

Japanese experts on Wednesday backed the decision to place 13 regions ‘under quasi-emergency’ measures from January 21 to February 13’, Daishiro Yamagiwa, the minister in charge of coronavirus affairs, told reporters.

AFP

Germany posts 100,000 daily cases

Berlin, Germany - Germany’s daily toll of new COVID-19 cases topped 100,000 for the first time on Wednesday, according to data from the country’s public health agency.

Europe’s biggest economy recorded 112,323 new infections over the past 24 hours and 239 fatalities, the Robert Koch Institute said.

The weekly incidence rate reached 584.4 new infections per 100,000 people over the past seven days.

Germany has introduced some curbs to cut contamination, limiting access to bars and restaurants to people who have received their booster jabs or who are tested on top of being fully vaccinated or recovered.

Contact restrictions are also in place keeping private gatherings to ten people, or two households if an unvaccinated person is present.



A woman receives a shot of the vaccine by BioNTech-Pfizer at a vaccination centre, in Berlin on Tuesday (AFP)

Germany’s record rise in coronavirus cases comes as Omicron has become the dominant variant, accounting for more than 70 per cent of new infections.

Health Minister Karl Lauterbach said the true number of infections could be up to two times higher than the official figures.

Numbers will likely continue to rise, peaking in around ‘mid-February’, he told the RTL broadcaster.

Other European countries are also battling soaring Omicron rates, with neighbouring France recently averaging around 300,000 cases daily.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is seeking to introduce

compulsory vaccinations to ramp up the immunity of the 83mn-strong population, of which 60mn are already fully vaccinated.

But resistance has been growing in the country where the BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine was first developed, with the business-friendly FDP party - junior partners in his coalition - casting doubt on the project.

Hundreds, at times thousands, of protesters have also been taking to the streets to rail against the government’s COVID-19 strategy and planned vaccine mandate.

Despite the dissent, Scholz insisted that vaccinations are necessary.

“I, for one, believe that it is necessary and will actively push for it,” Scholz told parliament last week at his first question time as chancellor.

AFP

New virus curbs announced in Japan over Omicron surge

Tokyo, Japan - Japan’s government approved new coronavirus restrictions on a large part of the country, including Tokyo, on Wednesday as it battles record infections fuelled by the Omicron variant.

The restrictions in 13 regions, which mainly target nightlife and are far less strict than a blanket lockdown, will be in place from Friday until mid-February.

The move allows each region to decide what specific measures to implement, with most places urging bars and restaurants to shorten opening hours or halt alcohol sales.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the government aimed to be ‘fully prepared’ in the fight against the latest wave of COVID-19.

“We will not have excessive



A crowded escalator at Shibuya district in Tokyo on Wednesday (AFP)

fear, and will work in close coordination with regional governments,” he said as he announced the measures at a virus taskforce meeting.

“With scientific assessments from experts, the cooperation of medical workers and above all else, the cooperation of the

Japanese public, we will overcome this situation.”

The highly infectious Omicron variant is driving a resurgence in coronavirus cases in Japan, with daily nationwide infections topping 30,000 for the first time this week.

AFP

Biden to distribute 400mn masks in US

Washington, US - President Joe Biden’s administration announced on Wednesday it will distribute some 400mn high-quality N95 masks for free to Americans to rein in the pandemic.

The masks will be made available from next week at thousands of distribution points, particularly pharmacies and community health centres, according to the White House.

“This is the largest deployment of personal protective equipment in US history,” an unnamed White House official said in a statement.

Faced with the surge of the Omicron variant, the White House is also focusing on expanding COVID-19 testing.

AFP

Xi’an partially resumes public transport after lockdown

Beijing, China - The Chinese megacity of Xi’an has partially resumed public transport, according to official announcements, after millions were confined to their homes for weeks because of a coronavirus outbreak.

The easing of transport rules - including the resumption of some inter-city train routes - comes just before the Lunar New Year holiday later this month, traditionally a period of mass travel.

Chinese officials have pursued a strict ‘zero-COVID’ approach to containing the virus, with tight border restrictions and targeted lockdowns, a strategy that has come under pressure as multiple clusters have flared across the country ahead of next month’s Winter Olympics.

Some 13mn Xi’an residents were placed in lockdown in mid-December as cases spiked, but the historic city reported no



this file photo shows a staff member spraying disinfectant on a van outside a market in Xi’an last week (AFP)

new local cases on Wednesday for the first time in weeks.

Local authorities said public transport had resumed in ‘low-risk’ areas from Tuesday.

Trains from Xi’an to popular

destinations such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou have ‘basically resumed operations’ as well, state broadcaster CCTV said on Wednesday.

CCTV added that the num-

ber of commuters at the city’s train stations - mainly students and migrant workers - was increasing as well.

Xi’an’s flare-up was China’s biggest in months.

Trains from Xi’an to destinations such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou have basically resumed operations. The number of commuters at the city’s train stations has been increasing as well

CCTV

Local authorities came under fire for how they handled it - with supply issues and medical tragedies affecting residents, including a pregnant woman who miscarried after being denied access to a hospital because she lacked a recent coronavirus test.

Wednesday’s absence of cases suggests the current outbreak is coming under control.

But other outbreaks involving both the Delta and Omicron variants have since appeared in Beijing, the eastern port city of Tianjin and the southern manufacturing hub of Guangdong.

The Beijing outbreak, which is currently limited to a handful of reported cases, is significant, with the capital set to host the Winter Olympics in just weeks.

International delegates, media and some athletes have already begun arriving for the Games, which will be held in a strict bubble that separates anyone involved in the Winter Olympics from the wider population outside.

With several local cases reported in Beijing, schools have started their Lunar New Year holidays earlier than expected, according to reports.

AFP

BODY MONITORING



A ring shimmers on display at the Consumer Electronics Show, but this is no mere piece of jewellery — it's packed with sensors capable of detecting body temperature, respiration and much more.

Startups at the annual gadget extravaganza in Las Vegas touted technology-enhanced accessories designed to look fetching on the outside while scrutinising what is happening on the inside of wearers.

"We want to democratise personal health," said Amaury Kosman, founder of the French startup that created the Circular Ring.

While that goal was shared by an array of exhibitors, some experts worried a trend of ceaselessly tracking steps, time sitting, heart rate and more could bring risks of stress and addiction.

Circular Ring provides a wearer with a daily 'energy score' based on the intensity of their activity, factoring in heart rate, body temperature, blood oxygen levels, and other data, according to Kosman.

"At night, it continues, we track the phases of sleep, how long it takes you to fall asleep, if you are aligned with your circadian rhythm, etc," he said of the ring, which costs around US\$340 when it hits the market later this year.



The inside of a helmet - Medisync's iSyncWave - for digital brain health monitoring with AI brain mapping and LED therapy was exhibited during a media event for CES 2022 on January 3, in Las Vegas, Nevada. (AFP)

"In the morning, it vibrates to wake you up at the right time."

A mobile application synced to the ring is designed to make personalised lifestyle recommendations for improving health based on data gathered, according to the founder.

High demand for wearables

Demand for body-tracking 'wearables' is strong: CES organisers forecast that more than US\$14bn will be spent this year in a category that includes sports tech, health-monitoring devices, fitness activity track-

ers, connected exercise equipment and smartwatches.

That figure is more than double what was spent in the category in 2018.

Growth has been driven by smart watches such as those made by powerhouses Apple and Samsung, as well as internet-linked sports gear — which boomed during the pandemic — and personal tracking devices.

Companies are also moving to fill a need for instruments that provide data that can be relied on as part of a pandemic-driven trend of remote health care.

Swiss Biospectral taps into smartphone

cameras to measure blood pressure when a finger is placed over a lens. French Quantiq is developing algorithms that calculate heart rate, respiratory rate and blood pressure from selfies.

Meanwhile, Japanese start-up Quantum Operation has designed a prototype bracelet that continuously measures the level of glucose in the blood. Diabetic patients would be spared needle jabs for frequent blood sugar tests.

Body-minding wearables can provide valuable health data, but some fear a 'quantified self' trend is blurring the line between well-being and obsession.

Growing dependency

South Korean firm Olive Healthcare displayed a 'Bello' infrared scanner that analyses stomach fat and suggests how to lose it, along with a 'Fitto' device that assesses muscle mass and ways to increase it.

Society needs to determine whether

these kinds of tools solve problems or give rise to new dependencies, contended German political scientist Nils-Eyk Zimmermann.

A danger is that the 'digital self' generated by such technology does not match reality, reasoned Zimmermann, who blogs on the topic.

He also saw danger in 'game' features, such as rewards and peer competition that put pressure on users that may not be healthy.

Withings' US sales director Paul Buckley was confident people can handle health data made available from devices such as the Body Scan smart scale unveiled at CES by the French company.

"I don't think it's too much," Buckley said as he showed off the scale capable of performing electrocardiograms and analysing body composition.

"You're able to be more informed about what is going on in your body."

AFP

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HOME REMEDIES

FITNESS IN 2022

From consuming healthy food to exercising in a hygienic environment at home, the year 2022 will see a new trend among fitness freaks who want to avoid the risks of contracting the coronavirus from public facilities

Hubert Vaz

In 2022, those keen on keeping fit and staying healthy, both physically and mentally, will continue doing so, nevertheless with extreme caution and emphasis on hygiene. After all, there's no place as safe as home.

Since the pandemic has not yet shown any signs of receding, the focus of fitness enthusiasts has, sort of, shifted away from public gymnasiums. Working out at home now seems to be the better option to avoid contracting the virus that, experts say, can thrive on surfaces in gym equipment and get passed on from those infected to those not with ease.

International guidelines state that people should stay at home where possible and only leave for activities such as shopping for basic necessities, go to work (only if one couldn't do so from home), and exercise regularly at home. As many gyms and fitness centres have downed their shutters over the past two years, this, actually, is the best option.

As result, many people have transformed their living rooms/bedrooms into home workout stations and got themselves equipped with a range of accessories from skipping ropes, dumbbells and yoga mats to

treadmills and cross-trainers. Trips to community yoga classes, bootcamps, aerobic sessions, etc have come to a grinding halt as people prefer to do the same alone or with willing family members at home.

Interestingly, those already in possession of heavy gym equipment, like treadmills and exercise bikes, have dusted them out and put them to regular use with renewed vigour. Till a couple of years ago, these lay as white elephants in the homes of those who could afford them but weren't quite inclined towards using them regularly.

The 'mushroom effect'

People have started buying a range of 'superfoods', from citrus fruits to mushrooms/broccoli and exotic meat products to build immunity as well as stay healthy. Markets, too, display such elements on the packs of foodstuff to attract the attention of the health conscious.

Mushrooms might not be popular in regular diets but suddenly they have become the 'ingredient of the year' since some varieties have adaptogenic properties that help counteract the effects of stress on the body.

Reports say, Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine has for centuries used mushrooms to reduce inflammation, support the immune system, brain health, the nervous system and increase energy. Hence, it is considered a 'superfood' and is widely available in super-

markets. Varieties like Lion's Mane, which is full of beta-glucans, protects against oxidative stress, Reishi and Maitake help bolster the immune system, Cordyceps can improve lung capacity and Shittake supports immunity.

It now appears the fitness industry is waking up to the 'mushroom effect', with several well-known brands selling mushroom supplements to aid performance and post-workout recovery.

Puresport - UK's most popular wellbeing brand - recently launched its 'Mind Body Mushroom Blend' which contains six medicinal mushrooms. According to a report in Elle, UK, its founder Grayson Hart states that the blend resulted in the biggest uptake in sales, which shows that there is a genuine appetite and interest for mushroom supplements.

Reverse running

Backwards running, also known as reverse running, has become increasingly popular with those wanting to improve rehabilitation after injury, such as hamstring, low back and knee joint damage.

According to a recent PureGym survey, there has been a 50 per cent increase in on-line searches for reverse running in the last year, thanks to the practice's ability to balance out muscles and alleviate impact on the knees, by reducing imbalances between the

anterior and posterior muscles.

Fitness experts say, reverse running creates a greater range of motion at the hip joint, creating a more aligned posture and produces greater activation of the calves and quadriceps.

When it comes to performance, reverse running is widely believed to be as effective as speed intervals insofar as it creates a greater cardiovascular demand, which therefore improves endurance and aerobic capacity. One lap of running on a track backward is considered equivalent to eight laps running forward.

Indoor rowing

Indoor rowing has also become increasingly popular over the last couple of years as fitness lovers look at ways of incorporating low-impact interval training exercises in short amounts of time.

There are several indoor rowing machine brands available at fitness stores which offer numerous types of workouts. According to Dr Kristin Haraldsdottir, director of exercise research and innovation for Hydrow, which was named one of *TIME Magazine's* Best Inventions of 2020, rowing works out up to 86 per cent of your body, activating several muscle groups in the upper body, lower body and core all at once, which ultimately enables you to build strength and burn calories.

Getting one of these machines for one's

home gym, therefore, might be a worthwhile investment of a lifetime.

Gym hygiene

The need for hygiene in the gym as well as at any workout area, whether at home or outdoors cannot be overstated in the current context. As COVID-19 variants continue to affect everyday life, the way people socially interact in public spaces as well as use public utilities - whether equipment in gyms or elevators in a mall - hygiene will continue to be a huge focus in 2022.

Surveys say, people are, by and large, more conscious about and afraid of germs these days. While some gyms advertise about their hygienic practices, the individual can do best by exercising his/her own cautions. And these can be best done at home where the intrusion of unknown users can be totally ruled out. Regular sanitising of workout equipment is absolutely essential even at home before and after workout sessions.

"If you spray a virus onto a surface, like a dumbbell, it will just sit there," Simon Clarke, a microbiologist and associate professor in Cellular Microbiology at the University of Reading, recently stated. 'The virus won't move unless someone picks it up again. Gyms pose a higher degree of risk because people are constantly touching things that you will then go and touch yourself.'



Al Warith al Horthy
International Federation of Body Building (IFBB) Elite Pro Judge

People say 'we are recovering from the pandemic safely' but they are still working out from home due to the increasing number of cases. Some are, however, back to gyms, like myself. I do so by maintaining social distance, wearing a mask always, and sanitising equipment before and after use.



Rashid al Balushi
GM, Motorcycles Learning Centre

For me, it is more safe to workout in the office (workplace), rather than in a gym, like many do these days, since I have absolute privacy and control on the hygiene in my office. It is more secure as I also have control on who should enter the office.



Alexander Tvaliashvili
Ex-head National Tennis Coach, founder of Padel Oman

We play padel at a newly-built padel court at the marina. It is open for members and non-members. It is a good sport to burn 900 calories per hour and its popularity has been spreading fast. They call it the 'pandemic sport'.



Bilarab Moosa Obaid Al Salami
Champion, Oman Open Bodybuilding and Physique Championship - 2019

It is safe to work out in a gym that takes all precautions and provides sanitation of equipment and facilities within. I visit the Champion Gym, at Al Ansab, regularly and take all precautions to ensure hygiene and safety during workouts.



Hilal al Abdali
Instructor, Shotokan Martial Arts

Based on the official statistics regarding the increasing number of infections, it is better to practice sports in open spaces while working with precautionary measures, such as social distancing and sanitising hands. It is not forbidden to go to the gym, if all health precautionary measures are provided.



Glenn Maxwell's score is the ninth highest in T20 history

Records tumble as Maxwell's 154* gives Melbourne highest BBL score

Stoinis smashed an unbeaten 75 as well to pile on the misery for Hurricanes

Melbourne Stars 2 for 273 (Maxwell 154*, Stoinis 75*) beat Hobart Hurricanes 6 for 167 (McDermott 55, Couch 3-30) by 106 runs

Melbourne, Australia - Glenn Maxwell's all-out assault on Hobart Hurricanes netted him and Melbourne Stars the highest scores in BBL history, handing Hurricanes a reality check with a 106-run hammering on the eve of the finals.

Maxwell thumped an unbeaten 154 from 64 balls at the MCG, smashing 22 boundaries and four sixes in the most brutal display of hitting in the competition's history.

It helped the Stars to a record total of 2 for 273, 41 more than the next best in BBL history and the third highest in any franchise or international T20 game in history. Only totals made by Afghanistan and the Czech Republic have been higher, with those matches against fellow minnows Ireland and Turkey.

Maxwell's score was also the ninth highest in T20 history, after Hurricanes opted to rest Scott Boland and Riley Meredith.

He dominated Hurricanes all

round the wicket, with the shot of the night an outrageous switch-hit flick over fly-slip for six. His century was the second-fastest in BBL history, coming in 41 balls and just two shy of Craig Simmons's 39-ball effort in 2014.

The right-hander helped take 21 off one D'Arcy Short over, while he hit five boundaries for 22 runs off another from Sandeep Lamichhane.

Maxwell was not alone with Marcus Stoinis also finishing unbeaten on 75 from 31 balls. On the same night he lost his record for the highest score in BBL history, Stoinis also showed Hurricanes no mercy. He launched six balls over the rope, also taking 26 from a Tim David over as no Hurricanes bowler went at an economy rate below 10.

In reply, Hobart never looked interested in the chase as they finished at 6 for 167 with Ben McDermott top-scoring with 55 from 33.

Maxwell's knock will serve as a great 'what-if?' for Stars fans, after they finished the season at 7-7 and with two losses with the bulk of their squad out with COVID-19.

Hurricanes' loss means they still finish fifth and face Adelaide in an Eliminator on Friday, but all of a sudden with a serious dent to their momentum.

The first three finals will each be played in Melbourne, with the challenger and decider to be at home venues.

Cricinfo

Dussen, Bavuma tons set up comfortable win for South Africa



India slide after Shikhar Dhawan and Virat Kohli fifties to end up 32 short of 297 target

Paarl, South Africa - A sparkling century from Rassie van der Dussen was complemented by a well-paced one from Temba Bavuma, as South Africa cantered to a 31-run win over India in the first ODI of a three-match series.

Dussen joined Bavuma when South Africa were 68 for 3 in the 18th over, but they shrugged off that rickety start to eventually drive the team 296 for 4 on a slow Boland Park pitch.

India were on track in the first half of their chase, particularly when Virat Kohli and Shikhar Dhawan were batting together in a 92-run stand for the second

wicket, but the innings withered after they both fell.

Bavuma and Dussen had put on 204 runs in just 183 balls, conquering bowlers and conditions. In particular, Dussen's knock took the first innings, and it turned out the match, away from India.

In the end, he remained unconquered on an ODI best 129 off just 96 balls. His innings included four hits over the fence and nine to it, with more than half his runs coming via running between the wickets - this on a day when the heat was sapping. In the final over of South Africa's innings, van der Dussen was often down on his haunches to gather

his breath. It was his batting that left those watching breathless though.

He got off the blocks quickly, injecting much-needed momentum into the innings, using sweeps and reverse sweeps to devastating effect against the spin duo of Yuzvendra Chahal and R Ashwin.

The feature of Dussen's innings was how he took the pitch out of the equation. Till his arrival, scoring had been laborious. But his use of the square boundaries, and ability to capitalise on the slightest errors in length, meant the innings found a new gear.

Bavuma had a head start on his innings and got to his century first, with a single off Shardul Thakur in the 45th over. At the start of the 48th over, van der Dussen got to his own hundred with a flick to fine leg.

The heat in Paarl saw the In-

dian bowling also wilt after a good start, as Dussen continued to go full throttle. Bavuma, who was on 23 off 45 when Dussen joined him and later on 28 off 53, gradually picked up his pace too. He made 82 from the last 90 balls he faced, playing an able foil to Dussen. By the time he had holed out to become Jasprit Bumrah's second wicket, he had made 110 off 143.

India's bowling had begun well. Bumrah got Janneman Malan nicking behind, and the returning Ashwin - playing his first ODI since 2017 - castled Quinton de Kock with a quicker one. When Aiden Markram ran himself out via a direct hit from debutant Venkatesh Iyer at mid-off, India seemed well in control.

However, the Dussen and Bavuma rebuilding plus counter-attack left India looking a bit ragged. There were several mis-

fields and overthrows too, which eased any pressure that was built up.

K L Rahul, captaining India for the first time, didn't have an outing to remember. He never went to his sixth bowling option Venkatesh, and had used up eight overs each of Bumrah and Bhuvneshwar by the time the innings was 40 overs old. Eventually, 86 runs came off the final ten overs, including a 17-run final over by Shardul Thakur.

When Rahul came out to open the innings, he treated Markram's part-time offspin with exaggerated caution. Markram bowled six overs on the trot after taking the new ball. Rahul had opted to play him out safely rather than attack, but that approach didn't pay dividends either when he poked Markram behind to de Kock.

That led to India's best phase in the chase, with Dhawan scoring freely and Kohli building busily. During that period, the target looked within reach. But the steady slide ended the game in favour of the hosts.

Cricinfo

SCOREBOARD			
SOUTH AFRICA			
Q de Kock	b Ashwin	27	
J Malan	c Pant b Bumrah	6	
T Bavuma	c Rahul b Bumrah	110	
A Markram	run out (VR Iyer)	4	
R van der Dussen	not out	129	
David Miller	not out	2	
Extras:	(lb 6, nb 3, w 9)	18	
TOTAL:	(50 Ov, RR: 5.92)	296/4	
Fall of wickets: 1-19, 2-58, 3-68, 4-272			
Bowling: J Bumrah 10-0-48-2, B Kumar 10-0-64-0, S Thakur 10-1-72-0, R Ashwin 10-0-53-1, Y Chahal 10-0-53-0			
INDIA			
K L Rahul (c)	c de Kock b Markram	12	
S Dhawan	b Maharaj	79	
Virat Kohli	c Bavuma b Shamsi	51	
R Pant st de Kock b Phehlukwayo		16	
Shreyas Iyer	c de Kock b Ngidi	17	
Venkatesh Iyer c van der Dussen b Ngidi		2	
R Ashwin	b Phehlukwayo	7	
S Thakur	not out	50	
B Kumar	c Bavuma b Shamsi	4	
J Bumrah	not out	14	
Extras:	(b 2, w 11)	13	
TOTAL:	(50 Ov, RR: 5.30)	265/8	
Fall of wickets: 1-46, 2-138, 3-152, 4-181, 5-182, 6-188, 7-199, 8-214			
Bowling: A Markram 6-0-30-1, M Jansen 9-0-49-0, K Maharaj 10-0-42-1, L Ngidi 10-0-64-2, T Shamsi 10-1-52-2, Andile Phehlukwayo 5-0-26-2			

Bangladesh romp to 80-run win over Kenya

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia - Kenya were bundled out for just 45 runs in reply to Bangladesh's 125 in T20 match on the second day of the ICC Commonwealth Games Qualifier 2022 at the Kinrara Oval in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday.

An unbeaten partnership of 75 for the seventh wicket between Salma Khatun (33 off 32 balls) and Ritu Moni (39 of 34) propelled Bangladesh to 125 before Player of the Match Nahida Akter broke the back of the Kenyan run chase with impressive figures of five for 12, an ICC report said.

Kenya won the toss and elected to bowl in their first match of the five-team tournament, being played to decide one remaining slot at the Commonwealth Games 2022 in Birmingham. Australia, Barbados, England, India, New Zealand, Pakistan and South Africa have already qualified.

Lavendah Idambo delivered a nervous first over, leaking 16 runs, including two boundaries and three wide deliveries. However, she hit back with the wicket



Batting first, Bangladesh scored 125 on the second day of the ICC Commonwealth Games Qualifier 2022

of opener Shamima Sultana before Mercyline Ochieng trapped Nigar Sultana in front and dismissed Rumana Ahmed first ball.

Ritu Moni and Salma Khatun later consolidated and the duo picked up 30 runs in the final three overs to lift Bangladesh to

a respectable 125.

In reply, Kenya's innings never got going. Veronica Abuga edged Salma Khatun through to keeper Shamima Sultana in the first over. Bowling the second over, Suraya Azmim trapped Queenor Abel in front for nine.

A brilliant direct hit from Mursida Khatun caught Sylvia Kinyua short of her crease before Kenyan skipper Margarte Ngoche was trapped in front by a Nahida Akter arm ball.

She was declared Player of the Match.

Scotland beat Malaysia by 31 runs

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia - Kathryn Bryce's unbeaten 62 scripted the win for Scotland against Malaysia on the second day of the ICC Commonwealth Games Qualifier 2022 at the Kinrara Oval in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday.

Scotland posted 148 while batting first, before Katherine Fraser took four for 19 to deliver a 31-run win over Malaysia.

After winning the toss and electing to bat, Scotland enjoyed a productive Powerplay. Sarah Bryce clipped a couple of boundaries off her toes with fellow opener Abbi Aitken-Drummond joining in the party. However, left-arm spinner Arianna Natasya dismissed Sarah in her very first over to put a lid on the scoring.

Scotland skipper Kathryn Bryce then walked in at three, putting on a 63-run partnership with Aitken-Drummond. Just as it looked like Scotland was pushing a total in the region of 160, they lost four quick wickets. Nik Atiela had both Aitken-Drummond and the aggressive Katie



Sarah Bryce's 30 was the third highest score in Scotland's innings

McGill stumped before Mas Elysa chipped in with a pair of wickets for herself. Kathryn Bryce, however, held strong, and continued to pepper the leg side boundary. Her seventh delivery came off the final delivery of the innings as Malaysia were set a target of 149.

In reply, Malaysia came storming out of the blocks. Three cover drives from Winifred Duraisingam set the tone for the innings with Wan Julia joining in the fun, walloping left-armer Rachel Slater for four down the ground.

However, the tide turned when off-spinner Katherine Fraser was introduced into the attack. Wan Julia chipped a catch to Aitken-Drummond before Duraisingam played inside one to lose her off stump in the very same over.

Scottish captain Kathryn Bryce was pleased with the eventual result but felt that Scotland let Malaysia's batters stretch the game out on the back of Katherine Fraser's impressive four-wicket haul.

Skipper Bryce was adjudged the Player of the Match.

Nadal rolls into round three but warns best still to come

Melbourne, Australia - Rafael Nadal rumbled into the third round of the Australian Open on Wednesday and warned that the best was yet to come after a troubled year with injury.

The Spanish legend needed five match points before decisively putting away tenacious qualifier Yannick Hanfmann to ramp up his march towards a men's record 21st Grand Slam title. The world number five executed a 6-2, 6-3, 6-4 win over the 126th-ranked Hanfmann in 2hr 42 min under a hot sun on Rod Laver Arena.

Nadal, who had his 2021 season end in August because of a foot injury and then contracted Covid-19 in December, told reporters, "I said before the tournament things are not going to be perfect.

"But every day I spend on court, the chances to play better are higher.

"I think I am doing things well. Things that I can improve I have to improve. I want to keep going in the tournament.

"After two matches now is the moment to make a step forward," warned Nadal, who has played just 13 tournaments in the past two seasons because of injury.

His 5-0 record in 2022 is a strong start, but he is yet to face a top-60 player in the new year.

That will change in his next match, against Russian 28th seed Karen Khachanov, who ousted 63rd-ranked Frenchman Benjamin Bonzi in straight sets

last Wednesday.

Nadal, who turns 36 this year and is one of the best men's players of all time, said he had achieved more than he had ever dreamed in his tennis career.

"I was able to spend almost 20 fantastic years on the tour. When you get older, the watch never stops. You need to accept that. But it's all good with me with that."

Nadal, the only Australian Open champion in the men's draw after nine-time winner Novak Djokovic's deportation on the eve of the tournament, is vying with Djokovic and Roger Federer to reach a record 21st Slam crown.

Zverev powers into third round

Alexander Zverev defied a boisterous crowd to storm into the third round of the Australian Open on Wednesday, bombarding home hope John Millman in straight sets with his blistering power game.

The German world number three, who is still looking to win his first Grand Slam, overpowered the 89th-ranked Millman with his back-court big hitting and searing serves to dominate their night match 6-4, 6-4, 6-0 in just under two hours on Rod Laver Arena.

It set up an encounter with Moldova's Radu Albot on Friday and was a sizzling statement of title intent.

"Amazing atmosphere, hope-



Harmony Tan receives assistance after retiring injured during her match against Ukraine's Elina Svitolina on Wednesday (AFP)

French player Tan taken off court in wheelchair

Melbourne, Australia - France's Harmony Tan had to be helped off court in a wheelchair on Wednesday after breaking down in agony with calf problems during her second-round Australian Open clash with Elina Svitolina.

The unseeded 24-year-old was down 5-1 in the third and deciding set before she the pain got too much and she was forced to withdraw.

"It was a rollercoaster match," said Ukraine's 15th seed Svitolina, whose 6-3, 5-7,

5-1 win set up a third-round clash with two-time Australian Open champion Victoria Azarenka.

"Of course, it's very sad to see her leaving the court in a wheelchair. It's never, never good to see a player getting injured."

Azarenka made round three with a routine 6-1, 6-2 thrashing of Switzerland's Jil Teichmann.

"We've played many times, played doubles with her, practised with her," Svitolina said of Azarenka.

fully it will stay the same and get even louder for the next few matches," Zverev, the Olympic champion, said before the noisy centre court crowd.

"I am prepared that everybody will hate me after the match, that's my mindset and

hopefully I will get a lot of boos, hopefully everybody will cheer against me. I'm just kidding.

"It doesn't matter if you are for me or against me, I enjoy the atmosphere, I enjoy the noise, I enjoy being on court."

AFP



Rafael Nadal serves against Yannick Hanfmann at the Australian Open, in Melbourne on Wednesday (AFP)

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Now is the time for Blues' revival: Chelsea keeper

London, UK - Kepa Arrizabalaga has urged Chelsea to regain the initiative in the race for a Champions League place after their poor run of form continued with a 1-1 draw at Brighton.

Despite a stalemate on the south coast on Tuesday, the Blues remained third in the Premier League, having topped the table early last month.

But the draw left Chelsea a huge 12 points adrift of leaders and reigning champions Manchester City, having played one game more.

And they face pressure from below them, with London rivals Tottenham Hotspur and Arsenal both having several games in hand following a rash of postponements due to COVID-19.

Blues goalkeeper Kepa is acutely aware of the threat and hopes they can turn the tide, starting with Sunday's match against Spurs at Stamford Bridge.

"We are honest. We are in good positions in all the competitions - we are in the Champions League, we have the League Cup



Chelsea's Spanish goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga during the English Premier League match against Brighton and Hove Albion, at the American Express Community Stadium in Brighton, southern England on Tuesday (AFP)

final and the World Club Cup - but in the Premier League we have dropped points in the last month," the Spaniard told Chelsea's website.

"We have to get back to win-

ning ways because everybody is coming (up behind us).

"We need points because we want to be on top of the league, but we have to look at ourselves, improve and step up.

"We have another big game on Sunday, a London derby, and from there we go."

Chelsea manager Thomas Tuchel blamed a mediocre display at the Amex Stadium on

We are in good positions in all the competitions. But in the Premier League

KEPA ARRIZABALAGA

mental and physical tiredness.

However, Kepa, who has been called into first-team action while Edouard Mendy is at the Africa Cup of Nations with Senegal, said players had no choice but to maintain their concentration.

"We are not happy of course, we dropped two points and we didn't play well," said the 27-year-old.

"Of course there is disappointment and frustration. We only got a point because they scored from a set-piece. We worked a lot, we ran a lot, but in small details we lost two points."

AFP



Flawless Barty employs serve as 'weapon'

Melbourne, Australia - Top seed Ashleigh Barty said on Wednesday she had been working hard to make her serve 'a weapon' and it paid off as she raced into the Australian Open third round with another near-flawless performance.

The Australian world number one is in ominous early-season form and was laser-focused on Rod Laver Arena against Italy's Lucia Bronzetti, her second qualifier in a row, crushing the Italian 6-1, 6-1 in just 52 minutes.

Barty launched her bid for a maiden Australian Open title in emphatic fashion on Monday, annihilating Lesia Tsurenko for the loss of one game in 54 minutes.

Her serve has been untouchable all year. She is now unbeaten in six matches to start the 2022 season after winning the Adelaide International and has not lost a service game for five straight matches.

"Just continually trying to make it a weapon," she said of her serve.

"I'm not the biggest girl out there, but I know I've got a sound technique and I know if I can get my rhythm right and use it effectively, it can be a weapon.

"I think Tyz (coach Craig Tyzzer) and I put a lot of emphasis on my serve, I always have," she added.

"As a kid, I was always serving baskets and baskets of serves to try to create that weapon, try to create a really sound shot.

"I think I've just been able to find some good rhythm and a big part of that is protecting my second serve when I need to do as well.

"I thought I've done a pretty good job of that over the last half dozen matches or so."

Wimbledon champion Barty has been the top-ranked player for 111 consecutive weeks and her little-known 23-year-old opponent, ranked 142 and in her first Grand Slam, never stood a chance.

She held serve then broke Bronzetti to love on a centre court bathed in sunshine.

Bronzetti only hit one winner in the opening five games before finally getting off the mark with a service hold, ahead of the Australian banking the set in 26 minutes.

I'm not the biggest girl out there, but I know I've got a sound technique

ASHLEIGH BARTY

utes.

The Italian held again to start the second set on a positive note but was broken in her next service game and the set followed a similar script.

Barty will face a tougher task on Friday in the last 32 where experienced 30th seed Camila Giorgi awaits after the Italian beat Czech Tereza Martincova 6-2, 7-6 (7/2).

"It's going to be a match where I'm going to have to serve well, bring in variety, make sure I can cover the court, neutralise the best that I can," said Barty of Giorgi.

AFP



Ashleigh Barty serves against Italy's Lucia Bronzetti at the Australian Open, in Melbourne on Wednesday (AFP)



Naomi Osaka hits a return against Madison Brengle during their match at the Australian Open, in Melbourne on Wednesday (AFP)

Osaka all smiles as moves closer to Barty showdown

Melbourne, Australia - Naomi Osaka said she drew on past experience in a composed beating of Madison Brengle on Wednesday to move closer to a blockbuster Australian Open clash with top seed Ashleigh Barty.

The Japanese 13th seed and defending champion raced through the first set but had to work hard in the second on Rod Laver Arena before eliminating the 54th-ranked American 6-0, 6-4 in 65 minutes to make the third round.

"I remember when I was younger, I would watch her play in the pro circuit, and she was kind of notorious for getting every ball back," she said of Brengle.

"So I just kind of took those memories from back then and tried to tell myself, you're probably going to make a lot of unforced errors this match, but it's

something you have to do because you can't let her dictate you in this match in the way that she would try to, like, keep the ball in play. For me, I feel like it was really important that even though I made a lot of errors at the net today, I thought it was really important to keep stepping in."

Osaka will meet another unseeded American next after Amanda Anisimova upset Tokyo Olympic champion and 22nd seed Belinda Bencic 6-2, 7-5.

Anisimova is on a seven-match win streak after claiming the Melbourne Summer Set title in the build-up to the Grand Slam and should pose a sterner test.

But if Osaka can win she faces the prospect of a fourth-round battle with world number one and Wimbledon champion Barty.

AFP



Indian trailblazer Sania Mirza to quit tennis this year

New Delhi, India - Indian former doubles world number one Sania Mirza said on Wednesday she will retire from tennis at the end of this season with injuries taking their toll.

It came after the 35-year-old, regarded as her country's greatest women's tennis player, bowed out of the Australian Open in the first round with her partner Nadiia Kichenok of Ukraine.

"I have decided this will be my last season. I'm taking it week by week, not sure if I can last the season, but I want to," she told press in Melbourne, in comments later confirmed to AFP by her father.

"I still feel I can play well, go deep into tournaments and all that. But beyond this season I

don't see my body do it either. It's beat."

Mirza, who has won six Grand Slam doubles titles, is paired with America's Rajeev Ram in the mixed doubles at the Australian Open. They play on Thursday in the first round.

Mirza, who is married to former Pakistan cricket captain Shoaib Malik, last won a women's doubles title at the Ostrava Open in September, with China's Zhang Shuai.

But Mirza admits that injuries and a young family is drawing a curtain on her career. "I do feel my recovery is taking longer, I'm putting my three-year-old son at risk by travelling so much with him, that's something I have to take into account."

AFP



Sania Mirza

Azarenka for no-jab, no-play rule in women's tennis

Melbourne, Australia - Two-time Grand Slam champion Victoria Azarenka threw her support on Wednesday behind a vaccine mandate on the women's tour, as tennis wrestles with the fallout of the saga surrounding unvaccinated Novak Djokovic.

The veteran Azarenka is a long-time member of the powerful WTA Players' Council, which is working through the challenges posed by coronavirus.

Those were laid bare by the chaos and confusion that engulfed vaccine-sceptic Djokovic, who was deported on the eve of the Australian Open.

Azarenka, however, admitted it could be legally challenging to enforce but she believes it would be 'helpful for everybody' if the WTA Tour considered a no-jab, no-play policy.

"Well, from my standpoint it's been very clear. I believe in science. I believe in getting vaccinated, that's what I did for myself," the 32-year-old Belarusian said. "If you ask me just for



Victoria Azarenka celebrates after winning the match against Jil Teichmann at the Australian Open, in Melbourne on Wednesday (AFP)

my opinion if that should be the case, I think it would just be helpful for everybody in the world, especially when we are travelling internationally."

But the former world number one acknowledged that forcing people to be jabbed could prove problematic. "Some countries will not allow mandates. I think to impose something

legally on the WTA Tour can be a challenge, I think that's something that we are facing," she said.

Spanish legend Rafael Nadal, who sits on the ATP Players' Council, said he was 'no one to say' whether there should be a uniform policy for vaccines at all men's tournaments.

AFP

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