

Oman-Iran committee discusses boosting trade

Muscat - The Omani-Iranian Joint Committee held its 19th meeting on Wednesday to discuss areas of bilateral cooperation in economic, financial, investment, technical and industrial sectors.

The Omani side was headed by H E Qais Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, while the Iranian side was headed by Seyyed Reza Fatemi Amin, Minister of Industry, Mining and Trade.

The two sides agreed on exerting more efforts in enhancing business relations and increasing the volume of trade ex-



change between the two countries in areas of goods, technical services, tourism and investments.

The two sides also discussed collaboration in the fields of industry, mining, finance, banking and free zones, besides completing the process of signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for cooperation in areas of agriculture, livestock, fisheries and exchange of research experience.

They affirmed the importance of activating an agreement of cooperation in maritime transportation and an MoU on recognition of maritime competency certifications between the two countries.

The two sides explored investment opportunities in ports, customs sector, cooperation in oil and gas, petrochemicals, heritage, tourism, culture and sports.

The two sides underscored the importance of cooperation between the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Omani-Iranian Joint Chamber for exchange of business delegations and to encourage specialised exhibitions aimed at supporting the private sector.

ONA



Programme launched to support women in Shinas

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In its efforts to empower Omani women and support productive families, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR), in cooperation with Omani Women's Association, has launched an initiative in the wilayat of Shinas, North Batinah.

The training programme will support women in the field of agriculture, livestock and fisheries activities through home-based projects, according to Mohammed bin Sultan al Habsi, director of Department of Agricultural and Fisheries and Water Resources in Shinas.

The programme targets 21 women who will receive both theoretical knowledge and practical training necessary to engage in these activities.

"The programme saw the participation of beneficiary groups, including jobseekers and housewives. The programme included training in food processing, such as drying fruits and vegetables, making jam and pickles, making dairy products, packaging dates and canning sardines," Habsi said.

MoHERI updates its Strategic Research Programme of 2010

Muscat - The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) has announced the launch of the Strategic Research Projects Programme. An updated version of the Strategic Research Programme established in 2010, it addresses challenges of research projects of national priority.

The programme involves partnerships between the ministry and government bodies, and the outcome of these research projects contributing to building a strong economy based on knowledge and scientific evidence.

Describing the objectives of the programme, Dr Salah al Zadjali, director general of Research Programmes and Capacity Building in MoHERI, said these aim to find scientific and applied solutions that focus on national priorities, including economic and social services.

"The programme will contribute to enhancing constructive cooperation between the parties of the research system (government, academic and private sectors), transferring knowledge and increasing the number of research in the sultanate, in addition to encouraging excellence in research in accordance to international standards," Zadjali said.

The updated programme also



The programme will contribute to enhancing constructive cooperation between the parties of the research system (government, academic and private sectors), transferring knowledge and increasing the number of research in the sultanate

DR SALAH AL ZADJALI

aims to build national capabilities and support a strong knowledge-based economy, which will contribute to diversifying sources of income in the sultanate, create job opportunities, and make recommendations to decision makers to create or update policies, legislation and procedures, he added.

According to Zadjali, the ministry contributes a maximum of 50 per cent of the cost of research projects, not exceeding RO50,000 for each research project approved. Other partners involved, who either manage or implement these research projects, will cover the remaining cost of the project and provide necessary support. Evaluation of research proposals is based quality, challenges posed, applicability and outcome of findings. Priority will be given to research proposals and projects that meet national priorities.

Refereed proposals will be announced annually through the Research Information Management System. Submissions are currently open for this year and will close on March 17, 2022.

MoHERI held a virtual workshop recently to inform various institutions and government agencies about the Strategic Research Projects Programme and the latest updates.

OPINION

SALEH MIRI, MUSCAT DAILY COLUMNIST, IS AN ARCHITECT WHO CAME TO OMAN IN THE EARLY 1980S

Proper respect to others is the most prudent rule of directing the measure of reverence due to ourselves.

- Norman MacDonald

Respecting others is key to the survival of people. Aggressing others does not solve anything. When more and more youngsters drive and try to make more noise while driving their cars or motorcycles, they disturb the tranquility of others. Speed is limited on the roads and if you transgress, you are fined. How about setting a fine for noise above a certain level?

Throwing masks on roads or sidewalks is also a lack of respect. There are garbage bins, maybe not enough, on the sidewalks so why throw masks just anywhere? Throwing cups, cigarette butts, masks and paper on the street deteriorates the environment and gives a negative image to the country.

Exorbitant fees for some services, such as those applied by some banks, give customers a very negative feel of the rules of the country. Telephone companies creating separate companies to put pressure on clients to pay their bills do not contribute to the peaceful reputation of Oman. They just forget that it is the client who makes their living and not the contrary. This is a lack of respect for others.



RESPECT

Respecting others is to take into account what the other party has to say and agreeing on solutions which help both sides; aggressive attitudes just create antagonism.

In the Eastern world, respecting others is part of life. When an elderly person is in the queue, youngsters allow them to come forward, or when an elderly person talks, others listen first. But the Western world seems to pay less attention to this way of life. How can our society grow if we do not respect the environment, others and the basic rules of life? Before the development of technology some decades ago, people were friendlier to each other. Respect exists in the animal world, but humans seem to forget this basic principle of life. According to a Polish proverb, time has no respect for beauty.

To respect, one must make space for discussions, expressions or responses. It is not an easy task, and as the Persian proverb goes, he who wants the rose must respect the thorn. Our world has advanced in so many fields, but we have forgotten the basic principles of what humanity is all about, such as co-existence in a friendly environment.

So, without respect, there's no tolerance, and without tolerance, the world wouldn't be as colourful and diverse as it is today. Together, the two create a subtle balance between love and hate, allowing us to stay open for new sensations and experiences.

A country's image does not come from the government but from how others perceive the country. When a foreigner is respected, he will be keen to return and explore other possibilities, from reasonable prices, attitudes of those serving, taxation and other aspects. Respecting the role of women in society, respecting foreigners, elderly people, and others' beliefs are the essence of a proper world.

It is fundamental to teach this value and others to the younger generation if we want to live in a better world.

For those who are always courteous and respectful of elders, four things increase: life, beauty, happiness and strength.

- Buddha

DR SA'EEDI RECEIVES IRANIAN MINISTER



H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, received in his office Seyyed Reza Fatemi Amin, Minister of Industry, Mining and Trade of the Islamic Republic of Iran and his accompanying delegation currently visiting the sultanate on Wednesday. During the meeting, the two sides exchanged cordial conversation and reviewed ways of strengthening cooperation between the two friendly countries in the health sector, according to a press statement issued by the Ministry of Health. The meeting was attended by a number of Ministry of Health officials and the delegation accompanying the guest (Supplied photo)

Citizen arrested for illegal logging in S Sharqiyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A citizen has been arrested for logging without permission, according to Environment Authority (EA).

A statement issued by the authority said, 'The Wildlife Protection Unit in Al Saleel National Park in South Sharqiyah arrested a citizen for logging without permission. Legal action has been taken against him.'

According to an EA official, under Omani law it is illegal to cut trees and damage green cover. "Additionally, our laws facilitate activation of programmes to combat desertification in co-



operation with international organisations. The authority is exerting all efforts to reduce damage to the environment, including logging and burning. Any person who cuts or burns a tree or damages vegetation in any region will be punished with imprisonment and a fine."

270kg of inedible food destroyed in Salalah

Muscat - Officials of Food Safety and Quality Centre (FSQC) destroyed 270kg of food found unfit for human consumption on Wednesday. A statement issued by the centre said, 'Specialists of FSQC destroyed 270kg of foodstuff, such as children's sweets, in Salalah port for violating the standard specification of labels, including displaying expiry date.'

Elsewhere, Dakhliyah Municipality and authorities concerned with restaurants and food establishments issued four violation notices, three warnings and destroyed 53kg of unfit food in the wilayat of Samail on Wednesday.

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

Oman mourns death of 'mother' of volunteers

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Rahima al Musafir, head of the board of directors of Al Rahma Association for Motherhood and Child Welfare, passed away on Wednesday.

Rahima was well known in the country for her devotion towards helping the poor, needy families and orphans. She was engaged in charitable work since she was 25 years old.

A statement issued by Al Rahma Association for Motherhood and Child Welfare, said, 'We ask God to forgive Rahima al Musafir and admit her to heaven and grant her family patience and solace. She started a great endeavour in the field of volunteer services and humanitarian work many years ago in Oman.'

The announcement of her death evoked strong reactions



Rahima al Musafir

among citizens.

Sanaa al Khanjariya, vice president of Al Rahma Association for Motherhood and Child

Welfare, said, "The one who passed away was mother of everyone. After she travelled for treatment, she used to commu-

The one who passed away was mother of everyone. After she travelled for treatment, she used to communicate until the last day and thought about the needy and always told us, 'We work for the hereafter and not for prizes'

SANAA AL KHANJARIYA

nicate until the last day and thought about the needy and always told us, 'We work for the hereafter and not for prizes.'"

Mohammed bin Salim al Bu-saidi, chairman of the board of Omran group, tweeted, "A great loss for volunteer work in the sultanate with the death of Rahima al Musafir. She is gone, but her giving continues and extends until the Day of Judgment. We ask God to have mercy on her, and grant her family patience and solace. Our sincere condolences to her family.

Khaula Hamoud al Harthy, CEO of Injaz Oman, tweeted, "Oh! God, make all her last good deeds accounted for the Day of Judgment."

Issuing a statement on its Twitter handle, Oman Human Rights Commission said, "Rahima had a prominent role in charitable work and in the service of humanitarian work. We ask God to have mercy on her and reward her with the best."



(Supplied photo)

CPA recovers over RO50,000 in January from North Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

During the month of January, the total amount of refunds and administrative fines imposed by the General Directorate of Consumer Protection in North Batinah amounted to more than RO50,000, the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) announced on Wednesday.

A statement issued online by CPA said, 'The total amount of refunds and administrative fines imposed amounted to RO51,726 as part of the efforts made by the directorate to guarantee and defend consumer rights.'

The statistical report of the Studies and Development Department in the directorate stated that it was able to recover RO50,506 for the benefit of consumers in January, while the total administrative fines during the same period amounted to RO1,220.

The recovered amount was distributed over a number of sectors. The directorate was able

to recover RO41,766 from automobile agencies, followed by labour services sector (RO4,000), vehicle repair workshops (RO1,366), furniture sector (RO810), aluminium workshops, blacksmithing and carpentry sector (RO770).

An amount of RO400 was recovered from watches, jewellery and accessories sector, RO360 from vehicle parts sector, RO307 from the construction sector followed by RO257 from other goods and services sector.

Specialists at CPA also recovered RO227 from electrical and electronic devices sector, RO156 from clothing and textiles sector and related services, RO71 from the travel and tourism services sector, and RO15 from tyre shops.

'The directorate received complaints that varied from selling expired goods, raising prices without the approval of the authority, not setting prices for goods and services, and making misleading commercial advertisements,' it stated.

Nafad platform launched; offers SMEs, freelancers RO8mn worth of business

Muscat - Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), in partnership with Global Computer Services Company, launched the Nafad (Access) platform on Wednesday.

The platform aims to attract national competencies specialised in the fields of technology, communications and postal services. It will allow licensed individuals in these sectors to float tenders, as well as request and bid on offers.

The launch ceremony was held under the patronage of H E Eng Said bin Hamoud al Ma'awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, in the presence of H E Dr Mahad bin Said Ba'owain, Minister of Labour.

H E Ma'awali said that launching the platform as a virtual incubator is the result of concerted efforts in developing the concept of work in the enterprises sector



(ONA)

and for part-time workers.

He added that the platform will increase transparency by giving access to opportunities. He also pointed out that there are RO8mn worth of business opportunities that small and medium enterprises and freelancers can find through the part-time work system.

On his turn, Ahmed Hassan al Hadabi, executive manager of

strategic planning in TRA, said that the platform will boost in-country value (ICV). It also targets creating a milieu that supports entrepreneurship in the communications, information technology and postal sectors.

The platform will also contribute in providing training programmes for jobseekers in these fields, Hadabi added.

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WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	25	15
Doha	21	13
Kuwait City	21	15
Manama	21	14
Muscat	25	16
Riyadh	26	13

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.27am
Sunrise	6.43am
Duhr	12.26pm
Asr	3.40pm
Maghrib	6.04pm
Isha	7.16pm

Send your comments to muscatdaily@apexmedia.co.om

TRAINEX to help boost employability

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As vocational and technical training is getting more relevant in today's world, the Ministry of Labour has taken a step towards supporting TRAINEX: Technical Training and Vocational Education Exhibition.

To be held from March 27 to 29 at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, TRAINEX is the sole exhibition for youths interested in technical and vocational, skilled-based certificate programmes.

'This exhibition will contribute significantly to Oman's development in terms of developing a qualified and efficient workforce, as well as assisting in the achievement of the national goal of creating certified professionals with technical experience in core areas,' stated a press release.

Youth unemployment has become a pressing issue in Oman, especially with the increasing number of graduates every year. 'One reason for this is the mismatch between educational investments in higher education and labour market outcomes and

TRAINEX will contribute significantly to the sultanate's development in terms of developing a qualified and efficient workforce

ability to absorb fresh graduates, which is a source of concern for both graduates, employers and the government alike,' the organisers of the event said.

H E Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, explained in his recent meeting with Majlis A'Shura that there are some challenges in terms of aligning education outputs to the requirements of the labour market, including the lack of a transitional programme from study to the labour market.

H E Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, recently visited Sohar University to inspect projects linking the university with the industrial

and entrepreneurial sectors.

The minister emphasised the necessity of bridging the gap between academia, industry and the labour market, as well as strengthening partnerships with relevant authorities in order to achieve tangible outcomes.

However, for people who have ambitions for professional work rather than academic education, Hatim al Taie, CEO of Alroya Press and Publishing House, explained that in today's world, the labour market is no longer in real need for holders of higher academic degrees. Rather, it requires skilled workers who are familiar with technologies and can operate equipment and robots in factories.

Jawaher al Marhoobi, project assistant, said, "Trainex is the need of the hour. A lot of government programmes are underway and more to be announced where training will be provided to youth so they can become employable in specific jobs. TRAINEX is a platform for Institutes to demonstrate the specific job-based training programmes to students and the government to help with the employment situation."

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MARKET WATCH

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FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)	
Indian Rs	194.42
Pakistani Rs	454.42
Bangladesh taka	223.32
Philippines peso	133.11
Sri Lankan Rs	524.69

*Rates as on February 09
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Japan offers gas to Europe over Ukraine fears

Japan is offering Europe part of its liquefied natural gas imports over fears supplies will be disrupted by tensions surrounding a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine, Tokyo's trade minister said Wednesday.

Multiple gas shipments are already being diverted to Europe by private Japanese firms and will arrive this month, Koichi Hagiuda said, declining to give details of how many boats or how much LNG is involved. More ships will head to Europe in March, but the supplies will be strictly contingent on ensuring domestic demand is met, he said.

Fears are mounting that a conflict in Ukraine could cause an energy crisis in Europe, which depends heavily on Russian supplies.

Fitch upgrades OETC ratings to 'BB', keeps outlook stable

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Global credit ratings agency Fitch Ratings has upgraded Oman Electricity Transmission Company's (OETC) long-term issuer default ratings (IDR) and senior unsecured rating to 'BB' from 'BB-'. The outlook on the OETC's issuer default ratings is stable, the ratings agency said in a statement.

The ratings upgrade follows the implementation of Fitch's updated parent and subsidiary linkage criteria, published on December 1, 2021, it said.

'Under the new criteria, we view OETC as the stronger subsidiary, based on its standalone credit profile (SCP) of 'bb+', which is higher than the sovereign rating of Oman (BB-). Our assessment leads to OETC being rated one notch higher than the sovereign rating,' Fitch said.

It said the outlook change reflects a recent similar action on Oman's long-term foreign currency issuer default ratings to stable from negative.

Fitch also applies its government-related entities (GRE) rating criteria to OETC's rating, as



the Omani government continues to have sufficient control over OETC through involvement in and influence over its strategic, operational and financial activities, while it controls 51 per cent of OETC through Nama Holding. 'Under our GRE rating criteria we assess track record of support, socio-political and financial implications of a default as moderate and ownership and control as strong,' Fitch added.

The ratings agency said it does not expect the restructuring of distribution companies,

announced by Oman Investment Authority (OIA) in January, to have an impact on OETC's ratings.

'Also, we view the announcement of the extension of subsidies for households to ten years from five years as rating-neutral. However, we could see some delays in the collection of receivables from various distribution companies should the government take more time to settle the subsidies receivables,' Fitch noted.

The ratings agency further said that a positive rating action on Oman would lead to positive rating action on OETC, provided the SCP remains at least 'bb+'.

It, however, added that a negative sovereign rating action would lead to negative rating action on OETC.

As of June 30, 2021, OETC had about RO15mn of readily available cash, deposits of RO150mn, and RO20mn undrawn committed bank facilities, with no debt maturing in 2022 and 2023, Fitch noted.



Qatar to host gas exporters summit

Doha, Qatar - With Europe worried about its gas supplies amid fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, Qatar will host a summit of top natural gas exporters including Russia, organisers said.

The United States has sought the help of its close ally Qatar in providing emergency supplies if pipelines to Western Europe are cut, according to US officials.

Organisers did not immediately confirm whether Russia's President Vladimir Putin would attend the biannual Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) summit on February 22.

Russia, Iran and Qatar are key members of the forum, which will also hold two days of ministerial meetings.

The United States and Australia, two other leading exporters, are not part of the group.

US President Joe Biden vowed on Monday, during a meeting with Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz, to shut the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Europe if Moscow launches an invasion of Ukraine.

The massive new pipeline has been completed, but has yet to begin funnelling natural gas to Germany, a route tying energy-hungry Europe ever closer to Russia.

The European Union has also been seeking alternatives to Russian gas in case of an energy crisis.

European Union energy commissioner Kadri Simson visited Azerbaijan, an observer member of the gas forum, on Friday in an effort to diversify the continent's energy sources.

Earlier this month, Saad al Kaabi, Qatar's energy minister, told the EU his country could not rescue Europe alone if Russia turned off gas supplies, but was ready to help "in times of need".

The GECF says its 11 members and seven associate countries account for 70 per cent of proven gas reserves and 51 per cent of global liquefied natural gas exports.

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Pfizer sees COVID-19 drug sales crossing \$50bn mark in 2022

New York, US - Pfizer forecasts more than US\$50bn in 2022 sales for its COVID-19 vaccine and therapeutic as the pharmaceutical giant reported a more than doubling of annual profits on strong sales of its inoculation.

Pfizer, whose vaccine developed with German company BioNTech was the first approved in the United States to counter the deadly virus, sees slightly lower 2022 revenues for the vaccine compared with the just-finished year, but a big infusion of revenues from Paxlovid, the company's pill for COVID-19.

Chief executive Albert Bourla described 2021 as a "watershed year" for Pfizer, adding that the company's efforts in the pandemic "have fundamentally changed our company forever."

Besides vaccines, sales were mixed across Pfizer's other divisions. Revenues dipped for internal medicine and inflammation and immunology, but rose for oncology, hospitals and rare disease.

Analysts have also projected higher 2022 profits compared with the company's forecasts.

Heavy interest in therapeutic

Pfizer on Tuesday reported annual profits of US\$22bn, more than double the 2020 level. An-



Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla

nual revenues nearly doubled to US\$81.3bn, with US\$36.8bn from the COVID-19 vaccine.

The company projected 2022 revenues of between US\$98bn and US\$102bn.

The results are the latest to show how the coronavirus has transformed Pfizer, which a year ago had projected just US\$15bn in COVID-19 vaccines sales in 2021 and ended up selling more than twice that amount after repeatedly lifting the forecast.

For 2022, Pfizer expects US\$32bn in revenue from COVID-19 vaccines and US\$22bn in revenues from Paxlovid.

Bourla said the company is currently working on a new vaccine candidate based on the

Omicron variant of COVID-19, as well as a new "potential next-generation oral COVID-19 treatment." The company expects to produce 120mn treatment courses for Paxlovid, with six million in the first quarter and 30mn the first half of 2022.

Pfizer executives described heavy interest in Paxlovid, with ongoing contract talks with about 100 governments around the world. The treatment has so far been approved in about 40 countries.

Bourla said the sales for Paxlovid "could be way bigger" than current forecasts. The 2022 estimate of US\$22bn is based on signed contracts and negotiations where there is essentially an agreement, he said.

However, chief financial officer Frank D'Amelio cautioned that there was "less potential upside" to 2022 estimates for COVID-19 vaccine revenues, compared with 2021 "when the vaccine was newly available and few people had received any doses of the vaccine."

Morningstar's Damien Conover estimated that COVID-19-related products will account for US\$60bn in revenues in 2022, but fall to close to US\$5bn by 2025.

"We expect increased near-term utilization of COVID-19 vaccines will reduce the demand for these vaccines and treatments over the long term," Conover said in a note. "We view Pfizer as slightly overvalued, with the market likely extrapolating strong vaccine and treatment sales too far into the future."

Bourla said the company's scientists "continue to monitor the COVID-19 virus and believe it is unlikely that it will be fully eradicated in the foreseeable future."

"That said, we now have the tools - in the forms of vaccines and treatments - that we believe will help enable us to not only better manage the pandemic but also help countries move into the endemic phase," he said.

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INTERVIEW

ARUL SAVIO PINTO, CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, FINTECH

'Employee wellbeing is taking centre stage'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Arul Savio Pinto is a senior human resources professional with extensive experience in the tech startup landscape, having worked with early-stage startups as well as large global organisations. His extensive experience stretches across organisational design and development, business partnering, strategic resourcing and planning, coaching and mentoring, employee development and performance management.

Pinto is highly skilled in creating compelling employee value propositions, establishing new HR functions, and aligning people management strategies with business objectives. He has vast international exposure having been instrumental in setting up offices and development centres across the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, Canada and China.

Pinto will be speaking at the Wellbeing at Work Middle East Summit which will take place during February 21-23, 2022 in Dubai and will also be available virtually across the region.

As a leader based in the Middle East region, what are the main challenges you are facing when it comes to employee wellbeing?

There are some challenges leaders in the region continue to grapple with on a regular basis when it comes to employee wellbeing. Here are some I would like to highlight:

As more and more employees are working from home, the future of work has become increasingly sedentary with usual physical activities such as going to the gym or walking to

work being disrupted.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an even more uncertain environment for both employers and employees, resulting in a lot of financial stress which in turn is severely impacting productivity at the organisations.

Lastly, another challenge they are facing is managing and applying wellbeing-related initiatives across a wider geographical spread and ensuring all employees can access and utilize the initiatives, regardless of their location or work environment.

What strategies have you seen developing in the region over the past 6-12 months during the pandemic to address health and wellbeing in the workplace?

With wellbeing now taking a centre stage in all the organisations, leaders in the region have been majorly focusing on physical wellbeing, career wellbeing, financial wellbeing and purpose-driven wellbeing.

Physical wellbeing: A growing number of employers have made physical wellness a priority and created a host of corporate activity challenges at work. Today, physical encompasses many aspects including exercise, sleep, overall lifestyle, and food choices.

Career wellbeing: The pandemic has led a growing number of employees to re-evaluate their career goals and re-think the job they want moving forward. As employers focus on attracting and more importantly retaining talent, this has meant, increased compensation, enhanced learning and development programs, developing new internal talent mobility op-



COVID-19 has created an uncertain environment for both employers and employees, resulting in a lot of financial stress which in turn is severely impacting productivity at the organisations

ARUL SAVIO PINTO

portunities, and online coaching and resilience training to help employees deal with massive disruptions and new ways of working.

Financial wellbeing: The uncertainty of the pandemic has caused a lot of financial stress which in turn is impacting their productivity, their health, and their relationships. More and more employers have begun offering financial management workshops, emergency funds, tailored compensation packages to reduce the

amount of time employees spend worrying about their financial situation.

Purpose-driven wellbeing: Employees' desire to work for organisations whose values align with their own is more and more becoming important criteria in selecting a new employer. As the talent marketplace continues to heat up, organisations are rapidly realizing that employees increasingly want to work for a company whose values match their own.

Why is employee wellbeing so important to you personally?

The pandemic has given leaders increased visibility into the life struggles of their employees. I believe in today's world workplace wellbeing relates to all aspects of working life - from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how employees feel about their work, their working environment, to the climate at work and work organisation. The focus has shifted from just organisational issues to individual human life experiences and on wellbeing programs that help a person feel happy and stay healthy.

What are you looking forward to about the Wellbeing at Work Middle East Summit this year?

Employee wellbeing is one of most talked off subjects in the corporate world. I am looking forward to hearing from industry leaders their thoughts and engaging in some very meaningful discussions.

What is your vision for the workplace of the future, in terms of employee engagement, health and wellbeing?

There is no doubt that a workforce that is 'well' leads to increased productivity. Most organisations limit their wellbeing programmes to encouraging employees to live healthier lifestyles and provide a few initiatives around that. Wellbeing is not an isolated program or initiative. Employee wellbeing is purpose-driven and woven into the fabric of an organisation's values and the employee experience. It needs to go beyond physical wellbeing and encompass, emotional wellbeing, financial wellbeing, career wellbeing and social wellbeing. Each

dimension is unique and intertwined with the other.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly influenced all areas of employees' personal and professional lives. What are the key learnings from this period and what are your tips for supporting each other through uncertainty?

While the pandemic has influenced all aspects of work, the largest and most powerful impact has been on employee wellbeing. While most organisations did do something around employee wellbeing in the past it was largely limited to a few policies or week-long activities. The pandemic has not only got both employers and employees thinking about the impact that well-being brings to employees, their productivity, and the organisation at large. Organisations have realized that employee wellbeing goes well beyond physical wellbeing and encompasses all aspects of an employee's life.

How has your organisation been leading the way over the last 12 months?

We have begun to look beyond physical wellbeing and have taken initiatives around career wellbeing, financial wellbeing and social wellbeing. Cliché as it may sound, we have started creating happy workplaces for happy employees.

(Muscat Daily is the media partner of the Wellbeing at Work Middle East Summit. Readers can get a 25 per cent discount on tickets, use offer code MUSCAT25 and visit <https://wellbeingat-work.world/summit/wellbeing-work-summit-middle-east-2022/#Tickets>)

Amazon expands healthcare push

San Francisco, US - Amazon announced its telemedicine service has expanded nationwide in the United States, a new extension of the firm's empire that has steadily gone far beyond e-commerce.

First launched in 2019 to provide Amazon employees with access to doctors, Amazon Care was made available to other employers last year in the company's home state of Washington.

The service combines virtual doctor or nurse visits using an Amazon Care mobile app with in-person care by medical personnel dispatched to patients' homes, the tech company said in a statement.

Amazon Care virtual health services are now available nationwide and in-person services will be rolled out in more than 20 new cities this year, Amazon said.

The telemedicine industry soared amid coronavirus restric-



tions and Americans' use has since held steady at about 38 times over pre-pandemic levels, according to a McKinsey & Company report from July.

At the same time, Americans typically get their health insurance through their jobs, so the current hiring crunch in the United States has pushed employers to offer increasingly attractive benefits.

"As more and more organiza-

tions look for convenient, comprehensive, high-quality health care solutions, we're seeing growing demand," the Amazon statement said.

In addition to selling everything from books to fresh produce, running an online video platform and its cloud computing service, Amazon has also offered an online pharmacy since late 2020 in the United States.

Amazon's push into health

care has prompted speculation as to whether it will shake up the medical insurance industry to the same degree it has reshaped retail.

Like other Big Tech giants, Amazon faces investigations, lawsuits and proposed legislation over its dominance, including how it uses its e-commerce platform to favor its goods over those of competitors.

But so far authorities have done little to curb the rush of these ubiquitous companies into consumers' daily lives.

In-person care through Amazon's care app is already available in major cities, including Boston, Dallas, Los Angeles, Seattle and Washington, DC, according to Amazon.

The service is to begin delivering in-person care this year in other cities including Chicago, Miami, New York and San Francisco.

AFP

US trade deficit slightly increases in 2021

Washington, US - The United States ended a year that saw a big increase in the trade deficit with a slight but unexpected monthly uptick as imports again outpaced exports, government data said Tuesday.

The deficit increased 1.8 per cent to US\$80.7bn in December from its upwardly revised level the month before, the Commerce Department said, just under its record high of US\$80.8bn posted in September 2021 and against analysts' expectations for a small monthly decline.

The deficit increased nearly



US\$15bn from 2020, the data said, and is far from the US\$41.6bn reported before the pandemic.

"It's unlikely that the trade

deficit will significantly unwind its Covid-related expansion until the pandemic is sustainably contained domestically and abroad," Mahir Rasheed of Oxford Economics said.

"However, we expect gradually warming growth and stronger services activity to boost export growth this year while import demand moderates."

Exports rose last month by US\$3.4bn, while imports increased by US\$4.8bn. Consumer goods exports rose US\$1.2bn, most of which were pharmaceutical preparations,

while food, feed and beverages declined US\$1.1bn.

Transportations and travel exports made up the bulk of the services exports, the data said.

Among imports, consumer goods rose US\$5.2bn, cars and parts climbed US\$2.4bn, capital goods climbed US\$2.3bn and industrial supplies decreased US\$3.2bn.

For 2021 in total, the report said exports were up US\$394.1bn and imports up by US\$576.5bn, with the US goods deficit expanding and the services surplus shrinking.

AFP



شركة التغليف المحدودة (ش.م.ع.)
Packaging Co Ltd. (SAOG)

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT		Statement Of Financial Position As At 31st December 2021	
		31.12.2021 RO	31.12.2020 RO
On behalf of the Board of Directors, we present the Chairman's Report of "Packaging Co Ltd (SAOG)" for the year ended on 31st December 2021			
The year ended with revenue of RO. 9,538,597/- and net profit of RO.252,556/- (after tax) as against revenue of RO. 8,886,709/- and net profit of RO.323,764/- (after tax) in the same period of previous year. The profit before depreciation is RO.788,144/- (after tax) for the year 2021, compared to profit before depreciation of RO.808,225/-(after tax) in the previous year 2020.			
The availability of paper is continue to be scarce and prices have reached to such levels which has not been seen before. The non/less availability of paper has impacted production.			
We would like to place on record our thanks to all our employees for their dedication and hard work.			
We would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to all of you for the patience and confidence reposed in the company. We also thank the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and the Muscat Securities Market for their support.			
On behalf of the Board or Directors, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq bin Taimur for his vision and growth oriented policies aimed at bringing about a prosperous national economy.			
Chairman of the Board of Directors			
		31.12.2021 RO	31.12.2020 RO
ASSETS			
NON-CURRENT ASSET			
Property, plant and equipment	6,047,222	4,989,072	
CURRENT ASSETS			
Inventories	2,393,586	2,064,424	
Trade and other receivables	3,490,137	3,098,606	
Other assets	56,749	139,190	
Cash and cash equivalent	7,448	30,869	
TOTAL ASSETS	5,947,920	5,333,089	
	11,995,142	10,322,161	
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES			
MEMBERS' FUND			
Share capital	3,000,000	3,000,000	
Share premium	90,811	90,811	
Legal reserve	539,548	514,292	
General reserve	53,378	53,378	
Revaluation Reserve - Land	649,245	649,245	
Accumulated (losses)/Profit	592,457	365,157	
Equity funds	4,925,439	4,672,883	
NON CURRENT LIABILITIES			
Longterm bank borrowings	845,832	-	
Deferred tax liability	305,458	260,688	
Staff end of service gratuity	129,021	115,065	
	1,280,311	375,753	
CURRENT LIABILITIES			
Short term bank borrowings	2,714,296	2,682,547	
Trade and other payables	2,972,242	2,428,363	
Contract liability	2,854	14,141	
Loan from a related party	100,000	100,000	
Current tax payable	-	48,474	
	5,789,392	5,273,525	
TOTAL EQUITY AND LIABILITIES	11,995,142	10,322,161	
		31.12.2021 RO	31.12.2020 RO
Statement Of Comprehensive Income For The Year Ended 31st December 2021			
REVENUE		9,538,597	8,886,709
Cost of sales	(8,395,106)	(7,644,631)	
GROSS PROFIT	1,143,491	1,242,078	
Other operating income	426,821	351,700	
Depreciation	(7,572)	(10,416)	
Allowance for expected credit losses	(8,398)	(36,779)	
General and administration expenses	(687,989)	(611,333)	
Selling and distribution expenses	(392,194)	(412,357)	
PROFIT FROM OPERATING ACTIVITIES	474,159	522,893	
Finance costs	(176,833)	(141,730)	
NET PROFIT FOR THE YEAR BEFORE TAX	297,326	381,163	
Income tax expenses for the current year	(44,770)	(57,399)	
NET PROFIT FOR THE YEAR AFTER TAX	252,556	323,764	
Basic earning per share	0.084	0.108	
Note: The Complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who request them either in Arabic or English within 7 days of the receipt of the request at the company's address at PO Box No 2818, Ruwi, Postal Code 112, Sultanate of Oman.			

Meethaq Islamic Banking: Continuously supporting the corporate sector in Oman



Ali Ahmed al Lawati

Since its inception, Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat, has always been at the forefront in actively supporting the sultanate's economic development, especially in line with the strategic goals of the ambitious Oman Vision 2040. Through rapid innovation, Meethaq's ever-growing suite of Islamic finance products and services is today catering successfully to the varied and sophisticated needs of its different customer segments. The bank offers a wide range of products and services for corporates and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Meethaq has been progressing from strength to strength over the years and enjoys the tremendous confidence of its ever growing family of customers.

Highlighting Meethaq's strategic importance on the occasion of the Omani Industry Day, Ali Ahmed al Lawati, Assistant General Manager, Meethaq - Corporate Banking, said: "Meethaq recognises the immense potential offered by the sultanate. Our comprehensive suite of Corporate Banking solutions support corporate customers at every stage of their business evolution, and in growing to their full potential. Hence, it is no surprise that Meethaq has been playing a key role in the de-



velopment of key sectors in the sultanate including, manufacturing, logistics, telecommunication, fisheries, mining and energy. For example, in support of Oman's strategic food security, Meethaq has financed several local food producers in the past. Similarly, Meethaq has been providing financing facilities to some of the leading companies in the transport and logistics sectors in the country. This is part of Meethaq's endeavours to help achieve the national goals of strong economic growth, sustainable development and ensuring prosperity for all. Meethaq is highly supportive of Oman's overall strategic development goals and also the feedback from its customers. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all our valued customers for the tremendous confidence they have placed in Meethaq, and promise to continue developing our portfolio of products and services so as to serve them better, every day."

Lawati further pointed out that Meethaq's large suite of cut-

ting-edge Islamic banking offerings include project financing, working capital facilities, trade financing, access to the largest Islamic banking branch network in the sultanate, and digital banking facilities. Throughout the past, Meethaq has been continuously working on improving its services and supporting the corporate sector in enhancing its competitiveness by providing a variety of banking facilities. Meethaq's services include capital finance, term and project finance, contract finance, trade services, currency exchange services and tailored financing solutions for corporates based on their business needs.

Other essential solutions offered by Meethaq include bank guarantees to third parties as well as Letters of Credit. These solutions facilitate the import and export of goods and the completion of various contracts for large entities. The services also cover accounts like current accounts, deposits and call accounts and corporate purchase cards. Moreover, it offers special

services related to transfers, collection of cheques, digital services, payment and currency services. All of these are designed in accordance with Islamic Sharia'a-compliant contracts such as Murabaha, Musharaka, Ijarah and Wakala amongst others. The products and services are available through the extended network of 24 Meethaq branches across the Sultanate. This comes as part of Meethaq's endeavours to promote the national goals of the Sultanate of achieving strong economic growth and sustainable development and ensuring prosperity for all by supporting national initiatives because of their vital and important role in the state's well-being and the development of its economy. This comes as part of Meethaq's endeavors to promote the sultanate's national goals of achieving strong economic growth and sustainable development and ensuring prosperity for all by supporting national initiatives because of their vital and important role in the state's well-being

and the development of its economy.

Digital Solutions

Meethaq is strongly committed towards investing in state-of-the-art technology to further increase efficiency and improve customer service across customer segment including both personal and corporate banking. It is focused on maintaining its clear leadership in hi-tech products and services, including electronic payments and Online Banking, which are powered by state-of-the-art banking technology. Meethaq is continuously developing its digital services to cater to the future needs of SMEs and large corporates.

Customised SME solutions

Meethaq's Sharia'a-compliant SME solutions are well designed by keeping in mind the essential role that SMEs play in supporting the sultanate's economy and Oman's 2040 vision. From this point of view, Meethaq's SME solutions, products and services

are highly innovative helping its customers to grow their businesses through various initiatives like providing dedicated relationship managers. Meethaq's customers have also been able to benefit from CSR programmes like Al Wathbah, Irshad, Maliyat as well as free VAT registration and advisory services for SMEs.

Meethaq Islamic Banking also offers a variety of banking solutions including the Ijarah financing solution and Diminishing Musharaka. Other essential solutions offered by Meethaq include bank guarantees to third parties as well as Letters of Credit, liquidity management solutions and foreign exchange services.

Supporting the Industrial Sector

Meethaq is playing an essential role in supporting the economic sector in general and the industrial sector in particular, as it is the preferred choice for companies whether in the investment side or benefiting from the banking facilities.

Meethaq is continuously improving its services provided to companies to enhance their competitiveness, through providing different banking facilities, which include, for example, working capital financing which can be financed up to 80 per cent and includes the purchase of goods and the fulfillment of short term commitments.

It includes payment of salaries, rent and bills at competitive prices and a financing period of up to five years in addition to Takaful life insurance. Meethaq also provides project financing and term financing. Under the framework of this service, financing of lease is available for real estate, project financing and sukuk, in addition to commercial services provided with a high credit limit.

Awards and recognition

As the pioneering financial institution to launch Islamic banking offerings, which adheres to the principles and provisions of Islamic Sharia'a, Meethaq's products and services are highly popular in Oman. The financing of economically vital projects come within Meethaq's strategy of promoting the Sultanate's national goals of supporting key sectors and developing a competitive economy.

This has been well recognised by both local and international media with Meethaq winning many prestigious awards including multiple awards from IFN. Meethaq was also recently crowned as Oman's Most Trusted Brand in Islamic Banking, testifying to its incredible reach and popularity with customers.

Every Meethaq product goes through Sharia'a compliance certification by the bank's Sharia'a Supervisory Board and is created in line with the guidelines of the Central Bank of Oman.



NBO celebrates Al Kanz Savings Scheme's 27-year legacy with final mega draw

Rounding off a nearly three-decade legacy, National Bank of Oman (NBO) recently held its final Al Kanz Savings Scheme Draw, giving away a total of RO565,000 to 56 lucky winners. The highly-anticipated event, which took place at the bank's headquarters in Athaiba, included the half-yearly Mega Draw, which gave RO250,000 each to two winners, the Mazaya Exclusive draw, giving RO10,000 each to four winners, and the Salary Transfer draw, giving RO500 each to 50 winners.

Tariq Atiq, chief retail and digital banking officer at NBO, said,

"We were glad to have finished our Al Kanz Savings Scheme draw on a high, sending our customers away with life-changing prizes. Although the draws have come to an end, we will continue to bring leading solutions to the market and find more innovative ways to delight and reward our customers, all while supporting them to lead financially secure lives and helping them form the habit of saving. We also thank our customers for being part of the success of Al Kanz and we promise to continue providing unique financial solutions that will help our cus-

tomers to save more"

Running since 1995, Al Kanz was one of the country's largest schemes of its kind, part of NBO's efforts to support its customers' financial journey and set them and their families up for the future. In 2021 alone, the bank gave away a total of RO3.251mn, under the theme 'Make Saving Matter'. Meanwhile, NBO continues to offer its customers various savings solutions with interest to maximise returns, along with a myriad of benefits and perks to make their financial lives easier and more rewarding.

Oman LNG sponsors National Golf Championship

As part of its strive to support the community and healthy lifestyle, Oman LNG sponsored the 46th National Golf Championship in Muscat.

The sponsorship complements our consistent efforts to boost competitive sports capabilities and promoting different sport activities.

The Golf Championship highlights development of local youth in competitive golf tournament raising self-esteem through recognition and appreciation. This grows sport enthusiasts and talents, who will represent our country in the international tournaments and competitions.



Oman's encourages competitive sport, particularly at international circles, as a window that offers high profile events, a glimpse of the sultanate - its hos-

pitable people and picturesque landscape - as a beautiful, attractive destination, with the possibility of drawing them to visit as holidaymakers.

Despite the pandemic, Oman LNG spares no efforts to sponsor and support various activities, while adhering to all health measures and protocols. The sponsorship of this event further encourages the adoption of healthy lifestyles, and marking the Sultanate of Oman in the touristic map as an excellent venue to hold local, regional and global events. Such step comes in line with the Oman 2040 Vision, whose main goals involve drawing tourists from around the globe to appreciate Oman's exceptional beauty and infrastructure through promoting such events.

Become a vlogging master with vivo X70

There's no denying that we have noticed a rapid growth for content creation and viewership in the region. As we see the popularity of short-form videos like TikTok and Instagram Reels growing globally, smartphone manufacturers have quickly responded by enhancing their devices to meet this demand.

vivo has entered the market with a strong flagship phone, the X70 series. Consisting of the X70 and X70 Pro, both offer consumers professional videography features that are close as real-life through a simple touch. To do this, vivo and its long-standing optics partner, ZEISS, have developed the new X70 series with remarkable vlogging



features that sets itself apart from its competition.

Three things that places the X70 series as the right vlogging companion:

Say no to tripods and yes to the X70 series' Gimbal Stabilization 3.0

Aren't you tired of carrying a tripods and selfie sticks every time you record a video? Well,

with the X70 series Gimbal Stabilization 3.0, you don't need any of them. Through this feature, the Gimbal Camera supports video stabilisation smoothly and easily through 5 axes, including X/Y axis rotation, X/Y axis translation and Z axis rotation.

Capture clear twilight sceneries through Super Night Video

Want to record fireworks at night? Or even showcase how bright and clear the moon is? Well, the X70 series has introduced a Super Night Video feature that allows vloggers to do this through a click of a button.

The Super Night Video has one of the best night scenes ca-

pabilities from the previous generation and is combined with a brand-new Ultra-Sensing Sensor, brightening and noise reducing the video under extremely dark and night scenarios.

Become your own director through the X70's Pro Cinematic Mode

Do you want to capture authentic and high-quality videos just like how it's done in films? Well, the X70 series has upgraded its professional video mode to give you that capability.

The Pro Cinematic Mode can maximize the control and adjustment of various video parameters, giving the user control on pre and postproduction.

Mazoon Dairy to participate in 2022 edition of Gulfood

The flagship dairy company of the Sultanate of Oman, Mazoon Dairy, recently announced its participation in the 27th edition of Gulfood, the largest food and beverage processing and packaging exhibition in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. The event brings together a wide range of participants from the food and beverage sourcing ecosystem from around the world.

The exhibition will be held from February 13-17 at the Dubai World Trade Centre and allows food professionals looking to source the latest products, gauge market developments, and connect with global suppliers.

Mazoon Dairy has participated in the previous edition of Gulfood while successfully introducing a variety of products into the regional market. Mazoon Dairy's keenness to participate at this regional exhibition reflects its constant endeavour to strengthen its local, and regional reputation as one of the largest dairy and related products producers in the region.



Ahmed al Ghafri, chief support officer, at Mazoon said, "Our annual participation is a significant opportunity to introduce our high-quality products to the market, enhance connections with manufacturers and distributors, and strengthen ties with consumers."

"This key event will enable us to engage and interact with hundreds of visitors during the week and showcase rich goodness of our products and what differentiates us from the competition. In addition to sharing

experiences and expertise, we hope to build constructive business relationships with international companies with a view to strengthen Omani exports and contributing significantly to the national economy."

"Our annual participation also helps us get a clearer picture on the current market trends while widening our knowledge of consumer needs and expectations. This empowers our ability to handle the continuous challenge of producing pioneering products, especially in

terms of quality, taste and pricing," Ghafri added.

Along with the product showcase, the event will feature a packed schedule of special activities that will keep the industry engaged during the five days of Gulfood.

The Innovation Summit and Innovation Awards will shine the spotlight on the most groundbreaking products and solutions from the F&B business, while Tastes of the World and the Brewers Cup will offer flavourful experiences.

Fahad Express and Sabre Corporation sign agreement

Sabre Corporation, the leading software and technology company that powers the global travel industry, and Fahad Express Travel & Tourism, one of the leading travel companies in the Sultanate of Oman, have announced a new multiyear preferred GDS agreement to help elevate the traveller experience in Oman.

Fahad Express Travel & Tourism has been working with Sabre for more than a decade, delivering on its vision 'to offer the best and most satisfying services to holiday seekers and our corporate travellers'. Under the new agreement, Fahad Express will be exclusively using Sabre Red 360 to deliver highly personalised offers for its customers, by deploying intelligent and consultative services and features.

Furthermore, it will continue to benefit from Sabre's automated exchanges and refunds to drive operational efficiency and excellence.

"We are excited to extend our longstanding relationship with Fahad Express as its preferred GDS partner," said John Matthew, Oman country manager,



Sabre Travel Network Middle East. "Online travel is playing a significant role in the industry's recovery, and we will provide the technology and tools to allow Fahad Express leverage this growth and excel in both online and offline travel."

Fahad Express Travel and Tourism will use Sabre's marketplace of more than 400 airlines, 750,000 hotel properties, and hundreds of tour operators, rail, car and cruise providers, to sell customised travel packages from suppliers around the world.

"We have been successful in building a brand that delivers the perfect balance of quality, reliability and service in the offline space," said Juliet Irwin, general manager, Fahad Express of Travel & Tourism. "Our partnership with Sabre will see us work together to empower the travel industry in Oman and transfer our expertise to excel in the online space. We will leverage Sabre's technology and solution to transform our business and advance our offerings for the online travellers."

Karwa Motors participates in MENA Transport Exhibition

Karwa Motors, Oman's first-ever bus brand and manufacturing facility, was well received by visitors at the recent MENA Transport Exhibition. A dedicated stand at the exhibition provided Karwa Motors with the opportunity to promote its transportation solutions to over 2,000 attendees throughout the event, which ran from February 6-8.

Karwa Motors CEO, Dr Ibrahim al Balushi, commented on the company's participation in the exhibition, saying, "The MENA Transport Exhibition is one of the foremost exhibitions of its kind in the region. It offered us the perfect avenue to meet with and showcase our brand, transportation solutions, technology, and manufacturing capabilities to leading industry experts, potential clients, and key decision-makers from the region."

The MENA Transport Exhibition is a leading biennial business and networking platform for all the players of the public transport sector.

The exhibition was held in Dubai and was organised by UITP (Union Internationale des Transports Publics) in partnership with RTA. It brought together over 50 exhibitors,



comprising industry leaders, authorities, operators, and expert international voices to exchange experiences, solutions, ideas, and business opportunities concerning the latest innovations in the public transport sector.

"Through our strong presence

in such a significant expo, not only will we be able to establish ourselves as major players in the region's transportation industry, but also proudly position Oman as a regional leader in automotive and industrial development," said Balushi.

Get a free SIM with Ooredoo Hala plans

Giving the best digital experience every time to subscribers, Ooredoo's Hala SIM is absolutely free. Always making it super simple, customers can select their plan of choice that includes choosing data with voice, data only or straightforward credit. All at amazing pocket-friendly prices, there's never been a better time to chat, surf and enjoy the Internet.

When purchasing a SIM with a Hala base plan option for RO2 per week, users can select to subscribe and get 1GB data, 500MB social data, 50 local minutes and 25 international minutes. Or choose RO3.5 and get 1.5GB of data, 500MB of social data, 50 minutes of local voice for four weeks, or bump it up to RO6 and get 3GB of data,



1.5GB of social data, 100 minutes of local voice and 25 minutes of international voice for four weeks. For the data only option, grab an Internet add-on for RO3 and get 2GB of data or for RO5, get 4GB of data, both valid for four weeks. Alternatively, go for

the amazing value standard option of RO2 and enjoy credit for up to 30 days.

Pick a Hala SIM through the app, the e-shop, via WhatsApp by messaging 9500 9500, or at any Ooredoo store or dealer located across Oman.

صناعة قرطاسية الكمبيوتر (ش.م.ع.) وشركتها التابعة
Computer Stationery Industry SAOG and its Subsidiary

HSE Cup 2008

AUDITED FINANCIAL RESULTS FOR YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2021

BOARD OF DIRECTORS' REPORT

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Computer Stationery Industry SAOG (CSI), I have pleasure in welcoming you to the Annual General Meeting of the Company. I take this opportunity to place before you the Annual Report together with Audited financials for the year ended 31st December 2021 for your consideration and adoption.

Financial Performance for the year 2021

Your company generated revenue of RO 1,246,033 for the year 2021 as against RO 1,031,261 generated during the previous year, representing an increase of 20.83%.

The operating loss of your company for the year 2021 was RO 288,466 against the operating loss RO 210,351 of the previous year. The Group's net loss for the year 2021 is RO 299,961 compared to net loss of RO 181,469 for the previous year.

COVID-19 pandemic continued to have adverse impact on the Global economies including Sultanate of Oman. Printing industry has been hard hit by the enforced shutdown of retail, leisure activities, events that would involve print collateral and the temporary restrictions in the marketplace. With the vaccination drive is in full pace, your company is optimistic of business prospects for the year 2022. The Company's expansion into the rapidly growing field of Printed Paper Packaging is proceeding as per the plan. The benefits of this expansion shall ensue in the next financial year.

The Future

The current Covid outbreak continues to have a profound impact on the global and local economies as well the printing sector in specific. To reduce this impact, Your company is focusing on controlling costs. The domestic economy is expected to be gradually back into normal as a results to recent measures taken by the government. We are seeing a gradual return to sales in the near future. However, there is also uncertainty in future raw material and packaging costs. With oil prices increasing over 2021, the Company expects raw materials and packaging materials to increase impacting overall margins and profitability.

Corporate Social Responsibility and Human Resources

The Group's Omanisation stands at 48% as on 31st December 2021. Your company has taken adequate measure to develop Omani employee's skills by providing in house training.

The group has rendered assistance to government school by the way of providing the study aids for the students.

Dividend Policy

The group has generated a net loss of RO 299,961 during the year 2021. The retained earnings of the company stand at RO 320,872.

The following are the details of dividend declared and distributed during the previous 5 years

Year	Cash Dividend	Stock Dividend
2015	20%	--
2016	10%	--
2017	7%	--
2018	--	--
2019	--	--
2020	--	--
2021	--	--

Given the current year financial performance, no dividend is being recommended.

Corporate Governance and Internal Control

The company has complied with all the requirements of corporate governance as also the regulatory regime laid down by the capital Market Authority.

The Board, the Audit Committee and the Nomination Remuneration Committee carried out their responsibilities with diligence and in professional manner. The Group's Operation Manual is periodically reviewed and updated to ensure appropriate internal controls in all the areas of the company.

Conclusion

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to our honourable shareholders, customers, banks and suppliers for their support during the year. Also, thankful to the executive management and all employees of the company for their sincere efforts, and we look forward for achieving better results in the years to come.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I thank His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik for his vision and leadership that has brought stability, prosperity to the Sultanate of Oman. May Almighty bless His Majesty with long life, health and grant Him success to pursue the march of goodness and development for the prosperity of Oman and its people.

Mehdi Bin Mohamed Jawad Al Abduwani
Chairman

CONSOLIDATED STATEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31st DECEMBER 2021

	Note	Group	2021 Parent Company	Group	2020 Parent Company
		RO	RO	RO	RO
INCOME					
Revenue from contracts with customers	18	1,246,033	174,318	1,031,261	251,763
Cost of sales	19	(1,175,190)	(173,468)	(922,730)	(211,042)
Gross profit		70,843	850	108,531	40,721
Other income	20	24,796	55,617	35,296	59,034
		95,639	56,467	143,827	99,755
EXPENSES					
Salaries and employee related costs		155,415	50,988	197,963	34,888
General and administration	22	189,877	110,500	137,979	104,577
Selling and distribution	23	20,405	2,603	7,536	4,505
Finance charges	24	18,408	4,471	10,700	3,906
		384,105	168,562	354,178	147,876
		(288,466)	(112,095)	(210,351)	(48,121)
Loss before taxation		(11,495)	(5,574)	28,882	5,186
Taxation (charge) / credit	26	(299,961)	(117,669)	(181,469)	(42,935)
Net loss and total comprehensive income for the year					
		(299,961)	(117,669)	(181,469)	(42,935)
Basic earnings per share	27	(0.030)	(0.012)	(0.018)	(0.004)

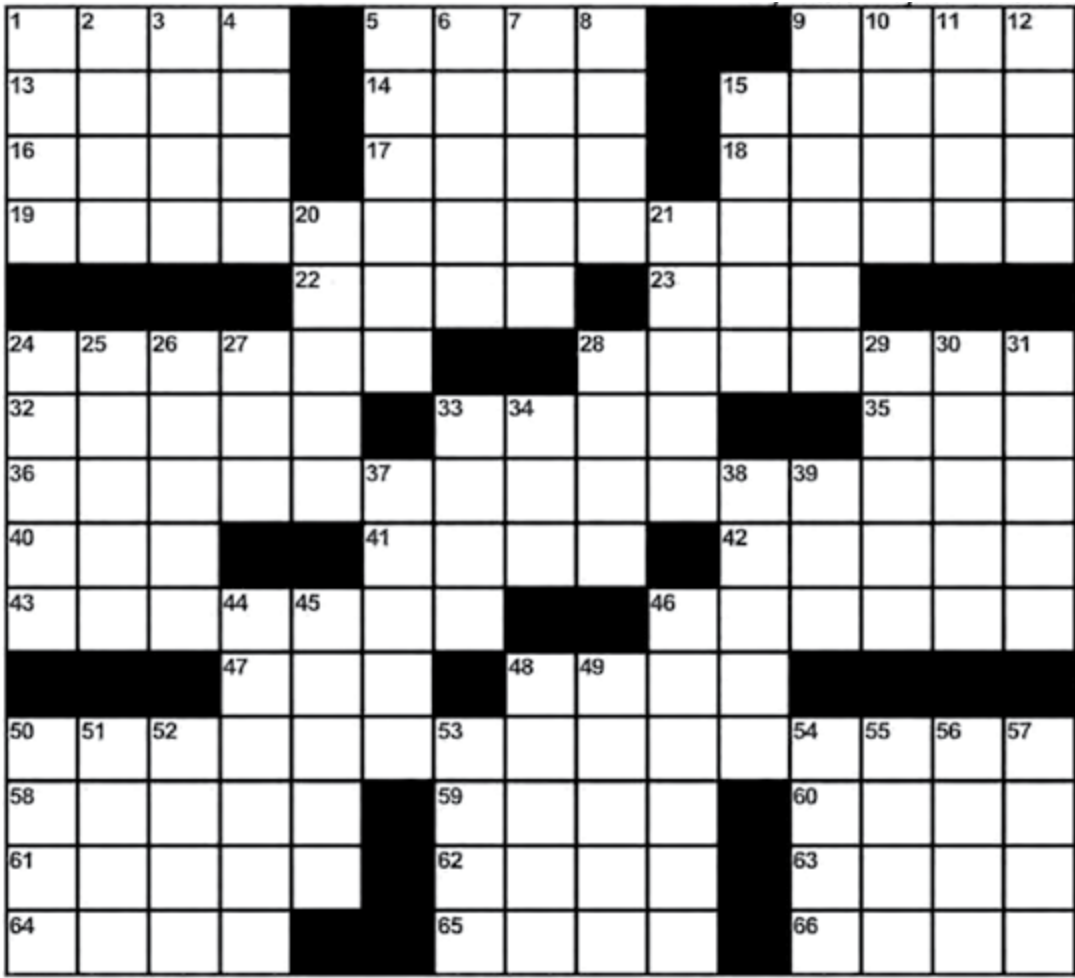
CONSOLIDATED STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 31st DECEMBER 2021

	Note	Group	2021 Parent Company	Group	2020 Parent Company
		RO	RO	RO	RO
ASSETS					
Non-current assets					
Property, plant and equipment	5	1,082,365	46,335	1,013,787	57,375
Investment property	6	--	712,664	--	756,332
Right of use assets	7 b)	223,144	41,365	250,504	47,713
Investment in a subsidiary	8	--	640,000	--	640,000
Wakala deposits	11 b)	200,000	--	--	--
Deferred tax asset	26	74,284	37,354	74,284	37,354
Total non-current assets		1,579,793	1,477,718	1,338,575	1,538,774
Current assets					
Inventories	9	293,212	28,706	167,373	30,764
Trade and other receivables	10	629,334	64,097	363,344	61,072
Term deposits	11 a)	200,000	--	404,100	--
Bank balances and cash	12	44,847	1,547	198,106	13,399
Total current assets		1,167,393	94,350	1,132,923	105,235
Total assets		2,747,186	1,572,068	2,471,498	1,644,009
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES					
Equity					
Share capital	13	1,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000
Legal reserve	14	361,216	333,333	361,216	333,333
General reserve	15	100,000	--	100,000	--
Retained earnings		320,872	50,349	620,833	168,018
Total equity		1,782,088	1,383,682	2,082,049	1,501,351
Liabilities					
Non-current liabilities					
Non-current portion of lease liabilities	7 c)	114,861	42,495	130,095	48,135
Employees' end of service benefits	21 b)	151,676	23,296	161,719	21,614
Total non-current liabilities		266,537	65,791	291,814	69,749
Current liabilities					
Current portion of lease liabilities	7 c)	8,214	3,039	7,303	2,702
Trade and other payables	16	513,887	66,070	90,332	70,207
Bank borrowings	17	176,460	53,486	--	--
Total current liabilities		698,561	122,595	97,635	72,909
Total liabilities		965,098	188,386	389,449	142,658
Total equity and liabilities		2,747,186	1,572,068	2,471,498	1,644,009
Net assets per share	28	0.178	0.138	0.208	0.150

Note : The complete accounts are available with Capital Market Authority. However, the same will be sent by mail to any shareholder, who requests them at the address, in either Arabic or English, as requested within 7 days of receipt of such request.

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DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

 - 1) Cook in a cauldron
 - 5) Wet bar
 - 9) Availed oneself of
 - 13) Forelimb bone
 - 14) "Keep quiet!"
 - 15) In a fitting manner
 - 16) Not as great?
 - 17) Elevate
 - 18) Decided upon
 - 19) Three glassy things
 - 22) Like roughly half a team's games
 - 23) Moray, e.g.
 - 24) Meals fit for a king
 - 28) Nonserious jokesters
 - 32) To whom Muslims pray
 - 33) Mongolia's, Bator
 - 35) Doo-wop syllable
 - 36) Three glassy things
 - 40) Word after "goose" or "nest"
 - 41) Mixed bag of things
 - 42) Perform well beyond expectations
 - 43) Exploits of TV's Car-rington family
 - 46) State, long ago
 - 47) Spike cheering on the
- Knicks

 - 48) Attack, as with snowballs
 - 50) Three glassy things
 - 58) Eclipse type
 - 59) Cotton bundle
 - 60) Cause of some shivers
 - 61) Follows instructions to the letter
 - 62) Short cut?
 - 63) Set of socks
 - 64) "Dick Tracy" role
 - 65) Flower in a pocket-ful?
 - 66) Bald eagle's kin

DOWN

 - 1) Socket insert
 - 2) Tub spread
 - 3) "Meet Me Louis"
 - 4) Survive
 - 5) Burrowing animals
 - 6) Medium board?
 - 7) Ore analysis
 - 8) "Boy, am I glad that's over!"
 - 9) Defend, as the law
 - 10) Put in the overhead bin
 - 11) "If all_ fails ..."
 - 12) Hue changer
- 15) Felt some pain
 - 20) Police club used in India
 - 21) It flows in Paris
 - 24) Stood directly before
 - 25) Mournful poem
 - 26) Arrange properly, as wheels
 - 27) 47-Across's pizza shop owner
 - 28) Stunning boxing victory
 - 29) Bring forth
 - 30) Deceptive maneuvers
 - 31) Silvery fish
 - 33) Far from fetching
 - 34) Luau souvenir
 - 37) One who keeps minutes
 - 38) Puts in the oven
 - 39) Moron's prefix?
 - 44) Eternally
 - 45) Nostradamus and others
 - 46) A Disney dwarf
 - 48) Schroeder's play thing?
 - 49) New York's_ Island
 - 50) Reputation blemish
 - 51) Job for a mechanic
 - 52) Some wallet stuffers
 - 53) 1/16 of a cup (abbr.)
 - 54) Mocking remark
 - 55) Petri dish substance
 - 56) Totally botch
 - 57) Sun-cracked
- NOTE PAD**
- | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M | E | L | T | S | | S | I | G | N | | A | L | B | S |
| E | X | E | A | T | | I | D | L | E | | D | I | A | L |
| S | P | A | R | E | D | N | O | E | X | P | E | N | S | E |
| S | O | F | T | E | N | | A | T | H | L | E | T | E | |
| | | | | | | R | A | V | E | N | | D | E | R |
| U | R | G | E | | | A | L | S | O | | | | | |
| R | E | I | M | P | O | S | E | | G | O | S | S | I | P |
| S | P | L | I | T | T | L | E | V | E | L | | H | O | U |
| A | S | T | R | A | L | | | | A | V | E | M | A | R |
| | | | | | | A | S | T | I | | P | E | S | T |
| P | O | E | S | | | W | E | L | S | H | | | | |
| A | F | G | H | A | N | I | | P | A | R | I | S | H | |
| S | T | R | I | K | E | S | A | B | | A | L | B | A | N |
| T | E | E | N | | | W | H | I | R | | V | I | C | A |
| A | N | T | E | | | T | Y | R | O | | E | L | A | N |

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

-  **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Your energy is fiery and contagious, so you should find almost everything you do becomes a source of inspiration. Anyone lucky enough to be by your side is treated to some thrilling adventures. Chores can wait. As for now, you're just better suited to tackling new activities. Your powers of persuasion are peaking too, so speak up about whatever you really want. Every new adventure will inspire you to go on many more adventures.
-  **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Your inspiring energy, zippy approach to life, and ability to spontaneously take on almost everything and everyone make you irresistible today. Everyone around you wants to know how you get so much out of life, and they should want to rub shoulders to get a taste of your amazingly positive attitude. Since you're feeling frisky and maybe somewhat flirtatious, your mojo is making life even better for you!
-  **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

There's plenty of fun to be had today and maybe also the chance to work toward a higher purpose. A big group project, new activity, or game could suit you perfectly and offer the possibility for mind expansion. At the same time, you get to learn more about and get closer to your people while laughing like crazy. Get creative and enjoy the good times that follow. These kind of fun filled days won't come easily.
-  **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

Extra planning pays off for you in a big way today. Though you're tempted to rush or simply leave things until the last possible moment and trust that things work out on their own, applying your brains together with your intuition is the best approach. Write down a firm schedule for your domestic projects, or plan that upcoming date to the tiniest detail. The results should delight you.
-  **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

How do you want your life to be if all goes well? Knowing you, your answer could go on for quite a while, so just write down a few notes hitting the major points. Then consider how close to perfect things can possibly get. It might be pretty close! Choose a few things from the list that you can bring to life right away and get to work. Even if they're simple like taking more long walks or catching up on your reading, you should be happy.
-  **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You can set some worries aside when it comes to an important relationship. There's just no point to worrying, and once you chill out you can see the situation in a much clearer light, and, weirdly, it might look much better than you thought. If something has been delayed, it might be time to pick up where you left off, or you might be able to reach a new, more stable understanding.
-  **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

Your aspirations might just collide with reality in the best possible way today. How can you smooth this process along? Make sure it's all clear in your mind first. Write a list, read it out loud, get advice from a friend or colleague, then make changes as necessary. You should have a better idea about precisely when to keep an eye out and how to position yourself in the right place at the right time.
-  **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Poring over old photo albums or scrapbooks is just what you need right now, and your sense of nostalgia is sweet. You could be inspired to reach out to old friends or family and reminisce. It doesn't take too long to get to talking about what's going on right now and maybe even making future plans. A visit or reunion might be just the thing. You should gather strength from these old connections.
-  **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Going along with the crowd isn't really how you operate, but if a spontaneous suggestion comes your way today like a road trip, gallery tour, or midnight movie, you're game for anything. If left on your own, you'd probably just spend the day lost in thought, but if you hook up with others (or at least one certain other), there's plenty for you to experience and enjoy. Take a chance today and you will see how wonderful the day might turn into.
-  **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

Your feelings are too easily bruised for the time being, but they're also too easily enraged. It can be an interesting state of mind, but it's not necessarily all that bad for you. Even if you should misunderstand someone, fly off the handle, and blurt out exactly what you think is wrong, it can lead to newer, better lines of communication. Improved understanding of an important relationship should make your world a lot simpler.
-  **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Your desires are usually pretty close to the surface of your mind, but don't be too shocked if you're feeling more selfless today. It's a great time to start anything new. Maybe you want to finally start working for your favourite cause, or it could be time to try a new career path or reboot an important relationship. Whatever you do, think it all through first so you can keep it up!
-  **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You need to just go with the flow today. Your energy is bringing new stuff your way in torrents. Make sure your all-powerful intuition is in good working order because there's a heck of a lot to pick up on now. The more overt stuff, such as so-called coincidences, weirdos both new to you and long-familiar, secret messages from odd sources, is certainly coming your way too.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Where are the headquarters of the World Curling Federation?

A. Ottawa, Canada
B. Perth Scotland
C. Bern, Switzerland
D. Stockholm, Sweden

2. Fingerprints come in three basic patterns. Which of these is not one of them?

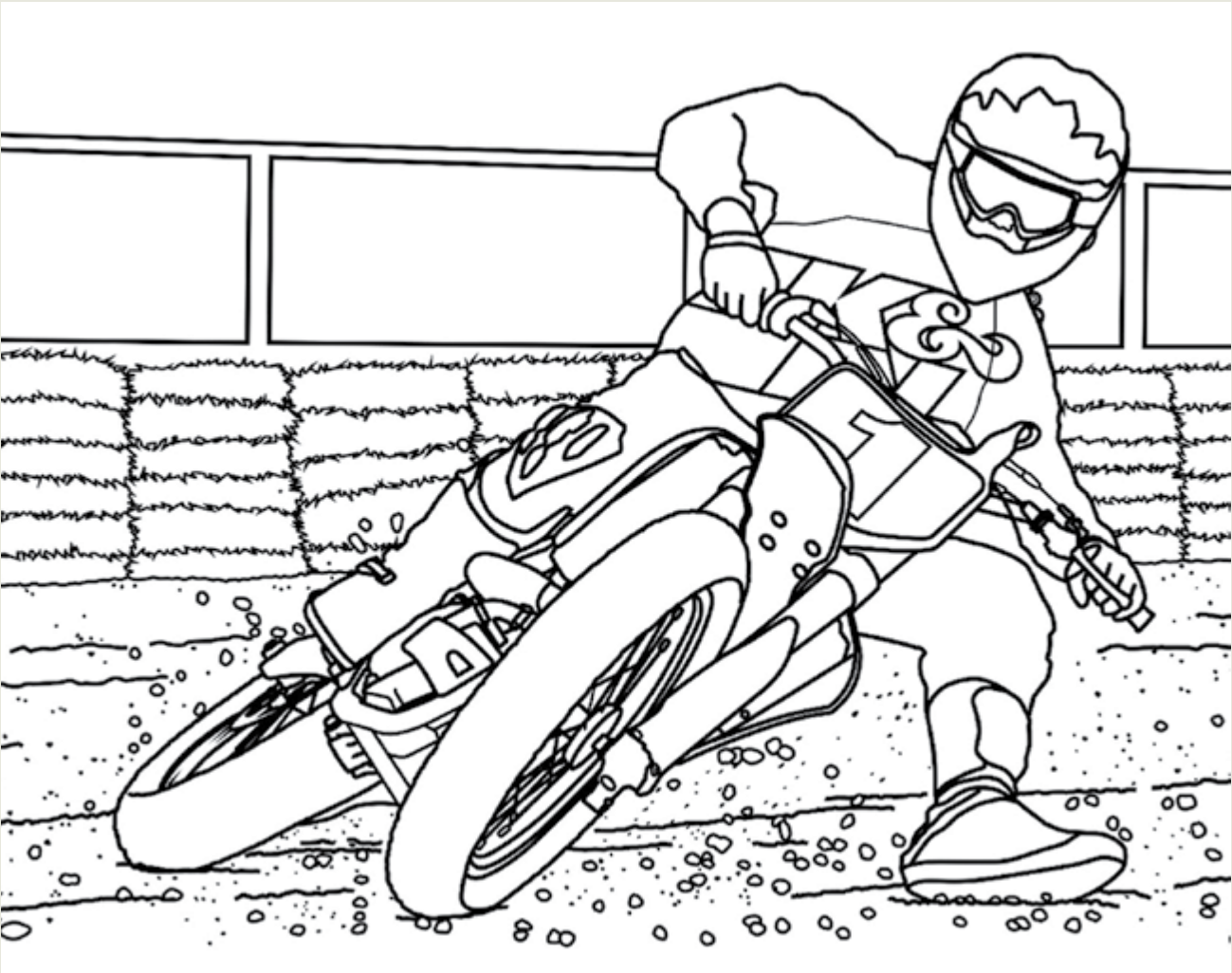
A. Arches
B. Loops
C. Whorls
D. Turns

3. Who wrote the music for the award-winning 1961 musical film for which Steven Spielberg directed a re-make in 2021?

A. Leonard Bernstein
B. Stephen Sondheim
C. George Gershwin
D. Aaron Copland

Answers: 1. b 2. d 3. a

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

G	O	N	O
R	I	I	O
M	I	D	T
A	R	S	M

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

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

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

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

Abu Dhabi gas blast escalates jitters after attacks by Yemen

Dubai, UAE - A gas explosion in downtown Abu Dhabi prompted a warning of a possible attack early on Wednesday following a series of drone and missile assaults by Yemeni rebels. The US Embassy issued a security alert after the blast in a building on Hamdan Street just after midnight sent a fireball into the sky and set off a blaze. But emergency teams in the United Arab Emirates capital 'put out a fire caused by a gas cylinder explosion', the official WAM news agency said. "The teams managed to control the situation after extinguishing the fire and safely vacating the residents," it said. The report also urged the public to 'follow the news from the UAE's official authorities and to avoid spreading rumours and false information'. Unverified footage posted on social media showed an explosion at the top of a building and emergency services arriving in the busy street below as bystanders watched. The US Embassy in Abu Dhabi had warned after the blast that 'there are reports of a possible missile or drone strike having occurred' over the city. In a later statement, it cited the Emirati authorities' notification that the blast was a gas



This file photo shows seagulls flying across Abu Dhabi's seaside promenade in the Emirati capital on January 24 (AFP)

cylinder explosion, saying it had an obligation to inform US citizens of potential threats. "Against the backdrop of recent security incidents, reports of audible and visible explosions in Abu Dhabi early this morning prompted the embassy to issue a security alert to American citizens and personnel." "Subsequently, the Abu Dhabi Civil Defence Authority issued a public notification widely across all media channels confirming that the incident was the result of a gas cylinder

explosion." "The embassy extends its gratitude to the Abu Dhabi emergency responders who contained the incident quickly and assured the safety of the city's residents." The gas explosion followed a

victory by Brazil's Palmeiras, who are accompanied by many of their fans, in the Club World Cup football tournament taking place in Abu Dhabi this week. The UAE has been on alert since a drone and missile attack killed three oil workers in Abu

The US embassy in Abu Dhabi had warned after the blast that there are reports of a possible missile or drone strike having occurred over the city. Later, it cited the UAE authorities' notification that the blast was a gas cylinder explosion

Dhabi on January 17. Authorities have since thwarted three similar attacks. The UAE is part of the Saudi-led coalition fighting Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen's civil war, which has killed hundreds of thousands directly or indirectly and displaced millions, sparking a humanitarian catastrophe. The January 17 attack was the first deadly assault on the UAE claimed by the Houthis, opening a new phase in the seven-year war and puncturing the country's image as a regional safe haven. AFP

Iran claims developing 'strategic missile'

Tehran, Iran - Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on Wednesday announced the development of a surface-to-surface missile whose stated range would put arch foe Israel within reach. The Guards' Sepahnews website said the missile was named the Khaybarchekan after a victorious battle fought by the Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century. Armed forces chief of staff Mohammad Bagheri described it as a strategic, 'long-range' missile. The Guards' Sepahnews website said the missile has a range of 1,450km, runs on solid fuel and is capable of penetrating anti-missile systems. It was unveiled during a visit to a surface-to-surface missile base of the Guards' air force, with the chief of the aerospace department Amiral Hajizadeh present. "Its manoeuvrability and extreme speed allow it to reach targets within a radius of 1,450km," the website said. Iran has the largest arsenal of missiles in the Middle East. On December 24, the Islamic republic fired 16 ballistic missiles to conclude military drills described by generals as a warning to Israel. The Jewish state is located little more than 1,000km from Iran's western frontier. AFP

Israel hits surface-to-air missile targets in Syria

Jerusalem - Israel launched strikes against targets in Syria early on Wednesday, hitting anti-aircraft batteries in response to a missile fired from Syria, the military said. Sirens were sounded in the northern Israeli Arab city of Umm Al-Fahm after the Syrian missile launch but it exploded in mid-air, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) tweeted. "In response to the anti-aircraft missile launched from Syria earlier tonight, we just struck surface-to-air missile targets in Syria, including radar & anti-aircraft batteries," the IDF said. Syrian state media said the country's air defences had been activated against Israeli fire 'in the vicinity of Damascus'. Citing a military source, it said Israeli aerial attacks began shortly before 1am and were accompanied at 1:10am by surface-to-surface missile strikes 'from



Israeli soldiers gather in Golan Heights on Wednesday (AFP)

the direction of the occupied Golan." "Our aerial defences confronted the enemy's missiles and shot some of them down," said Syrian news agency SANA. It said one soldier was killed and five others wounded, 'along with material damage'. Israel rarely comments on the air strikes it carries out in Syria

but has said repeatedly it will not allow its archfoe Iran to extend its footprint in the country. Since civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, Israel has carried out hundreds of air strikes targeting government positions as well as allied Iran-backed forces and Hezbollah fighters. AFP

French elections: Macron holds advantage

Paris, France - A relatively flat campaign in which opponents have failed to score points is playing into the hands of French President Emmanuel Macron as he bids for a second term, even if much can still change ahead of the April elections. A cautious Macron, saying he is preoccupied with the COVID-19 pandemic and averting war between Russia and Ukraine, has kept his powder dry by refraining from officially declaring himself a candidate ahead of the first round of voting on April 10. This has so far done Macron no harm, with opinion polls showing him rock solid in the first round, coming out on top at around 25 per cent, and then beating any rival in the run-off two weeks later. Opposing forces remain sometimes hopelessly divided. Far-right candidates Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour have spent more time trading barbs with each other than firing them at Macron, while the left's chances are stymied by no fewer



Emmanuel Macron (AFP)

than five major left-wing candidates ranging from communists to the greens. The candidate who could potentially cause Macron the most trouble in the second round, the conservative Paris region chief Valerie Pécresse, has lost momentum since her nomination and started to slip in the polls. Gaspard Estrada, a political scientist at Sciences Po University and a specialist in political campaigning, said Macron was seeking to 'keep his opponents at a distance' with his late declaration. "For the moment, we do not

see in the polls a trend that endangers the president," he told AFP. While Macron appears to be leaving it late with his formal declaration, the strategy is nothing unusual. In 1965, Charles de Gaulle declared only a month before the polls, a tactic repeated successfully in 1988 by Francois Mitterrand. "Macron is very stable, he neither goes up nor down in his voting intentions. I therefore think that he has every interest in being the master of the timetable and in not having an agenda imposed on him by the other candidates," Estrada said. The latest poll published on Monday, by Ifop-Fiducial, showed Macron on 25 per cent - remarkably stable for a president who won 24 per cent in the first round of 2017 - and Pécresse slipping to 15.5 per cent. It also projected that Macron would easily win a run-off, whether it was against Pécresse or Le Pen. "All these balances can still be

upset but, at this stage, a vote for Emmanuel Macron is taking on the appearance of a default choice," said the Le Monde daily. 'Reshuffle the cards' After rising to power five years ago as his country's youngest-ever president, Macron, who is still only 44, knows that winning a second term is crucial to his ambitions of reforming France and Europe - as well as securing a place in French history. Victory would see him become the first French leader to be re-elected since Jacques Chirac in 2002, after the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and Francois Hollande ended as single-term disappointments. Analysts warn he would be wise to steer clear of complacency as there remains an element of uncertainty, with polls showing many voters yet to make up their mind and the numbers of those not casting ballots also not clear. AFP

Mosul university library in Iraq rises from ashes of IS reign

Mosul, Iraq - The storied library of Iraq's Mosul University boasted a million titles before Islamic State (IS) group militants rampaged through it, toppling book shelves and burning ancient texts. Now, almost five years after their defeat, the war-battered northern metropolis is trying to rebuild the pride of the city long known as a literature hub boasting countless booksellers and archives guarding rare manuscripts. Mohamed Younes, technical director of the prestigious university library, recalls the carnage he witnessed after Mosul was recaptured from IS in mid-2017 following long and gruelling street battles. "When we came back, we saw... the books pulled from the shelves, thrown on the ground and burned," he said.

Thousands of texts on philosophy and law, science and poetry which in some way contradicted the IS' extremist world view had gone up in flames. Some of the most valuable titles were sold on the black market. "Before, we had more than a million titles, some of which couldn't be found in any other university in Iraq," said Younes. When the militants were first at the gates of the city, he said, "We were only able to move the rare books and a number of foreign periodicals." With the IS group's brutal takeover of Mosul, 85 per cent of the collection was lost. Before IS, Mosul University was 'the mother of all books', said former student Tarek Attiya, 34, who is now enrolled at Tikrit university. "There is a huge difference



A librarian consults a book from the collection of Mosul central library, in Iraq's northern city of Mosul, on January 31 (AFP)

between what used to be and the situation after IS," he said. **Refurbished building** Now there is a revival going on to, with the help of donations, slowly line the library shelves with books again.

The library building, refurbished with financing from a UN agency, is set to reopen this month. Four floors high with a sleek glass exterior, it will have an initial 32,000 books. It will also feature a digital trove of e-books, with a view to

eventually rebuilding a million-strong collection. Ahead of the opening, the books have been housed in the narrow premises of the university's engineering faculty where shelves are overflowing and titles are stacked on every available surface. Significant donations from Arab and international universities have been received to 'enable the revival of the library', said the director. Renowned figures in Mosul and across Iraq have also contributed by 'dipping into their personal' collections, he added. The northern metropolis of Mosul has historically been a hub for merchants and aristocrats, with a rich cultural and intellectual life. A commercial crossroad of the Middle East, Mosul was able to preserve thousands of rare and ancient works, notably

religious texts. Iraq's first printing press was operating in Mosul in the second half of the 19th century. **Appetite for reading** Signs of Mosul's fledgling cultural revival have begun to take root - at least where there was anything left to save. The library of the Waqf, the state body that manages Islamic endowments, once contained manuscripts dating back 400 years, said its head, Ahmed Abd Ahmed. But, he added sadly, 'they have all disappeared'. Elsewhere in the city, Al-Nujaifi street, historically lined with booksellers, still bears the scars of destruction wrought by the militants. Many shops are abandoned, and mounds of rubble lay under old stone arches - but a handful

of shopkeepers have reopened their doors after paying out of pocket for restoration work. Mosul's central public library - which was founded a century ago last year, and had boasted more than 120,000 titles - reopened its doors in late 2019, after restoration. "We lost 2,350 books on literature, sociology or religion," said its director Jamal al Abd Rabbo. But he added that public donations and purchases had allowed him to rebuild the collection up to 132,000 titles. Old leather-bound books with worn spines and creased pages still line the library's shelves. Crucially, the public's appetite for literature remains unbroken, he said, and 'some of our visitors come daily, for an hour or two, to read'. AFP

Intensified bid to ease Ukraine tensions sees 'positive signs'

Berlin, Germany - German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Wednesday ramped up efforts to stop Russia from invading Ukraine, as Kyiv and Moscow said they saw 'positive signals' towards resolving the crisis.

French President Emmanuel Macron, returning from separate talks earlier this week with Putin and Ukraine's leader Volodymyr Zelensky, had said on Tuesday he glimpsed a way forward towards easing tensions.

The Russian leader had told him that Moscow 'would not be the source of an escalation', the French president said.

While 100,000 Russian soldiers are still massed near Ukraine's borders, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said 'diplomacy is continuing to lower tensions'. "The way the greater European community responds to this crisis will determine the future of European security and of each individual European state," he told reporters. More upbeat noises also emerged from Moscow, with Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov telling reporters that 'there were positive signals that a solution to Ukraine could be based only on fulfilling the Minsk agreements'.

German leader Scholz, who had come under fire at home over his dithering response to the Ukraine crisis, is accelerating his diplomatic pace to reassure allies that Germany would not be the weakest link among allies in standing up to Russia.



Employees unload a Boeing 747-412 of National Airlines carrying US military aid at Kyiv's Boryspil airport on Wednesday (AFP)

Less than 24 hours after his trip in Washington to underline his resolve to US President Joe Biden, Scholz late on Tuesday stood alongside Polish leader Andrzej Duda and Macron to declare the Europeans' unity in their goal of averting war on the continent. The German leader will speak with Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen before dinner with EU chief Charles Michel later on Wednesday, and on Thursday, a huddle is planned with leaders of Baltic nations.

'Further steps'

Scholz, who took over from Angela Merkel in December, has been struggling to emerge from

behind the veteran leader's shadows. His quiet demeanour has at times been drowned out by noisier voices questioning Western allies' course, including from within his own Social Democrats, leading critics to question Germany's resolve in the crisis.

Scholz will travel to Kyiv and then Moscow next week, where he will have his first face-to-face meeting with Putin.

The Russian leader, who has demanded sweeping security guarantees from NATO and the United States, said after his talks with Macron that Moscow would 'do everything to find compromises that suit everyone'.

He said several proposals put forward by Macron could 'form a basis for further steps' on easing the crisis over Ukraine, but did not give any details.

At the same time as sending its military hardware to Ukraine's borders, Putin has issued demands the West says are unacceptable, including barring Ukraine from joining NATO and rolling back alliance forces in eastern Europe.

The French presidency said Macron's counterproposals included an engagement from both sides not to take any new military action, the launching of a strategic dialogue and efforts to revive the peace process for

Ukraine's conflict. It also said an agreement would ensure the withdrawal of some 30,000 Russian soldiers from Belarus at the end of joint military exercises later this month.

The Kremlin insisted it never intended to leave the troops permanently on Belarusian territory.

The West faces a tough task trying to convince a wary Zelensky to accept any compromises.

Kyiv has laid out three 'red lines' it says it will not cross to find a solution - no compromise over Ukraine's territorial integrity, no direct talks with the separatists and no interference in its foreign policy.

AFP



Residents look at the partially collapsed RN25 road in Ranomafana on Monday following the passage of Cyclone Batsirai (AFP)

Cyclone toll in Madagascar goes up to 30

Antananarivo, Madagascar - The death toll from Cyclone Batsirai, which left Madagascar on Monday morning, has risen to 30, according to an updated count from authorities, and could rise further as bodies continue to be found in the rubble of collapsed houses.

On Wednesday morning, Madagascar's disaster management agency (BNGRC) announced that the number of dead on the Indian Ocean island had risen from 21 to 30 the previous evening. The BNGRC said that 94,000 people were victims of Batsirai with 60,000 now homeless. Many NGOs and UN agencies have begun to deploy resources and teams to help the victims of the cyclone which brought heavy rain and winds of 165km per hour.

The tropical cyclone hit Madagascar overnight from Saturday to Sunday, on a 150km-long, sparsely populated and agricultural eastern coastal area.

As the cyclone moved inland it caused flooding that ravaged rice fields in the country's central 'breadbasket', raising fears of a humanitarian crisis.

German experts have arrived in the country, one of the poorest on the planet, to 'support the humanitarian response in the Batsirai passage areas', said the BNGRC, and work is underway on the 20 roads and the 17 bridges that were cut, isolating villages.

"We know for sure that rice

fields, that rice crops will be damaged, will be lost. This is the main crop for Malagasy people and they will be seriously affected in food security in the next three to six months if we don't do something immediately," said Pasqualina DiSirio, director of the World Food Program (WFP) in the country.

The UN agency distributed hot meals in Manakara, one of the most affected localities.

Many NGOs, including Action Against Hunger, Handicap International, Save the Children and Medecins du Monde, were mobilised ahead of the cyclone, organising equipment and medicines.

Alongside the aid provided by the government, they provided assistance to the victims: food, primary health care and the distribution of kitchen equipment, blankets, hygiene products.

Some 77 per cent of Madagascar's 28mn people live below the poverty line, and the latest blow comes during a severe drought in the south which has plunged more than a million people into acute malnutrition, some facing famine. Madagascar was still picking up the pieces after Tropical Storm Ana affected at least 131,000 people across the island late last month, with most of the 55 deaths occurring in Antananarivo.

Ana also hit Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, causing dozens of deaths.

AFP

Ukraine says European push helping avert conflict

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukraine said on Wednesday that a European diplomatic push aimed at averting a feared Russian invasion of the ex-Soviet state was working but that the situation remained tense.

"The situation remains tense but under control. Diplomacy is continuing to lower tensions," Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told reporters after talks with his Spanish counterpart Jose Manuel Albares.

"The way the greater Euro-



Dmytro Kuleba (AFP)

pean community responds to this crisis will determine the future of European security and of

each individual European state."

Kuleba's comments came after French President Emmanuel Macron engaged in a round of shuttle diplomacy between Moscow and Kyiv and then continuing his talks in Berlin.

Macron said he secured a pledge from Russian President Vladimir Putin that the Kremlin 'would not be the source of an escalation'.

But Washington warns that Russia's decision to mass more than 100,000 soldiers near

Ukraine's borders meant that Putin was seriously mulling an invasion aimed at reversing Kyiv's pro-Western course.

Ukraine has been trying to talk down the prospects of war because of the dire effect on the country's investment climate and public mood.

But it has also pushed for tough preventative sanctions against Russia aimed at punishing it for its role in the eight-year conflict in Ukraine's separatist east.

"Without exaggeration, Russia is trying to take revenge for the Soviet Union losing the Cold War, which is why today, we are talking about defending the entire security architecture of Europe," Kuleba said.

"Ukraine's position is that in recent years, Russia has been gravely violating international law and the Minsk agreements' on settling the separatist conflict, he said. "And for this, it should be punished with sanctions."

AFP

Godsend or 'ghetto': Syrian migrants flock to small Cyprus town

Chlorakas, Cyprus - On the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, grappling with an influx of asylum seekers, the small town of Chlorakas has become the centre of tensions. One-quarter of its residents are refugees.

While local authorities talk of 'ghettoisation' and seek to move some of them, many of the newcomers renting flats there refuse to leave, saying they have nowhere else to go.

The Cypriot government says the divided country has the highest number of first-time asylum applications in the European Union per capita, accusing Turkey of sending many across the UN-controlled buffer zone.

"We have a demographic problem," said Chlorakas Mayor Nicholas Liasides.

Five kilometres from the west coast city of Paphos, Chlorakas is home to 7,000 people, 1,700 of whom are asylum seekers.

Most of them are from Syria, and their number has more than doubled from 800 over the past three years.

At the heart of the issue, according to the mayor, is the St Nicolas residential complex on the outskirts of town where around 700 of the refugees live.

Located on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, the complex formally known as 'St Nicolas Elegant Residence' consists of about 20 peach-coloured residential blocks with terracotta tiles.

But its lustre began to fade following a 2018 financial dispute between the owner and the municipality over unpaid water bills.

When the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 led to a plunge in foreign visitor arrivals, refugees took their place.

'Shameful'

Liasides told AFP he believes the solution is to resettle the refugees throughout Cyprus.

"This is a ghetto and actually we want to break (up) this ghetto," he said.

One month ago the local authorities declared the site unfit for habitation, and cut off the water supply to 250 apartments.

"It's shameful," said Neofyto Paranetis, who is in his 70s and manages the complex.

He is under criminal investigation for alleged violation of an interior ministry decree, issued in December, which forbids any new refugees from staying in



Syrian refugee Nayef al Shouyoukh stands with his children in the backyard of their residence in Chlorakas on January 31 (AFP)

Chlorakas.

"These are just excuses because I am housing refugees," Paranetis said.

Tensions in Chlorakas worsened in early January after two fights between refugees, some of whom lived at St Nicolas, said

Paphos police spokesman Michalis Nicolaou.

"For one month we've been patrolling in the village every evening, and we have investigated more than 80 people illegally living there," he said, noting the ministerial ban on new residents.

Since early January townspeople have organised two protests, which drew dozens carrying signs hostile to asylum seekers.

A cafe owner, who asked to remain anonymous because he doesn't 'want any trouble' with the refugees, said: "People here are hospitable towards the refugees, but now there are many who are illegal and creating problems here.

"Most of the people in the village are scared to go near the place because there are too many refugees."

Local business owner Geoffrey Velloza, 50, said that "to be honest, I haven't been affected by their presence. They have been perfectly decent with me, but I feel for others who were made uncomfortable."

Where to go?

More than 12,000 Syrians have

sought refuge in Cyprus since 2011 when their country's civil war began, forcing millions to flee abroad.

Those who reached Cyprus arrived on an island with its own painful history of displacement.

The territory has been divided since Turkish troops invaded in 1974 and occupied its northern third.

Hundreds of thousands of Greek Cypriots in the north and Turkish Cypriots in the south fled to the opposite sides.

Mohammed Ramadan Diab, 37, originally from Idlib in Syria, arrived illegally in Chlorakas via Turkey a little more than a year ago.

In recent weeks police investigated him at St Nicolas.

"Officers took me to the station and made me sign a document, but I didn't know what it said," the father of six recalled.

"I'm trying to find somewhere else to stay, but people refuse to rent to me because I am Syrian."

Another Idlib native, Nayef al-Shouyoukh, 32, has stayed at St Nicolas for three years.

"Police regularly come to see me for an ID check. They pound the door with their feet," scaring his three children, he said.

"I don't know where to go. I am barely surviving."

'Sieges and bombs'

St Nicolas charges €350 rent a month for a two-bedroom apartment with a kitchen - electricity and internet included.

"We want to stay in our homes," said Abdallah al Khaled, 25, who reached Chlorakas three years ago after fleeing the ranks of the Syrian army.

"We survived sieges and bombs in Syria. We don't want to find ourselves back on the street." Local authorities propose to move the refugees into camps in eastern Cyprus but those sites are already overpopulated, according to migrants' rights group Kisa.

In a statement, Kisa said the local authorities should establish programmes to help the refugees integrate.

Paranetis, the St Nicolas manager, said "the government should thank us because these refugees have no alternatives.

"Some day we might also become refugees, like we were in 1974 during the Turkish invasion," he added.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Virus restrictions spark panic buying in HK

Hong Kong, China - Shoppers thronged Hong Kong's markets fearing a shortage of food on Wednesday, familiar scenes in a city that is back under gruelling COVID-19 restrictions in contrast to much of the world.

Hong Kong has followed mainland China in maintaining a strict 'zero-COVID' policy that has kept infections low through targeted lockdowns and extensive social distancing measures.

On Wednesday the city recorded 1,161 new infections, a daily record but a number that pales in comparison with outbreaks around the world.

The Omicron-fuelled spike has alarmed authorities and leader Carrie Lam announced renewed curbs on the 7.5mn residents of the financial hub.

In scenes reminiscent of early 2020, when the coronavirus first emerged in China, Hong Kongers this week scrambled to stock up as panic set in over food supply shocks.

"It feels like the government isn't prepared at all, and we ordinary citizens can only look out for ourselves," a woman surnamed Siu, 42, told AFP on



Shoppers buy vegetables a day after many shops ran out of some produce in Hong Kong on Wednesday (AFP)

Wednesday.

She was among the throng of morning shoppers anxious over fresh produce supply, which the city mostly imports from the mainland.

This week a cross-border truck driver tested positive for

COVID-19, spurring a temporary hold-up of delivery trucks.

Hong Kong's vegetable supply has since decreased by about a third, the government said.

The shortage - coupled with business savvy among sud-

dently popular veg sellers - has sent produce prices in Hong Kong's wet markets soaring with shelves in supermarkets sitting bare.

"I don't remember vegetables ever being this expensive," Siu said, adding that her daily

grocery bill had doubled this week.

Choy sum - a leafy green popular in Chinese cuisine - now costs around HK\$25 (US\$3.20) for a half kilogramme, double its usual price.

A vegetable stall owner told

AFP his supply, sparse earlier in the week, has recovered - for now.

"Hopefully things can get back to normal - I don't know how long we can keep this up," he said as he fielded shouted requests from customers.

'Very dispiriting'

Unlike much of the rest of the world - where governments opting to adapt to a new COVID-present normal have gradually opened up - Hong Kong's 'zero COVID' policy has meant doubling down on the restrictions.

The latest area to see anti-COVID-19 measures bite was Discovery Bay, a wealthy suburb home to some 20,000 well-heeled residents, when they were ordered to be tested en masse after the virus was found in a major sewage pipe.

Leader Lam on Tuesday said it was still the best strategy, given the city's low vaccination rate among the elderly, as she introduced new measures banning public gatherings of more than two people.

More significantly, Lam announced that meetings in

homes of more than two families were forbidden.

She also ordered religious sites and hair salons to close by Thursday - sending Hong Kongers rushing to barbers for a last-minute trim.

Five hair salons in Central district said they were fully booked.

"They say the closure is temporary but who knows when it will reopen," a man surnamed Cheung told AFP as he waited for a haircut.

"It feels like we have gone back to the start of the pandemic. It's very dispiriting."

Hong Kongers also took to social media to express their frustration.

"We have done all you ask, we sat quietly as mental health takes a toll, as families are torn apart and as businesses close down because it is all in the hope of China reopening our borders," wrote one resident in an open letter that went viral.

"You have tried for two years, and failed," it continued.

"When will you stop holding the citizens of this... city hostage?" AFP

Indonesia starts testing homegrown vaccine 'Merah Putih' on humans

Surabaya, Indonesia - Indonesia began testing a homegrown COVID-19 vaccine on humans on Wednesday after getting the green light from the drug regulator as the country faces a rising wave of virus cases.

Research on the 'Merah Putih' (Red White) vaccine - named after the colours of the Indonesian national flag - is led by Airlangga University and Bi-otis Pharmaceutical Indonesia.

The project has suffered delays since starting in 2020, but the authorities are now hoping to authorise its use by the middle of 2022 if the trials turn out to be a success.

Health minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin said the drug, set to be rolled out in the latter stages of Indonesia's vaccination campaign, could be donated to other nations, as a booster jab or as a vaccine for children aged three to six. "I have discussed this matter with the president and



A health worker prepares a syringe with Sinovac vaccine at an Islamic elementary school in Banda Aceh on Wednesday (AFP)

he has agreed to use this vaccine as a donation to countries in need," Sadikin said on Wednesday at a launch event for the human trials in Surabaya. The first and second phases of the clinical trials will involve 90 and 405 adult volunteers respectively.

The Merah Putih vaccine has been granted a 'halal' certification from the Indonesian Ulama

Council, the Muslim majority nation's top religious clerics body, according to the dean of Airlangga University Mohammad Nasih. "We hope with this halal certification, the public confidence to use this vaccine will be higher," Nasih told reporters.

Indonesia has approved 13 vaccines and boosters but has primarily used the Chinese-

made jabs, and has struggled to procure enough doses for its population of more than 270mn people.

The Indonesian government has stressed the importance of developing and manufacturing national vaccines since the beginning of the pandemic.

The country was ravaged by COVID-19 in July last year as the Delta variant swept the country.

Daily cases declined significantly at the end of the year but the spread of Omicron recently brought the country back to 30,000 confirmed cases a day.

In total, Southeast Asia's largest economy has reported over 4.5mn confirmed cases with nearly 145,000 deaths.

Vaccination rollout is also relatively slow with around 48 per cent of the population vaccinated with two jabs and only five million with a booster shot.

AFP

WHO urges rich countries to pay up to conquer pandemic

Geneva, Switzerland - The WHO on Wednesday urged rich countries to pay their fair share of the money needed for its plan to conquer COVID-19 by contributing US\$16bn as a matter of urgency.

The World Health Organization said the rapid cash injection into its Access to COVID Tools Accelerator could finish off COVID as a global health emergency this year.

The WHO-led ACT-A is aimed at developing, producing, procuring and distributing tools to tackle the pandemic: vaccines, tests, treatments and personal protective equipment.

ACT-A gave birth to the Covax facility, designed to ensure poorer countries could access eventual vaccines, correctly predicting that richer nations would hog doses coming off the production lines.

Covax delivered its billionth vaccine dose in mid-January.

ACT-A needed US\$23.4bn for its programme for the year October 2021-September 2022 but only US\$800mn has been raised so far.

The scheme therefore wants US\$16bn up front from wealthy nations 'to close the immediate financing gap', with the rest to be self-funded by middle-income countries.

Omicron impetus

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the rapid spread of the Omicron variant made it all the more urgent to ensure tests, treatments and vaccines are distributed equitably. "If higher-income countries pay their fair share of the ACT-Accelerator costs, the partnership can support low- and middle-income countries to overcome low COVID-19 vaccination levels, weak testing, and medicine shortages," he said in a statement.

"Science gave us the tools to fight COVID-19; if they are shared globally in solidarity, we can end COVID-19 as a global health emergency this year."

Just 0.4 per cent of the 4.7bn COVID tests administered globally during the pandemic have been used in low-income countries. Meanwhile only 10 per cent of people in those nations have received at least one vaccine dose.

The WHO said the vast inequity was not only costing lives and hurting economies, it was also risking the emergence of new, more dangerous variants that could rob current tools of their effectiveness and set even highly-vaccinated populations back by many months.

ACT-A has come up with a new 'fair share' financing model on how much each of the world's wealthy countries should contribute.

AFP

'All we can do is persevere': Afghan women defy Taliban regime

Kabul, Afghanistan - One after the other, quickly, carefully, keeping their heads down, a group of Afghan women step into a small Kabul apartment block - risking their lives as a nascent resistance against the Taliban. They come together to plan their next stand against the hardline regime, which took back power in Afghanistan in August and stripped them of their dreams.

At first, there were no more than 15 activists in this group, mostly women in their 20s who already knew each other.

Now there is a network of dozens of women - once students, teachers or NGO workers, as well as housewives - that have worked in secret to organise protests over the past six months.

"I asked myself why not join them instead of staying at home, depressed, thinking of all that we lost," a 20-year-old protester, who asked not to be named, tells AFP.

They know such a challenge to the new authorities may cost them everything: four of their

comrades have already been seized.

But those that remain are determined to battle on.

When the Taliban first ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, they became notorious for human rights abuses, with women mostly confined to their homes.

Now back in government and despite promising softer rule, they are cracking down on women's freedoms once again.

There is enforced segregation in most workplaces, leading many employers to fire female staff and women are barred from key public sector jobs.

Many girls' secondary schools have closed, and university curriculums are being revised to reflect their hardline interpretation of Islam.

Haunted by memories of the last Taliban regime, some Afghan women are too frightened to venture out or are pressured by their families to remain at home.

For mother-of-four Shala, who asked AFP to only use her first name, a return to such female



This file photo shows Afghan women taking out a protest march in Kabul on January 16 (AFP)

confinement is her biggest fear.

A former government employee, her job has already been taken from her, so now she helps organise the resistance and sometimes sneaks out at night to paint graffiti slogans such as 'Long Live Equality' across the walls of the nation's capital.

"I just want to be an example for young women, to show them that I will not give up the fight," she explains.

The Taliban could harm her family, but Shala says her husband supports what she is doing and her children are learning from her defiance - at home they practise chants demanding education.

'Fear can't control me'

AFP journalists attended two of the group's gatherings in January.

Despite the risk of being arrested and taken by the Taliban, or shunned by their families and society more than 40 women came to one event.

At another meeting, a few women were fervently preparing for their next protest.

One activist designed a banner demanding justice, a cellphone in one hand and her pen in the other.

"These are our only

weapons," she says.

A 24-year-old, who asked not to be named, helped brainstorm ideas for attracting the world's attention.

"It's dangerous but we have no other way. We have to accept that our path is fraught with challenges," she insists.

Like others, she stood up to her conservative family, including an uncle who threw away her books to keep her from learning.

"I don't want to let fear control me and prevent me from speaking and telling the truth," she insists. Allowing people to join their ranks is a meticulous process.

Hoda Khamosh, a published poet and former NGO worker who organised workshops to help empower women, is tasked with ensuring newcomers can be trusted.

One test she sets is to ask them to prepare banners or slogans at short notice - she can sense passion for the cause from women who deliver quickly.

Other tests yield even clearer results.

Hoda recounts the time they

gave a potential activist a fake date and time for a demonstration. The Taliban turned up ahead of the supposed protest, and all contact was cut with the woman suspected of tipping off officials. A core group of the activists use a dedicated phone number to coordinate on the day of a protest. That number is later disconnected to ensure it is not being tracked.

"We usually carry an extra scarf or an extra dress. When the demonstration is over, we change our clothes so we cannot be recognised," Hoda explains.

She has changed her phone number several times and her husband had received threats.

"We could still be harmed, it's exhausting. But all we can do is persevere," she adds.

The activist was one of a few women flown to Norway to meet face to face with Taliban's leadership last month, alongside other civil society members, when the first talks on European soil were held between the West and Afghanistan's new government.

AFP

CLIMATE CHANGE

MISSING MIGRANTS

The number of waterbirds recorded in January 2022 in the Divjaka-Karavasta wetlands - an internationally important wintering site along the European migratory flyway - was 25 per cent lower than at this time last year.

Western Albania recorded the drop during the annual International Waterbird Census, a three-day global event to monitor the migration patterns of waterfowl across the world. Several species are affected by the decline, according to Taulant Bino from the Albanian Ornithological Society.

"We discovered that some 9,000 waterbirds are missing from the Divjaka-Karavasta lagoons compared to last year," said Ardian Koci, head of the Divjaka-Karavasta National Park, where the protected wetlands are located.

Koci told AFP a total of 25,000 birds were counted in Divjaka-Karavasta - one of the most important wetland ecosystems in the Mediterranean - during the census on January 15-16, as compared to 34,000 in the survey a year earlier.

"The reasons are multiple but above all, it is global warming that has disrupted the migration and breeding seasons," Koci explained.

Nexhip Hysolokaj, a regional biodiversity expert, said scientists in Albania had tracked a rapid decline in migratory bird



A ranger monitors birds in the Karavasta lagoon, within the Divjaka-Karavasta National Park, Albania

populations over the past three years.

Failed winter pilgrimages

While scientists say more research is needed to understand exactly how climate change is affecting birds, some point to the simple fact that ever-warmer weather

means certain species no longer need to leave their northern breeding grounds when winter comes in order to find food further south.

"If there aren't extreme temperatures in northern Europe, they prefer not to move, or they just migrate over shorter distances,"

said Mirjan Topi, the author of the first guide to Albania's birds. In recent years, several species of migrating geese - including the Greylag Goose, the White-fronted Goose and the rare Lesser White-fronted Goose, which breeds in the tundra of northern Russia and Scandinavia - have largely

failed to make their winter pilgrimage to Albania's marshes.

Disruptive weather patterns

The western lagoons are also famous for their resident Greater Flamingos and Dalmatian Pelicans, which have a three-metre wingspan rivalling that of the albatross. But experts say the breeding cycle of the iconic pelican - whose fragmented populations are a concern for the long-term stability of the species - is being disrupted by increasingly erratic weather patterns.

In 2021, the pelicans began breeding at the start of January. This year, the nesting season did not begin until the end of January - a difference of several weeks - after a winter that started exceptionally late.

"The pelican breeding season seems to be behind last year," Sajmir Hoxha, an expert in Albania for the French conservation group Noe, told AFP.

Meanwhile, illegal fishing has depleted vital food sources in Albania's lagoons, and rapid urbanisation is threatening fragile ecosystems, especially in the network of marshes and sand dunes along the tourist magnet that is the Adriatic coast.

To add to the pressures, a sprawling international airport is set to be built near the protected marshlands of the Vjosa-Narta region, just south of Divjaka-Karavasta. This project would directly affect wildlife and is a threat to species that breed there.

AFP



Divjake National Park is the home to 242 of Albania's 330 native bird species

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LOCKDOWN STARTUPS



Opportunity FROM ADVERSITY

The COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to many new businesses among the younger generation in Oman who made the most of their extra time and talents

The coronavirus, apart from unleashing global restrictions in movement and economic downturns, also gave rise to a sudden boom in entrepreneurship for small businesses in Oman. While most people sat at home and rued over their hapless fate, there were some who burnt the midnight oil and turned their ideas into reality.

Some Omani youth devised innovative entrepreneurial strategies to convert adversity into opportunity. Consequently, small and medium businesses started to take centerstage as young Omani men and women swung into action to create a host of new products as well as services.

One among them was Ahmad al Jabri, a young businessman from Yiti, who worked as a tourist guide. He previously depended particularly on foreign cruise liners that halted at Muttrah Corniche and took tourists around to showcase the rich heritage of Oman.

“Due to the onset of the pandemic, imposition of strict lockdown and closure of borders, many people were left without much work. Considering that getting a 9-5 job at a corporate in line with my qualifications was not really a worthwhile proposition, I felt the need to explore other alternatives,” Jabri said.

Since expatriates in Oman had limited choices to travel and explore during the lockdown, as they couldn’t exit the country, many like Jabri seized the opportunity to provide them with domestic travel options.

“I started organising treks on traditional hiking routes discovered by our ancestors for people to explore, like the unseen beauty of Yiti village,” he said, adding that the response was overwhelming from locals as well as expatriates. He soon extended his ventures into photography by the name of Al Jab Photo.

Like Ahmad, another young Omani college graduate Majid al Jabri, a resident of Bander Al Khairan who was also hit hard by the effects of pandemic said, “Making productive use of the time in the lockdown, I along with my friends and family transformed a barren island near my home into an Arabic style camp



“Making productive use of the time in the lockdown, I along with my friends and family transformed a barren island near my home into an Arabic style camp, with a majlis, tents, kitchen, etc

MAJID AL JABRI

with traditional Omani majlis, tents, basic facilities like toilets, a kitchen, a power generator and barbecue equipment for people to rent. We also make and serve fresh Omani food cooked by my family members.”

To promote his business, he posted glimpses of the setup on social media handles like Instagram and Facebook which were widely liked by his target audience during the COVID-19 restrictions and turned into regular bookings. His venture is now doing good under the name ‘Al Bandar Sail Camping’.

“Within a few weeks, I got noticed and gained popularity as many residents started to venture into the unexplored camping arena,” he said.

As his business started to grow he made relevant investments and introduced water sports like kayaking, jet skiing, and diving in the crystal clear waters of Bander Khairan as part of the camping package. This attracted more patrons and his business flourished.

Talood Mohammed al Mashri,



“The pandemic has given rise to changing eating habits as people spend more time at home. I see people giving more thought to eating healthy to reduce illness and stay fit

YASMEEN AL ALAWI

another enterprising youth, said, “I realised, how a simple aesthetic setup can attract the social media driven population,” he said, adding that he set up his own ‘fairy tale island’ in the wilderness near Al Khairan beaches and mountains. His business has been growing exponentially under the banner of ‘Bander Camping’.

Transitioning from an engineering accounting manager to starting a food supply business, since there is ‘a lack of availability of healthy cuisine in Oman’, Yasmeen al Alawi, another young entrepreneur, started ‘Sprout’, a food supply outlet that provides healthy and nutritional food made from original recipes. She herself perfected these recipes, after a lot of trials and research, with the help of her family.

Asserting that, “the pandemic has given rise to changing eating habits as people spend more time at home,” Yasmeen said, “Since the pandemic we have started to get more business as I see people giving more thought to eating healthy to reduce illness and stay fit.” She hopes to reach out to more people in the near future to popularise the concept of healthy eating.

(Contributed by Gaurika Joshi)



Options for exploring Oman



Camps and treks saw an overwhelming response



Fairytale ambience on a barren island



Vlhova wins Olympic slalom gold after Shiffrin misfires

Yanqing, China - Slovakia's Petra Vlhova produced a stunning second leg to win Beijing Olympic slalom gold on Wednesday after Mikaela Shiffrin slid out of medal contention with a botched first run.

Vlhova clocked a combined total of 1min 44.98sec over the two runs to edge Austria's reigning world champion Katharina Liensberger into silver by eight-hundredths of a second, with Switzerland's Wendy Holdener claiming bronze at 0.12sec.

"I gave everything I had and at the end I am Olympic champion," said Vlhova, whose gold was Slovakia's first in alpine skiing at a Winter Games. "It's something huge."

"I have been dreaming all my life to win an Olympics or just to have medals. I have a lot of emotions right now inside me. This season I was really strong and today I gave everything."

Shiffrin, as she had done in the giant slalom at these Games, slid out of the first leg of the slalom to blast the field wide open.

After seven of the nine slalom races of the current World Cup season, Vlhova tops the standings ahead of Shiffrin.

The Slovak has six world championship medals to her name but had drawn a blank at the last two Olympics, with a best finish of fifth, and has often had to settle for second best to Shiffrin on the biggest stages.



Slovakia's Petra Vlhova competes in the first run of the women's slalom during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games at the Yanqing National Alpine Skiing Centre in Yanqing (AFP)

But on the testing Ice River course at the Yanqing National Alpine Skiing Centre north of Beijing, it was Vlhova who held her nerve after finishing eighth fastest in the first run.

The 26-year-old laid down the fastest second run and watched on with increasing nervousness as the seven racers

ahead of her failed to match her time. "Honestly, it was really difficult to be calm and focused on my skiing," said Vlhova.

"But I had a lot of power from my team. They trusted me, they believed in me and they repeated to me, 'you are so strong, just ski free, enjoy and focus on your skiing, nothing else'."

Vlhova's renowned Swiss coach Mauro Pini added: "We were just asking Petra between the two runs to really be courageous, have a big heart on the

slope in the second run with nothing to lose.

"Just to come home tonight without any regret."

Sweden's giant slalom gold medalist Sara Hector was left to rue a straddled gate that led to her disqualification while she was holding a commanding lead coming into the final descent.

Germany's Lena Duerr, leader after the first run, eventually came in fourth, at 0.19sec. Shiffrin was on hand to console a tearful Duerr.

A total of 51 nations were represented in the 88-strong turnout for the first leg from skiing minnows as diverse as Taiwan, Israel, Lebanon, Madagascar, Malaysia, Peru, Thailand and Turkey.

None were close to making the podium.

AFP

MEDALS TABLE				
	G	S	B	T
Germany	5	3	0	8
Norway	4	2	4	10
Sweden	4	1	2	7
Netherlands	3	3	1	7
China	3	2	0	5
Austria	2	4	4	10
Italy	2	4	1	7
Russian OC	2	3	6	11
Slovenia	2	1	2	5
United States	1	5	1	7
France	1	5	0	6
Canada	1	2	5	8
Japan	1	1	2	4
Switzerland	1	0	3	4
Australia	1	0	1	2
South Korea	1	0	1	2
Czech Republic	1	0	0	1
New Zealand	1	0	0	1
Slovakia	1	0	0	1
Belarus	0	1	0	1
Hungary	0	0	2	2
Finland	0	0	1	1
Poland	0	0	1	1
G Gold S Silver B Bronze T Total				

No slip-ups as snowboarder wins first US gold

Zhangjiakou, China - Snowboard cross rider Lindsey Jacobellis said her infamous fall that cost her a title in 2006 had "kept her hungry" as she won the United States' first gold medal of the Beijing Olympics on Wednesday.

Jacobellis was comfortably in the lead in the final at the 2006 Turin Olympics when she attempted to 'style out' her last jump - and fell just before the finish line, finishing second.

The 36-year-old avoided that problem on Wednesday, leading from the front and crossing the finish line with a big smile on her face.

"(People) can keep talking about (2006) all they want because it really shaped me into the individual that I am and kept me hungry and really helped me keep fighting in the sport," she



Gold medalist USA's Lindsey Jacobellis celebrates on the podium during the women's snowboard cross victory ceremony (AFP)

said. Jacobellis has won six world championship golds, but she had never won gold at the Olympics

before, not even making the finals at the Vancouver and Sochi Games.

It is unusual for the United States to have to wait for the fifth full competition day of a Winter Olympics to claim a gold.

With Jacobellis' gold, the Americans sit 10th in the medal table, behind Slovenia but ahead of France and Canada.

When asked if the title gold meant redemption for her, Jacobellis said she had never thought of it that way.

"I think if I had tried to spend (time on) the thought of redemption, then it's taking away focus on the task at hand, and that's not why I race."

AFP

Ruud remembers late dad with Olympic gold

Beijing, China - Birk Ruud led from the start to win Beijing Olympic gold in style in the men's freeski Big Air on Wednesday - even carrying a Norwegian flag in his hand for his third run.

The day after Eileen Gu needed a stunning final jump to land gold for China in the women's event, Ruud dominated the men's field from the opening round.

The 21-year-old landed a stunning opening leap of five and a half rotations for a near-perfect score of 95.75 points.

"I have had this as a goal since I was 13 or 14 years old, even before this became an Olympic



Birk Ruud celebrates winning the men's freeski big air final (AFP)

sport. I was really proud to put down those tricks and land those jumps," said Ruud.

He had built up such a commanding lead that he held his country's flag in his hand for his third jump, drapping it over his shoulders after landing.

"My coach brought out the flag before I jumped. I still had to stay focused to do my tricks," he laughed.

"I was really in the moment and took the opportunity. I wanted to put on a show for Norway. There is a lot of stuff happening in the world and it was nice to put on a show here."

Burk, who also won the Olympic test event in 2019 and was the top-ranked qualifier on Monday, finished with a winning tally of 187.75.

He wore a gold bracelet on his left wrist in tribute to his father, who died of cancer last April.

"I got this from my father before he passed away," said Ruud.

"I wanted to say 'thank you' to him, he's with me," he added, touching the bracelet.

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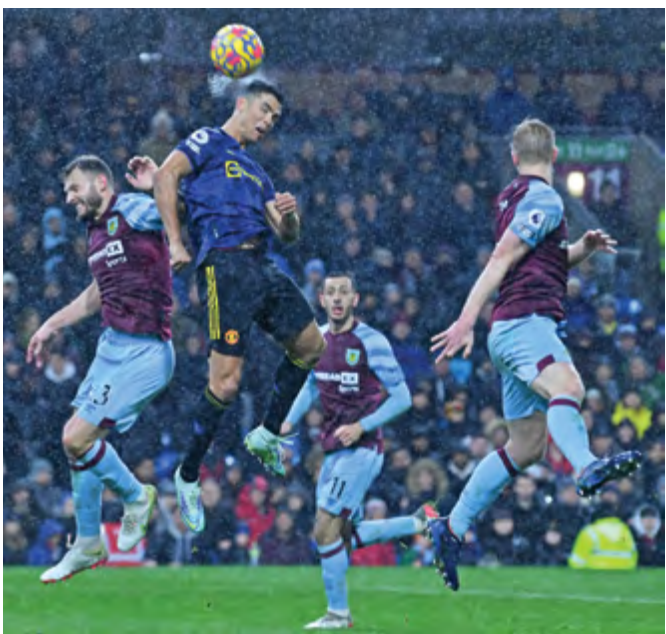
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Manchester United's Portuguese striker Cristiano Ronaldo (C) wins a header during the English Premier League match against Burnley (AFP)

Manchester Utd fail to beat lowly Burnley, fall out of top four

Burnley, United Kingdom - Ralf Rangnick blamed a lack of aggression for Manchester United's failure to beat bottom-of-the-table Burnley as a 1-1 draw at Turf Moor saw the Red Devils fall out of the Premier League's top four.

With Cristiano Ronaldo left on the bench, United were made to pay for not making more of a dominant first 45 minutes after Paul Pogba put them in front.

Burnley roared back after the break and gave their survival hopes a boost when Jay Rodriguez levelled two minutes into the second half.

West Ham's 1-0 win over Watford sees the Hammers leapfrog United into the final slot to qualify for next season's Champions League, while Arsenal and Tottenham remain within striking distance with games in hand.

"Again it's a frustrating night for us because we should have won that game easily," said

Rangnick. The first 15-20 minutes of the second half we were just not aggressive enough. One point from a performance like this is just not enough."

United's troubled season hit another bump in the road when they were dumped out of the FA Cup by Championship side Middlesbrough on penalties on Friday.

The lessons from that defeat were not learned as again Rangnick's men had more than enough chances to kill the game as a contest before half-time before being punished for a slack piece of defending.

For the first time the German left a fit Ronaldo out of his starting line-up for a league match after the 37-year-old played the full 120 minutes on Friday.

However, United's first half performance will add more fuel to the debate on whether they function better as a unit without the five-time Ballon d'Or winner.

AFP

Newcastle rock Everton to climb out of relegation

Newcastle, United Kingdom - Eddie Howe urged Newcastle to "stay calm" after they moved out of the Premier League relegation zone with a vital 3-1 win against Everton that plunged Frank Lampard's side deeper into trouble on Tuesday.

Howe's team fell behind to Jamaal Lascelles' own goal in the first half at St James' Park.

But, on a pulsating Tyneside evening, the Magpies had the perfect response as Mason Holgate's own goal sparked a rousing revival.

Ryan Fraser put Newcastle ahead after half-time and Kieran Trippier's superb free-kick rounded off the hosts' second successive win.

Mired in the bottom three for most of the season, Newcastle finally have their heads above water as they battle to avoid sinking into the Championship.

Unbeaten in four league games, Newcastle are one place and two points above the relegation zone.

Warning his players to stay focused, Howe said: "Consecutive wins in the Premier League are rare, they can change your status and elevate the club. But we have to stay calm and focus on the next game."

"We are in a better place, but football has a way of twisting and turning, so we are not getting ahead of ourselves, we know how tough this league can be."

Everton are now in serious danger and Lampard will have been left in no doubts about the size of the task facing him.

Lampard's first game in charge was a 4-1 win over Brentford in the FA Cup fourth round

on Saturday.

But the honeymoon ended much quicker than the former Chelsea boss would have liked.

Everton have failed to win their last six league games and sit uncomfortably just one point above Newcastle.

"Of course the players' confidence levels are low, it smacks you in the face," Lampard said.

"When I came to the club it was on a bad run of results. There is no magic wand to fix that. It was never going to be easy and this result puts it into sharp focus."

The promise of a star-studded spending spree fuelled by Newcastle's Saudi-led owners

We are in a better place, but football has a way of twisting and turning, so we are not getting ahead of ourselves

EDDIE HOWE

failed to materialise during the January window.

But Newcastle remain ambitious despite their perilous position and Brazil midfielder Bruno Guimaraes marked his £33 million (\$44 million) move from Lyon last month by claiming the club would be Champions League winners in the future.

For now, Howe would settle for avoiding having to win the Championship next season and this was a step in the right direction.

AFP



Newcastle's English defender Kieran Trippier celebrates after scoring their third goal against Everton (AFP)

FIFA backs semi-automated offside system to boost VAR

Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates - FIFA hopes the rolling out of its semi-automated offside technology being trialled at the Club World Cup will not only speed up decision-making but offer increased clarity for football supporters.

The ultimate goal for the optical tracking system is to be fully in use for the World Cup in Qatar later this year.

Pierluigi Collina, chairman of FIFA's referees committee, on Wednesday told reporters VAR had proved "very successful" since its introduction but conceded more consistency is needed.

"It's not yet at the very, very top... the same speed decision-making process. Being fast and being accurate don't work together," Collina said at the Club World Cup in Abu Dhabi.

AFP

Inter dump Roma out of Italian Cup on Mourinho's return

Milan, Italy - Inter Milan marked the return of Jose Mourinho to the San Siro on Tuesday by dumping their idol's new team Roma out of the Italian Cup 2-0 and reaching the semi-finals.

Mourinho coached in front of an Inter home crowd for the first time since leaving in 2010 but after being warmly welcomed back by supporters in Milan Roma limply exited the competition thanks to a goal almost straight from kick-off by Edin Dzeko and Alexis Sanchez's second-half piledriver.

The win for Inter, who will meet either AC Milan or Lazio in the last four with those sides facing each other on Wednesday, was the perfect response to losing the derby on Saturday, the tempestuous aftermath of which has led to coach Simone Inzaghi being suspended for the weekend's huge clash at fellow Serie A title chasers Napoli.



The win for Inter was the perfect response to losing the derby on Saturday

Portuguese Mourinho is a footballing deity for Inter fans thanks to two magical seasons on the Nerazzurri bench which culminated with the treble triumph of Serie A, the Italian Cup and most importantly the Champions League.

He beat Roma to the league

title and cup in a battle of former Chelsea managers with Claudio Ranieri, only seeing off his Blues predecessor to the championship on the final day of the 2009-10 season.

"I won't ever hide that my relationship with Inter is one that will last forever. But I came here

to win for Roma and my supporters who today are the Roma supporters," said Mourinho.

"We didn't win but apart from the first five minutes I saw a Roma team play well against a team against whom it's not easy to play well."

AFP

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Krishna stars as India down West Indies to clinch series

Ahmedabad, India - Fast bowler Prasidh Krishna claimed four wickets as India beat West Indies by 44 runs in the second one-day international to clinch the series on Wednesday.

Chasing 238 for victory, West Indies faltered in their chase to be bowled out for 193 in 46 overs in Ahmedabad. India took an unbeatable 2-0 lead in the three-match series.

Earlier Suryakumar Yadav top-scored with 64 to help India to 237-9 in 50 overs after being invited to bat first by West Indies who came into the match without injured skipper Kieron Pollard.

West Indies' seamers pounded the pitch in the early exchanges, before their spinners got the ball to hold up, as they limited India to 237 for 9 in what was a must-win game for them in Ahmedabad.

Kemar Roach, who sprayed the ball around in the first ODI, tightened up in the second, using the crease and seam movement on offer to his advantage. He also gleaned substantial extra bounce, having Rohit Sharma nicking off for five in his second over. Odean Smith, who got a game in the niggles-enforced absence of captain Kieron Pollard, seized his opportunity by dismissing both Rishabh Pant and Virat Kohli in the same over.

The returning KL Rahul and Suryakumar Yadav, who made his second ODI half-century, then struck up a 91-run fourth-wicket partnership, but India failed to find the finishing kick.



India's cricketers celebrates after the dismissal of West Indies' Fabian Allen (not pictured) during the second ODI against West Indies at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Motera (AFP)

Yadav fell to Fabian Allen's left-arm spin and the Indian middle and lower order stumbled apart from Deepak Hooda who hit 29 off 25 deliveries.

Left-arm fingerspinners Akeal Hosein and Fabian Allen bowled five overs between them in the last ten while giving away only 22 runs for the wicket of Washington Sundar.

With Rahul returning to the team after missing the series opener because of a family commitment, India rejigged their

It could've been 64 for four had wicketkeeper Shai Hope not dropped a regulation catch to reprieve Rahul, when he was on four, in the 18th over

batting line-up. While Rahul slotted in at No. 4, Pant was bumped up to open with Rohit. After surviving potent opening spells from Roach and Alzarri Joseph, Pant tried to swing his way out of trouble against

Smith. After carving a short ball for four, he took on another short ball, only to sky a pull to Jason Holder who snagged it near square leg.

Smith - and Joseph - had similarly tested Kohli with prancing

deliveries, but the allrounder ultimately bested him with a length ball. Kohli went for a drive, lost his shape and nicked off for 18 off 30 balls. India were 43 for 3 in 12 overs at that point.

It could've been 64 for four had wicketkeeper Shai Hope not dropped a regulation catch to reprieve Rahul, when he was on four, in the 18th over. Rahul broke free when Hosein bowled a half-tracker first ball, which was clattered over midwicket for six. Rahul then charged at

Hosein, pumping him over his head for six. From being on 7 off 23 balls, he moved to 49 off 47 balls before running himself out in the 30th over.

As for Suryakumar, he kept milking the spinners and passed fifty. However, when he looked to hit a higher gear, he misjudged the length of an Allen dart and top-edged a sweep to short fine leg for 64 off 83 balls. Allen combined with Hosein to tighten the screws on India, despite a late cameo from Deepak

SCOREBOARD		
INDIA		
R. Sharma	c Hope b Roach	5
R. Pant	c Holder b Smith	18
V. Kohli	c Hope b Smith	18
KL Rahul	run out (Hosein/Hope)	49
S. Yadav	c Joseph b Allen	64
W. Sundar	c Joseph b Hosein	24
D. Hooda	c Hosein b Holder	29
S. Thakur	c Brooks b Joseph	8
M. Siraj	c Hope b Joseph	3
Y. Chahal	not out	11
P. Krishna	not out	0
Extras	(b2, lb2, nb2, w2)	8
Total	(9 wickets, 50 overs)	237
Fall of wickets: 1-9, 2-39, 3-43, 4-134, 5-177, 6-192, 7-212, 8-224, 9-226		
Bowling: Roach 8-0-42-1, Joseph 10-0-36-2, Smith 7-0-29-2, Holder 9-2-37-1, Hosein 6-0-39-1, Allen 10-0-50-1		
WEST INDIES		
S. Hope	c Yadav b Chahal	27
B. King	c Pant b Krishna	18
D. Bravo	c Pant b Krishna	1
S. Brooks	c Yadav b Hooda	44
N. Pooran	c Rohit b Krishna	9
J. Holder	c Hooda b Thakur	2
A. Hosein	c Pant b Thakur	34
F. Allen	c Pant b Siraj	13
O. Smith	c Kohli b Sundar	24
A. Joseph	not out	7
K. Roach	lbw b Krishna	0
Extras	(lb5, nb3, w6)	14
Total	(all out, 46 overs)	193
Fall of wickets: 1-32, 2-38, 3-52, 4-66, 5-76, 6-117, 7-159, 8-159, 9-193, 10-193		
Bowling: Siraj 9-1-38-1, Thakur 9-1-41-2, Krishna 9-3-12-4, Chahal 10-0-45-1, Washington 5-0-28-1, Sundar 4-0-24-1		

Hooda (29 off 25 balls).

Joseph, who was outstanding with the new ball, was rewarded with the wickets of Shardul Thakur and Mohammed Siraj at the fag end of the innings. Fittingly, he closed out the first innings with a lifter that sailed over Yuzvendra Chahal's shoulder. In all, India could manage only 54 in the last ten overs.

The final match is on Friday at the same venue.

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11th edition of Tour of Oman to kickstart today from Rustaq

Muscat - Rustaq Fort in the Wilayat of Rustaq will witness the launch of the first stage of the 11th edition of the Tour of Oman today. The 138km race will end at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre in Muscat.

Organised by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in conjunction with Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO), the race is part of the UCI ProSeries of events. For its much-anticipated return following two years of cancellation, 18 teams from four continents will be starting at the frontline.

The race will last for six days with a total length of 891 kilometers divided in six stages.

Speaking at a pre-launch press conference on Wednesday, Saif al Rushaidi, Chairman of Oman Cycling Association, said that the 11th edition of the Tour of Oman will enjoy global media coverage and follow-up, as there are 15 international photo agencies, five specialised international newspapers, 35 international tel-



There will be global television broadcast for 275 hours. Apart from the focus on races, Oman's tourist and heritage landmarks will also enjoy coverage

SAIF AL RUSHAIDI

evision channels, four international news agencies, and 17 international journalists who will

report on the progress of the event.

He added that there will be

global television broadcast for 275 hours. "Apart from the focus on races, Oman's tourist and heritage landmarks will also enjoy coverage."

For the first time in the history of the race, the Oman National Team will participate, granting a select team of local riders the opportunity to race against some of the strongest squads in the world.

New Zealand cancels T20 series against Australia

Wellington, New Zealand - New Zealand Cricket on Wednesday scrapped next month's T20 series against Australia, saying the move was "inevitable" due to strict COVID-19 border controls.

NZC chief David White said a government decision to push back plans to open the border forced the cancellation of the three-match series, slated to take place in Napier on March 17, 18 and 20.

"At the time we scheduled the visit there was a lot of hope that the trans-Tasman border would be open for those who met the right criteria," White said.

"However, the advent of Omicron has, unfortunately, changed everything at the border and has made it impossible for us to continue with the series."

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