

HM condoles Greece President

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent condolences to President Katerina Sakellariopoulou of the Republic of Greece on the death of Karolos Papoulias, former president of Greece. In the cable, His Majesty expressed his heartfelt sympathies to President Sakellariopoulou, family of the deceased and the people of Greece.



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BEIJING'S WINTER OLYMPICS TO QATAR WORLD CUP: SPORTING KEY EVENTS IN 2022



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MDO ANNOUNCES STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH SYNERGIES CASTING OMAN



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WANT TO SEE PENGUINS, COME TO MALL OF MUSCAT IN MABELA



KUWAIT

EMIR NAMES NEW CABINET AND FM

Kuwait formed a new cabinet on Tuesday with a new finance minister and including three opposition lawmakers following a stand-off between previous governments and the parliament. Oil Minister Mohammad al Fares was reappointed.

Abdul Wahab al Rasheed, head of the non-governmental Kuwait Economic Society, replaced Khalifa Hamada as finance minister. The new health minister is Khaled al Saeed, whose predecessor had steered Kuwait through the Covid-19 pandemic.

This is the Gulf state's third cabinet this year after the previous governments resigned in the standoff that had hindered state efforts for fiscal reform. **SEE P6**

BENGALURU

INDIA APPROVES TWO MORE VACCINES

India has approved Merck's Covid-19 pill and two more vaccines for emergency use as the world's second most populous country braces for a possible spike in coronavirus cases due to the rapidly spreading Omicron variant. Asia's third-largest economy has already said it will allow Covid-19 booster shots for some of its population as some Indian states logged an uptick in Omicron cases. **SEE P7**

Now get news on the go



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STRIKE SETS ABLAZE SYRIAN PORT

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DEEPENING SOMALIA ROW BETWEEN PRESIDENT, PM

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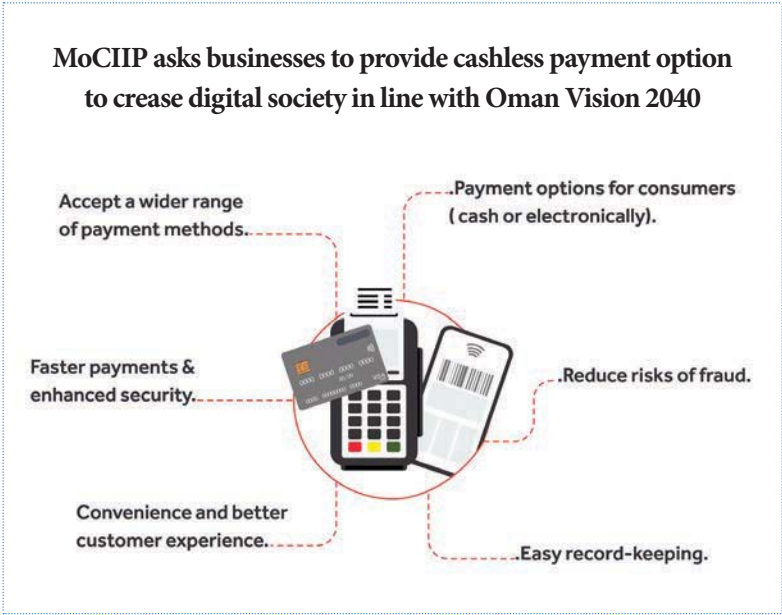
SAY BYE TO CASH FROM JAN 1

KABEER YOUSUF
[@kabeeryousef](#)

Shops, hotels and malls have been advised to provide the option of cashless payment for their customers from Saturday as part of the ongoing initiatives for a digital society in line with Oman Vision 2040.

“This initiative (electronic pay), implemented in association with the Central Bank of Oman(CBO), is an attempt towards achieving a digital society towards Oman vision 2040,” said Hussain al Harrasi, Director-General of SMEs at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP).

The CBO has already provided point-of-sales (PoS) devices to the commercial establishments which are asked to provide the service in



the first phase. The PoS will not involve any installation fees or maintenance fees. However, there would be a fees for merchant transactions specified by the CBO which are applicable from time to

time. These fees must not exceed 1.5 per cent and a maximum of RO 10 for payment via direct debit cards and do not exceed 0.5 per cent for mobile payments via a QR code.

We call on all commercial institutions that fall under these wide categories to provide the electronic payment service in their stores and outlets before the end of 2021

HUSSAIN AL HARRASI
DG, MoCIIP

“Post pandemic, the business community is slowly getting back to normalcy. Although cashless transactions are the way to go, I am of the opinion that the small retail traders might find

the operations little difficult to get familiarised but over a period of time, they especially from the interiors, will get organised and gain the advantages of e-payment system,” says Davis Kallukkaran, Managing Partner, Crowe Oman.

All these commercial establishments are advised to display a signage at their premises indicating that electronic payment facility is available for their customers.

“We call on all commercial institutions that fall under these wide categories to provide the electronic payment service in their stores and outlets before the end of 2021, in order to be able to serve the customers from the new year,” Al Harrasi said

Customers can approach the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) if they have any complaints pertaining to cashless system.

WHO warns surge of Omicron as China, Europe slap curbs



A volunteer stands at the entrance to a vaccination centre, amid the coronavirus disease outbreak in Manchester on Tuesday. – Reuters

BERLIN: The WHO warned on Tuesday that the Omicron coronavirus variant could lead to overwhelmed healthcare systems even though early studies suggest it leads to milder disease, as China and Germany brought back tough restrictions to stamp out new infection surges. China put hundreds of thousands more people under lockdown, while infections hit new highs in multiple US states and European countries.

Covid-19 surges have wreaked havoc around the world, with many nations trying to strike a balance between economically punishing restrictions and controlling the spread of the virus.

The United States has halved the isolation period for asymptomatic cases to try and blunt the disruption, while

France has ordered firms to have employees work from home at least three days a week.

Contact restrictions were in place in Germany for the second year in a row heading into the New Year, as Europe's biggest economy shuttered nightclubs and forced sports competitions behind closed doors. Despite facing a much smaller outbreak compared with global virus hotspots, China has not relaxed its “zero Covid” strategy, imposing stay-at-home orders in many parts of the city of Yan'an.

The hundreds of thousands of affected residents there joined the 13 million people in the city of Xi'an, who entered a sixth day of home confinement as China battled its highest daily case numbers in 21 months. — AFP

MORE COLD LIKELY AS RAIN CLOUDS GATHER



The people of Muscat and neighbouring governorates woke up to see medium and light rains on Tuesday after these areas came under the influence of low-pressure system. The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) has urged people to stay home and do not go out towards the sea until the period announced in the warning is over and an all-clear notification is issued by the authorities. **SEE P2**

Flight cancellations holiday spoiler

NEW YORK: Thousands of flights have been canceled over the past several days as Covid cases surge across the globe.

On Tuesday, another 2,500 flights have been canceled, with more than 800 of them within, into or out of the United States, according to tracking website FlightAware. More than 5,100 flights have been delayed. Monday

was an even bigger nightmare for travelers, with more than 2,800 flights canceled, and 11,000 delayed. Globally, airlines canceled more than 6,000 flights on Christmas Eve, Christmas and the day after Christmas. In the United States, more than 1,200 flights were cancelled and more than 5,000 were delayed on Sunday alone as staff and crew call out sick.

The cancellations come at the busiest time of year for air travel.

Some 11,000 flights have been scrapped worldwide since Friday, and tens of thousands more delayed, during one of the year's busiest travel periods — with multiple airlines saying spikes in cases of the Omicron variant have caused staffing shortages.

— Agencies

State Council Office reviews draft laws

MUSCAT: The Office of the State Council reviewed the proposed amendments of the Records and Archives Law promulgated by Royal Decree 60/2007 and the draft Securities Law both of which were referred from the Council of Ministers.

After reviewing reports prepared by the specialised standing committees of the State Council, the Office decided to refer the bills to the State Council's general meeting.

The Office was briefed on the response of the Council of Ministers regarding the State Council's proposals for studying bank loans and insurance. It also discussed and revised the Environment Conservation and Pollution Control Law issued by Royal Decree 114/2001 and reviewed the annual report of the State Audit Institution (SAI) for 2020.

The Office of the State Council discussed a number of proposals and reports submitted by the honourable members of the State Council which included



a proposal on the system for accrediting and equivalence of the academic certificates issued from outside the Sultanate of Oman. It also reviewed a follow-up report on the work of the standing committees for the period between the previous office meeting and this meeting.

At the end of the meeting, the Office set the date and agendas of the State Council's third regular

meeting.

Meanwhile, the Education and Research Committee of the State Council, hosted Talal bin Said al Maamari, CEO of Oman Telecommunications Company (Omantel), within the framework of the committee's study on the reality and legislations of technology-based distance education.

During its fifth meeting of the

third annual session held under the chairmanship of Mohammed bin Hamdan al Toobi, the Education and Research Committee of State Council, discussed with the CEO of Omantel the policies prepared by the company to realise the strategic orientation of Oman Vision 2020 regarding the establishment of smart cities in the governorates and the legislations governing them

as well as the company's plans to realise comprehensive and sustainable education.

The committee reviewed the facilities provided by Omantel to the educational institutions to achieve the requirements and challenges of distance education and the proposed solutions and legislation to achieve quality distance education in the Sultanate of Oman.

Emergency medical devices needed at big events

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The sudden demise of the Omani football player last week has initiated a debate on the need for mechanisms to handle emergencies, like a heart stroke or cardiac arrest, at public events.

Muscat Football Club player Mukhlid al Raqadi fell during training and died at the hospital before the game began. He was 29 and a budding player for the national team.

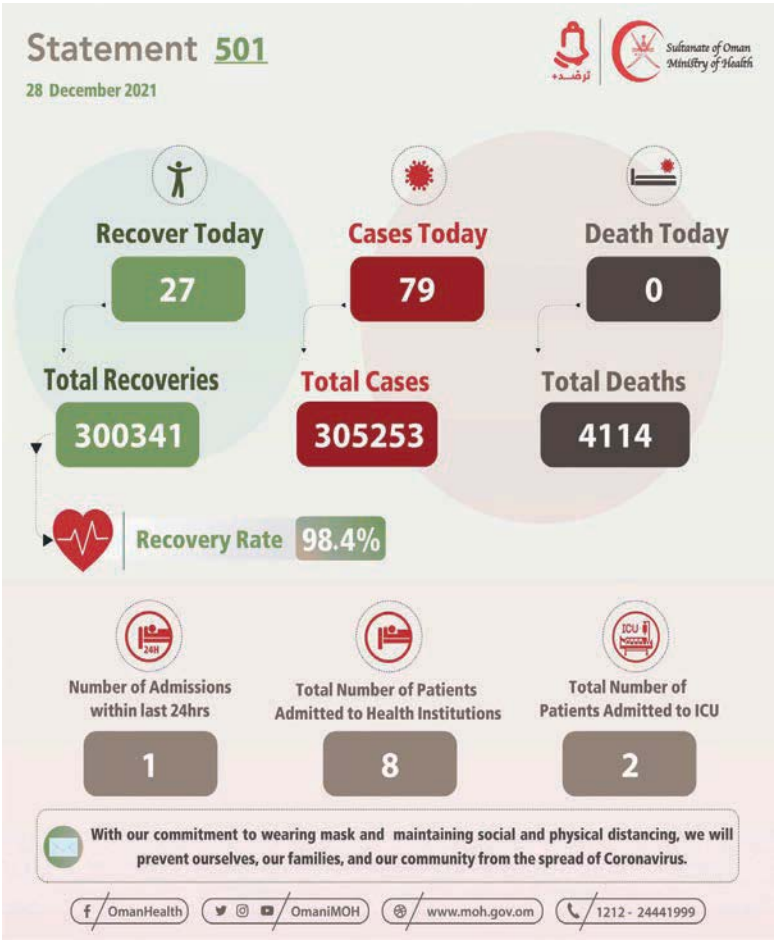
Dr Najeeb bin Zahran al Rawahi, senior consultant of cardiology and electrocardiography at the Royal Hospital and the first Omani electrophysiologist has said that the heart is a muscle, which can be affected by many factors that may lead to its failure.

He said cardiac arrest can be caused due to several factors, including ventricular fibrillation (irregular heartbeats), which leads to fainting, end in the event of a person's exhaustion, it will lead to death. It is necessary for everyone in the target groups to undergo periodic examination. One of the main causes of stenosis of the coronary artery (blockage is high cholesterol, which is common in people aged 40 years and above.

Diabetes, high blood pressure, and infections can also affect the functioning of the heart. It is also necessary to have automatic cardiac resuscitation devices (chest compression machines CPRS) at big gatherings or public events, with people trained in first aid," Al Rawahi said.

Football fans in the Sultanate of Oman expressed their shock at the death of Al Raqadi and highlighted the lack of facilities. They urged the concerned authorities, including football clubs and associations, to take corrective measures.

79 new coronavirus cases reported



ALGIERS: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation concluded its participation in the 18th conference of Arab Ministers of Higher Education and Research.

The three-day conference, held by Algeria in cooperation with the Arab League Educational,

Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO), was themed "Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Arab World by 2030: Vision and Directions".

The Sultanate of Oman's delegation was headed by Dr Bakhit bin Ahmed al Mahri, Under-Secretary for Higher Education.

The conference discussed the developments of higher education and research systems within the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) Education 2030 agenda, among other topics.

Moreover, the conferees drafted a document on higher education and research in the Arab World by 2030. — ONA

Rains likely to continue

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The people of Muscat and neighbouring governorates woke up to see medium and light rains on Tuesday after these areas came under the influence of low-pressure system.

The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) has urged people to stay home and do not go out towards the sea until the period announced in the warning is over and an all-clear notification is issued by the authorities.

"Do not try to Wadis, even if the water level is low. Remember that storms can cause huge floods. Keep away from beaches and dams," the CDAA said.

CDAA said that the risk of vehicle sliding is the highest during early rainfall, as water mixes with oil and dust particles in the road surface, creates a greasy layer that causes sliding.

The National Multi-Hazard Early Warning Centre has said that the Sultanate of Oman will be affected by a trough of low pressure starting from Wednesday and it will last for several days. Cloudy weather with chances of rains ranging between 50 to 100 mm, and occasionally thundershowers associated with fresh winds are expected over the governorates of Musandam and North Al Batinah. Rains may lead to flash floods and overflow of wadis, the Oman Meteorology said.

Cloud advection is expected over governorates of South Al Batinah, Muscat, Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah, Al Dakhiliyah, South Al Sharqiyah and North Al Sharqiyah with chances of rains ranging between 10 to 25 mm.

The sea state will be moderate in the coastal areas with a maximum wave height of 2 metres. Sea condition will be rough during thundershowers with a maximum wave height of three metres.





Blood bank hails donors who helped despite challenges

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 28

The Central Blood Bank in Bausher said that there has been an increase in the number of blood units collected in 2021, compared to the previous year despite the difficulties and challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

“This increase was due to the demand to donate blood and its components and we are pleased to extend our thanks and appreciation to all donors who



contributed blood to patients and those in need,” the Central Blood bank said.

The blood bank also urged everyone to donate platelets at the earliest as recently there has been a high demand.

It has been noted that several volunteer and community groups, and corporates played a big part in conducting various blood donation campaigns, especially during the lockdowns and at the peak of pandemic-related hospitalisations.



Arab Gulf Security 3 committee meets

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by Royal Oman Police (ROP), took part in the 5th meeting of the Supreme Committee for the joint tactical exercises of the GCC security services (Arab Gulf Security 3).

The event was organised by

the GCC Secretariat-General in Dammam, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Sultanate of Oman's delegation was headed by Colonel Salim bin Mubarak al Abrawi, Commander of the ROP Special Tasks Force. – ONA

Turkish Airlines to operate Antalya-Muscat flights

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 28

As part of the efforts to link the airports of the Sultanate of Oman with various international destinations, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has issued approval for Turkish Airlines to operate flights from Muscat.

The airline will operate two flights per week from Antalya in Turkey to Muscat, starting June 3, 2022.

It currently operates flights to Istanbul from Muscat.

Antalya is a Turkish resort city with a yacht-filled Old Harbor and beaches flanked by large hotels. It's a gateway to Turkey's southern Mediterranean region, known as the Turquoise Coast for its blue waters. Remnants remain from Antalya's time as a major Roman port.



Omanis to be trained for driving heavy trucks



VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

A programme to train Omanis in the field of driving heavy trucks has been launched recently. The programme, by the Esnad Institute, will help qualify Omani cadres and develop their capabilities as heavy truck drivers to meet the needs of the labour market in the land transport sector.

The programme includes tests on the road over a period of six months for the target age group of 21 years to 45 years.

In a statement, Abdullah bin Yaqoub al Rahbi of Esnad Institute for Training Truck Drivers and Equipment, said the programme seeks to bring the trainees to the profession of driving heavy trucks and familiarise them with the rules, precautionary measures related to the maintenance of the

truck and other technical aspects such as changing tyres and using fire extinguishers. Drivers are also responsible for the safe delivery of goods that are loaded in the trucks.

The Ministry of Labour, which has been making efforts to regulate the profession of drivers, earlier this year announced that driving of fuel vehicles, agricultural materials and foodstuffs, will be restricted to Omanis.

‘Theatre laboratory’ concludes



AMAL AL RIYAMI

NIZWA, DEC 28

The theatrical laboratory, which was organised by the theatre group of the Student Services Centre, was concluded in Nizwa Hall Theatre, College of Technology and Applied Sciences, Nizwa. The closing ceremony was under the auspices of Dr Mohammad bin Juma al Kharousi, dean of the college.

The theatrical laboratory is

held for students of the theatre group. It includes workshops and theatrical performances. It aims to enhance students' abilities and skills in understanding theatre in terms of: acting, directing and playwriting and make-up. It also aims to discover new talents in the theatre field.

Abdullah al Hadrami, Head of Student Activities Department, said: “Through implementing the theatrical laboratory, we would like to nurture student abilities

and talents after their interruption due to the pandemic. Also, discover the capabilities of new students in the theatrical field and introduce the concept of theatre.”

The theatre laboratory was launched with three different training workshops in the theatrical field. The first workshop “Acting and Directing” presented by Qasim al Riyami, actor and theatre director, which was for three consecutive days. The second workshop, “Cinematic

Make-up”, was presented by Ibrahim al Jassasi. Hayan al Lamki, a member of the Alden Theatre Troupe, presented the third workshop entitled “The Basics of Theatre and Theatrical”.

At the end of the ceremony, Dr Al Kharousi honoured the presenters and participants of the workshops. He praised the role of theatre in raising awareness and sending a purposeful and sublime message, in an attractive way to the public.

Beautification projects completed in Al Hamra

STAFF REPORTER

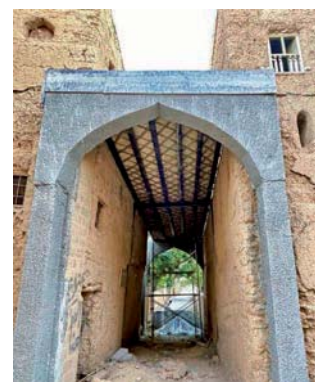
HAMRA, DEC 28

The National Committee for the Development of Wilayat of Al Hamra in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate has completed the restoration of a number of tourist and archaeological sites, including the Al Sabahat and the old roads between the orchards. It also completed the restoration of ‘Sabah al Na’ab’, the second gate in the old quarter.

Saeed bin Hamad al Abri, a member of the Wilayat Development Committee, said the upcoming beautification projects, with the support of the people, include the completion of the road repairs.

He stressed the importance of the project in linking the Al Sahma area with the historic lane of the town of Al Hamra as it passes through orchards.

The project was implemented in several phases, which included the reconstruction and expansion of the watercourses that irrigate farms and orchards, in addition to rebuilding Sabah al Na’ab gate.



FOR A SOUND ENVIRONMENTAL BALANCE

SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkuttyvp

The Sultanate of Oman has been planting thousands of mangrove seedlings over the past several years as part of the leadership's efforts to restore natural habitat. The dense vegetation of the mangrove forests provides nutrients and shelter for fish, crayfish and birds.

From the beginning of this year, a campaign has been on to plant hundreds of thousands of mangrove saplings in the Wilayat of Al Musannah in South Al Batinah Governorate, said the Environment Authority. The campaign is part of the National Initiative project to plant 10 million trees, with the aim of preserving and rehabilitating ecosystems and their components to create a sound environmental balance.

Mangroves are one of the main components of the Omani marine environment. One species of the green trees growing in the sea are black mangroves – also called Avicennia Marina or Qurum in Arabic. These are one of the few trees which can live in salty conditions.

ONE SPECIES OF THE GREEN TREES GROWING IN THE SEA ARE BLACK MANGROVES – ALSO CALLED AVICENNIA MARINA OR QURUM IN ARABIC



They prefer bays such as those at Al Khiran, as well as lagoons such as those in Qurum in Muscat. The mangrove woodland in Al Khiran is one of the largest in the area. The government has been protecting existing mangroves, and organising, coordinating and implementing the planting of seedlings, and conducting awareness-raising campaigns across the country.

THE TOTAL AREA COVERED BY THE AVICENNIA TREES IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN ABOUT
1,030
HECTARES

The Department of Marine Environment Conservation, in coordination with the Environment Department in South Al Batinah Governorate, implemented a campaign during which 2,400 mangrove saplings were planted in Khor Al Quraim in the Wilayat of Al Musannah last week, to compliment the efforts made in implementing the National Initiative to plant 10 million trees. In May, more than 1,000 mangrove saplings were planted by the Environment Authority in Khor Al Arqoub in the Wilayat of Mahout.

Over the years people have become more aware of the value and importance of mangrove ecosystems, and have increasingly participated in mangrove

seedling plantation efforts. Historical and archeological evidence indicates that dense mangrove woodlands covered much of the Sultanate of Oman's coastline and islands in ancient times. The total area covered by the Avicennia trees in the Sultanate of about 1,030 hectares, and in order to preserve those trees, the cultivation project of the Avicennia was launched in April 2000, through the establishment of 4 plant nurseries in different provinces, and the cultivation of more than 600 thousand seedlings until the end of 2018.

Local communities up and down the coast will benefit as they gradually get back the healthy ecosystems they had lost over past decades. Mangroves are breeding grounds for many fish species and other fauna, and also soak up carbon dioxide, thus contributing to mitigating the impact of greenhouse gas emissions.

They protect the shore from coastal erosion. Mangrove boardwalks can also be a tourist attraction, bringing in additional income to locals.

Several field surveys were conducted to determine the success of the aquaculture project, noting that there is an increase in the green areas of the mangrove and biodiversity. These trees are highly efficient for storing carbon, and are a habitat that attracts large numbers of endemic and migratory birds.

2,400

MANGROVE SAPPLINGS WERE PLANTED IN KHOR AL QURAIM IN THE WILAYAT OF AL MUSANNAH LAST WEEK

IN MAY, MORE THAN
1,000

MANGROVE SAPPLINGS WERE PLANTED BY THE ENVIRONMENT AUTHORITY IN KHOR AL ARQOUB IN THE WILAYAT OF MAHOUT

THE EFFORTS MADE IN IMPLEMENTING THE NATIONAL INITIATIVE TO PLANT
10
MILLION TREES



Workshop held on simplifying cybersecurity

MUSCAT: Oman Computer Services Company “OCS Infotech” recently organised a workshop on ‘Simplifying and maximising your security ecosystem’, with Infoblox. The workshop saw the attendance of several members from the public and the private sectors.

Commenting on the importance of the workshop, Anu Cherian Philip, General Manager of OCS Infotech, said, “The main aim of this workshop is to learn how integrations and using the right tools can help to empower the security teams of companies.

“Moreover, by giving a better understanding of the security ecosystem and the benefit of a complementary solution, businesses can detect, contain and remediate threats even quicker through a high-level response integration system.” The workshop also saw the discussion of automatically sharing indicators of compromise across multi vendor security systems.

This will enhance visibility throughout respective extended networks regardless of infrastructure complexity. Ali Sleiman, Regional Presale Technical Director, Infoblox,

Middle East and Africa, said, “As we know the world around us is changing as organisations digitally transform through cloud initiatives. This change requires a modern networking and security architecture.

“Infoblox addresses DNS security by providing enforcement at the DNS control plane, on which over 90 per cent of malware activity takes place.” Our BloxOne Threat Defence solution is a simple and quick way for customers to detect potential threats.” “OCS is a partner that we are closely working with in the Sultanate of Oman. This collaboration will help us better serve regional customers.

“Together, we can work towards educating our customer base, sharing knowledge and generating awareness of how Infoblox and OCS can benefit them,” he added.

Infoblox provides the world’s leading cloud-first solutions for simplifying and scaling DNS, DHCP and IPAM (DDI) and security. OCS Infotech is one of the first Omani establishments in the technical field and one of the Zubair Group companies.

Yoga routine helps boost immune system, fight off illnesses

LIJU CHERIAN
@lijucherianoman

Abdul Karim and Abbas al Lawati have been immensely benefited by yoga practices during the Covid-19 pandemic. The duo have praised the health benefits of this ancient practice which involves concentration, relaxation and deep breathing techniques.

Both of them were trained under Indian expatriate and renowned yoga practitioner and exponent Dr Kavitha Ramakrishna, also well-known in Sanskrit and Tanjore paintings.

Her breathing techniques and sun salutations have helped boost immunity among Omanis, both men and women, who have undergone training under her guidance.

Abdul Karim, a banker, could experience a tremendous amount of inner energy and freshness in his mind and body through yogic asanas like sun salutations, body balancing asanas and others.

“The pranayama lessons taught by Dr Kavitha were instrumental during the coronavirus pandemic. I could keep my respiratory organs in mint condition which helped keep myself and my surrounding members safe during these stressful times,” says Abdul Karim.

Abbas, a finance and account student, says he gained much by learning breathing techniques or pranayama through his classes from Dr Kavitha.

He has felt a significant change in his breathing habits, and the freshness that is spread throughout the day which aided him to focus



Abdul Karim



Dr Kavitha Ramakrishna



Abbas al Lawati

more on his daily life as a student.

“My lungs are getting stronger to fight the unhealthy elements in the environment, especially during the pandemic,” explains Abbas.

After mastering the art, Abbas now goes about spreading awareness among his Omani brothers and sisters.

Both Abdul Karim and Abbas have praised the role of Dr Kavitha who constantly

spreads awareness of yoga among the Omani community by showcasing the importance of this vast subject. A number of Omani female students have also been trained under her guidance.

As a yoga practitioner, Dr Kavitha has tried to spread awareness among Omanis by showcasing the importance of yoga, the science of life.

“I am trying to teach the king of asanas or the sun salutations

and the breathing techniques which work on the physiology of the body, the endocrine system, respiratory system, all the chakras, and finally, for the health of our body and emotions. Yoga is the dexterity in action, and this is in maintaining relaxation and awareness in action which helps integrate the personality by bringing body and mind coordination well-balanced,” explains Dr Kavitha.

Nizwa youth organise neighbourhood clean-up

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, DEC 28

Al Somod Team of Nizwa Club and Al Wadi Al Abyad School for Basic Education, in cooperation with the municipality department in Nizwa, organised a youth cleaning camp to prune trees and remove weeds and waste near the school in the town of Al Ghubra in the Wilayat of Nizwa.

About 60 participants of different age groups from the team and school students participated in the camp from morning till noon.

Asad bin Masoud al Rashidi, Secretary of Al Somod Team, said: “Volunteering has a great importance in serving the community and Al Somod Team always strives to serve the community.”

The team has previously conducted cleaning camps, which included cleaning the town of Alayaz Nizwa, mosques and aflaj, as well as the streets especially after the rain.

Al Rashidi extended his sincere thanks and appreciation to all participants in this social work.



Strike blamed on Israel sets ablaze Syrian port

BEIRUT: An Israeli air strike hit Syria's Latakia port before dawn on Tuesday, sparking a fire that lit up the Mediterranean seafront in the second such attack on the key cargo hub this month, Syrian state media reported.

Since the outbreak of Syria's civil war in 2011, Israel has routinely carried out air strikes on its strife-torn neighbour, mostly targeting Syrian government troops as well as allied forces and Hezbollah fighters.

But it is only the second time it has hit the port of Latakia, in the heartland of President Bashar al Assad's minority Alawite community.

"At around 3:21 am, the Israeli enemy carried out an aerial aggression with several missiles from the direction of the Mediterranean... targeting the container yard in Latakia port," Syrian state news agency SANA cited a military source as saying.

The strike caused "significant material damage", it added.

Asked about the strike, an Israeli army spokesman said: "We don't comment on reports in foreign media".

Pictures released by SANA



Smoke rises after Syrian state media reported an Israeli missile attack in a container storage area, at Syrian port of Latakia, in this handout picture released by SANA on Tuesday. — Reuters

showed firefighters training hoses on stacks of blazing containers that lit up the night sky.

The news agency said the

containers were carrying "engine oil and spare parts for cars and other vehicles".

But Britain-based war monitor,

the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said the cargo was "arms and munitions," which had detonated in "powerful explosions

that were felt across the city of Latakia and its suburbs".

Latakia governor Ismail Hilal said firefighters had brought the

blaze under control by midday and were dousing the embers, SANA reported.

It is the second time this month that Israel has attacked the container yard at Latakia port.

The Syrian government's other major ally, Russia, operates a naval base in the port of Tartus, 85 kilometres to the south.

So far this year, Israel has targeted Syria nearly 30 times, killing 130 people including five civilians and 125 loyalist fighters, according to Observatory figures.

On December 7, it carried out a strike targeting an arms shipment in Latakia, its first on the port since the start of the civil war.

While Israel rarely comments on individual strikes it carries out on its northern neighbour, it has acknowledged mounting hundreds since 2011.

According to a report by the Israeli army, it hit around 50 targets in Syria in 2020.

In the deadliest operation since the strikes began, Israel killed 57 government troops and allied fighters in eastern Syria in January this year. The Israeli military has defended the strikes as a necessary measure. — AFP



Iranians walk down a street in the capital Tehran on Tuesday. — AFP

Iran, Russia upbeat about progress of nuclear talks

DUBAI: Iran and Russia sounded upbeat about talks on salvaging the 2015 Iran nuclear deal on Tuesday, with Tehran saying an accord was possible if other parties showed "good faith" and a Russian negotiator reporting "indisputable progress".

Iran and the United States resumed the indirect talks in Vienna on Monday, with Tehran focused on one side of the original bargain — lifting sanctions against it — despite what critics see as scant progress on reining in its atomic activities.

"The Vienna talks are headed in a good direction... We believe that if other parties continue

the round of talks which just started with good faith, reaching a good agreement for all parties is possible," Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian told reporters in Tehran.

"If they show seriousness, in addition to the good faith, arriving at a deal soon and in the near future is conceivable," Amirabdollahian said in a video of his remarks on state media.

Russian envoy Mikhail Ulyanov said on Twitter: "We observe indisputable progress... Sanctions lifting is being actively discussed in informal settings" in a working group at the talks.

— Reuters

Yemen fighters allow aid flights to resume after air strikes

SANAA: Yemen's Ansar Allah fighters said on Tuesday they have allowed the temporary resumption of UN aid flights into the capital Sanaa, a week after a halt due to coalition air strikes.

"The civil aviation authority announces the resumption of UN and other organisation flights into Sanaa airport on a temporary basis," the Ansar Allah-run Al Masirah television reported.

"The (Ansar Allah administration's) foreign ministry was contacted to notify the UN and all international organisations that Sanaa airport was ready to receive flights."

Yemen has been wracked by civil war since 2014 pitting the government — supported by the Saudi-led coalition — against the Ansar Allah fighters who control much of the north. Tens of thousands of people have been killed, in what the United Nations has described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Flights into the Ansar Allah-held capital have been largely halted by a Saudi-led blockade since August 2016, but there have been exemptions for aid flights



Yemenis inspect a crater following a reported air strike by the coalition targeting a road at Al Sabeen square in the Ansar Allah-held capital Sanaa, on December 23. — AFP file photo

that are a key lifeline for the population.

The Ansar Allah fighters had said UN aid flights into Sanaa had been halted by Saudi-led air strikes last week but the coalition said the airport had already been closed two days earlier and blamed the fighters.

Coalition spokesman Turki al Maliki said on Sunday the Ansar Allah was "militarising" Sanaa airport and using it as a "main centre for launching ballistic missiles and drones" towards

the kingdom. On Saturday, the coalition launched what it called a "large-scale" military operation against the Ansar Allah after its fatal attack. The coalition raids killed three civilians, including a child and a woman, Yemeni medics said.

The coalition maintains its operations are carried out in accordance with international humanitarian law and has repeatedly accused the Ansar Allah of using civilians as human shields. — AFP

New finance minister, oppn lawmakers in Kuwait's cabinet

KUWAIT: Kuwait formed a new cabinet on Tuesday with a new finance minister and including three opposition lawmakers following a standoff between previous governments and the parliament.

Oil Minister Mohammad al-Fares was reappointed.

Abdul Wahab al Rasheed, head of the non-governmental Kuwait Economic Society, replaced Khalifa Hamada as finance minister.

The new health minister is Khaled al Saeed, whose predecessor had steered Kuwait through the Covid-19 pandemic.

This is the Gulf state's third cabinet this year after the previous governments resigned in the standoff that had hindered state efforts for fiscal reform.

The government has tried to temporarily boost finances while more structural and fiscal reforms remain deadlocked, including a debt law to tap international markets.

The cabinet has only one woman minister. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

CAIRO

Egypt 'digitally unwraps' mummy of pharaoh

Egypt has "digitally unwrapped" the mummy of famed Pharaoh Amenhotep I, revealing its secrets for the first time since it was discovered in 1881 without disturbing his funerary mask.

Thanks to the advanced digital 3D imagery, researchers unearthed new mummification techniques used for the pharaoh whose rule dates back more than 1,500 BC.

The research was led by Sahar Saleem, a professor of



radiology at Cairo University and the renowned Egyptologist Zahi Hawass, a former antiquities minister, the tourism and antiquities ministry said in a statement on Tuesday.

BEIRUT

PM signals backing for central bank governor

Lebanon's Prime Minister Najib Mikati said on Tuesday that central bank Governor Riad Salameh should remain in position for now, signalling continued political backing for him despite embezzlement probes at home and abroad.

"One does not change their officers during a war," Mikati told a news conference in reference to Salameh, adding that he would wait for the results of investigations that are being conducted by judicial authorities in Switzer-



land and elsewhere. Salameh has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing. Speaking to Reuters, Mikati, a billionaire tycoon, said the investigations against Salameh were "being used in politics".

DUBAI

UAE okays Sinopharm's protein-based jab

The United Arab Emirates has approved emergency use of Sinopharm's protein-based Covid-19 vaccine and it will be available to the public as a booster dose starting January 2022, the health ministry said.

The vaccine will be produced and distributed by a joint venture between the UAE's Group 42 and China National Biotech Group (CNBG), a unit of China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm), the ministry said in a statement on state media



on Monday. The approval came following a UAE-based study that included individuals who were previously vaccinated with two doses of Sinopharm CNBG's inactivated vaccine.

In brief

■ JAKARTA



INDONESIA ALLOWS BOEING'S 737 MAX TO FLY AGAIN

Indonesia has lifted a ban on the Boeing 737 MAX, its transport ministry said on Tuesday, three years after the crash of one of the aircraft operated by domestic carrier Lion Air with the loss of all 189 people on board.

Aviation authorities around the world grounded the aircraft months later after a similarly deadly accident in March 2019 involving one of the aircraft operated by Ethiopian Airlines.

The approval in Indonesia comes months after it returned to service in the US and Europe, and follows more recent lifting of grounding orders in countries including Australia, Japan, India, Malaysia, Singapore and Ethiopia.

■ SYDNEY



AUSTRALIA COVID NUMBERS RISE WITH OMICRON OUTBREAK

Australia recorded another record surge in Covid-19 infections on Tuesday as an outbreak of the highly infectious Omicron variant disrupted reopening of the economy, while state leaders argued over domestic border controls.

The country reported 11,264 new cases of the coronavirus in the previous day, according to a Reuters calculation of state figures, once again surpassing its peak of a day earlier, as it grapples with a planned reopening while the new variant rages.

There were five Covid-19 deaths reported, taking the total fatalities to just over 2,200 since the start of the pandemic.

■ TOKYO



JAPAN AIMS TO PUT A PERSON ON THE MOON BY LATE THIS DECADE

Japan revised the schedule of its space exploration plans on Tuesday, aiming to put a Japanese person on the moon by the latter half of the 2020s.

"Not only is space a frontier that gives people hopes and dreams, but it also provides a crucial foundation to our economic society with respect to our economic security," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told a meeting to finalise the plan.

Japan's announcement of its space exploration targets comes a week after Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa returned to earth after spending 12 days aboard the International Space Station.

CHINA'S LOCAL CASES UP FOR 4TH DAY AS XIAN OUTBREAK EXPANDS

India boosts arsenal against Covid with Merck pill, 2 more vaccines

BENGALURU/BEIJING: India has approved Merck's Covid-19 pill and two more vaccines for emergency use as the world's second most populous country braces for a possible spike in coronavirus cases due to the rapidly spreading Omicron variant.

Asia's third-largest economy has already said it will allow Covid-19 booster shots for some of its population as some Indian states logged an uptick in Omicron cases.

The emergency approvals come at a time measures are being taken to ramp up oxygen supplies and strengthen the country's health infrastructure.

Molnupiravir will be manufactured in India by 13 companies for restricted use under emergency situation for treatment of adult patients with Covid-19, the country's Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said on Tuesday.

Merck's anti-viral pill molnupiravir was authorised by the United States last week for certain high-risk adult patients and has been shown to reduce hospitalisations and deaths by around 30 per cent in a clinical trial.

Earlier this year, Aurobindo Pharma, Cipla, Sun Pharmaceuticals and some others signed non-exclusive voluntary licensing agreements with Merck to manufacture and supply molnupiravir in India.

Two other Covid-19 vaccines, Serum Institute of India's version of Novavax Inc's shot, Covovax, and homegrown drugmaker Biological E's Corbevax were also granted emergency use approval, Mandaviya said on Twitter.

Medical experts have said India needs to double down on its vaccine campaign and some states have imposed night curfews and other restrictions in the run up to New Year festivities to prevent a



A woman reacts as she receives a dose of the Covishield vaccine against Covid-19, manufactured by Serum Institute of India, at a vaccination centre in Ahmedabad, on Tuesday. — Reuters

spike in infections and a repeat of summer 2021 when a devastating second wave of infections left tens of thousands dead.

The country's inoculation drive so far has been dominated by a domestically produced version of

the AstraZeneca Covid-19 shot by Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech's inactivated vaccine Covaxin.

CHINA CASES RISE

Meanwhile, China's local coronavirus cases rose for a

fourth day, with the majority of infections reported by Xian, a northwestern city that has put its 13 million people under lockdown.

Xian reported 175 symptomatic cases for Monday, up from the previous day's 150. No Omicron infections have been announced yet from the more than 800 confirmed cases in Xian since December 9.

Case numbers in Xian are small compared with many clusters in other countries, but Chinese officials have imposed tough curbs on travel within the city and on leaving it, in line with national guidelines to immediately contain any Covid-19 outbreak.

Some residents in Xian were anxious to know when they could next stock up on daily necessities such as vegetables, as officials had barred people from going out to shop during a new round of mass testing that started on Monday.

— Reuters

Indonesia rejects Rohingya refugees, sends stricken boat to Malaysia



A boat carrying Rohingya refugees, including women and children, is seen stranded in waters off the coast of Bireuen, Aceh province, Indonesia, on Monday. — Reuters

BIREUEN: Dozens of Rohingya refugees intercepted after their boat ran into trouble off the coast of Indonesia's Aceh province were being sent into Malaysian waters, authorities said on Tuesday.

At least 100 mostly women and children aboard a wooden vessel said to be taking on water

were denied refuge in Indonesia and instead pushed into the neighbouring Southeast Asian country. Despite calls from non-governmental organisations and the United Nations agency for refugees, Indonesian authorities are attempting to send the group back after providing supplies,

clothes and fuel, as well as a technician to fix their damaged boat. "We hope (the supplies) can help the Rohingyas to continue their journey to Malaysia as they planned and intended," Winardy, an Aceh police spokesman who, like many Indonesians, goes by only one name, said. — AFP

China slams US after 'close encounters' in space

BEIJING: Beijing on Tuesday accused the United States of irresponsible and unsafe conduct in space over two "close encounters" between the Chinese space station and satellites operated by Elon Musk's SpaceX.

Tiangong, China's new space station, had to manoeuvre to avoid colliding with one Starlink satellite in July and with another in October, according to a note submitted by Beijing to the United Nations space agency this month.

The note said the incidents "constituted dangers to the life or health of astronauts aboard the China Space Station".

"The US... ignores its obligations under international treaties, posing a serious threat to the lives and safety of astronauts," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said at a routine briefing on Tuesday.

Starlink, a division of SpaceX, operates a constellation of close to 2,000 satellites that aims to provide Internet access to most parts of Earth.

SpaceX is a private American company, independent of the US military and civilian space agency Nasa.

But China said in its note to the UN that members of the Outer Space Treaty — the foundation of international space law — are also responsible for actions by their non-government entities.

SpaceX has not responded to a request for comment.

Evasive manoeuvres to reduce the risk of collisions in space are becoming more frequent as more objects enter Earth's orbit, said Jonathan McDowell of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics.

"We've really noticed the increase in the number of close passes since Starlink started getting deployed," he said. — AFP

Afghan women protest against Taliban killings

KABUL: A crowd of women marched through the Afghan capital on Tuesday, accusing Taliban authorities of covertly killing soldiers who served the former US-backed regime.

Around 30 women gathered near a mosque in the centre of Kabul and marched a few hundred metres chanting "justice, justice" before they were stopped by Taliban forces, an AFP correspondent saw.

The Taliban also tried to prevent journalists from covering the march, organised against the "mysterious murders of young people, particularly the country's former soldiers", according to social media invitations.

Taliban fighters briefly detained a group of reporters and confiscated equipment from



Women hold placards during a protest to demand an end to the extrajudicial killings of former officials of the previous regime, in Kabul, on Tuesday. — AFP

some photographers, deleting images from their cameras

before returning them. Since the hardliners returned to power

in August, they have effectively banned unsanctioned protests.

The protest comes weeks after separate reports by the United Nations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said there were credible allegations of more than 100 extrajudicial killings by the Taliban since their takeover.

"I want to tell the world, tell the Taliban to stop killing. We want freedom, we want justice, we want human rights," said protester Nayera Koahistani.

In a statement read aloud by protester Laila Basam, the demonstrators called on the Taliban "to stop its criminal machine". The statement said former soldiers and government employees of the old regime are "under direct threat", violating a general amnesty announced by the Taliban in August. — AFP



US and Russia set for Jan 10 security talks amid Ukraine tensions

WASHINGTON/MOSCOW: US and Russian officials will hold security talks on January 10 to discuss concerns about their respective military activity and confront rising tensions over Ukraine, the two countries said.

A spokesperson for the Biden administration announced the date late on Monday, and said Russia and Nato were also likely to hold talks on January 12, with a broader meeting including Moscow, Washington and other European countries set for January 13.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov confirmed those dates on Tuesday and said he hoped the talks with the United States in Geneva would launch a process that would give Moscow new security guarantees from the West. Such guarantees are a longstanding demand of Moscow, which alarmed the West by massing tens of thousands of troops near Ukraine in the past two months.

The January 12 Nato meeting would be held in Brussels,

Ryabkov said, while the January 13 talks would involve the Vienna-based Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which includes the United States and its Nato allies, as well as Russia, Ukraine and other ex-Soviet states.

CONCERNS ON THE TABLE Russia's deployment of troops near Ukraine has raised fears in the West that Moscow, which seized Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in 2014 and has since backed separatists fighting in eastern Ukraine, may be poised for a new attack.

Russia has denied plans for an assault but says it could take unspecified military action if its security demands are not met.

Moscow, worried by what it says is the West's re-arming of Ukraine, has said it wants legally-binding guarantees Nato will not expand further eastwards, and that certain offensive weapons will not be deployed to Ukraine or other neighbouring countries. — Reuters

Deepening Somalia row between president, PM sparks global alarm

MOGADISHU: Somalia's neighbours and Western countries have expressed alarm over an intensifying row between the country's president and prime minister as heavily armed factions patrolled parts of the capital Mogadishu on Tuesday, raising fears that the political crisis could erupt into violence.

Soldiers loyal to the prime minister took up positions near the presidential palace a day after President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as Farmajo, announced the suspension of Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble, who accused him of an "attempted coup".

Relations between the pair have long been frosty, but the latest developments have sparked concerns for Somalia's stability as the country struggles to hold long-delayed elections and fight an insurgency.

On Tuesday, pro-Roble troops paraded the streets, fuelling fear among Mogadishu residents weary of armed confrontations.

"They are not far away from the main security checkpoints of the presidential palace, they are armed with heavy machine guns and RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades)," Saido Mumin, a resident, said.

Another local, Abdulkadir Ahmed, said that although the situation appeared to be calm, he was "really worried" about the potential for violence.

International observers have urged both sides to resolve the escalating dispute while some Somali traditional elders and



Somali military supporting Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble ride on their pick-up trucks as they gather at Siigale village in Hodan district of Mogadishu, on Monday. — Reuters

politicians have also sought to calm tempers.

"Some politicians and elders (have) started going between the two sides to de-escalate the situation, but these efforts are yet to... bring about a formal resolution," a source in the office of the president said on condition of anonymity. A coalition of opposition presidential candidates on Tuesday urged Farmajo to vacate his office immediately and called for "an urgent investigation and legal charges against Farmajo and anyone who helped him in staging the coup".

"This failed coup was an attempt

to destroy the constitutional agencies of the country," the coalition said in a statement.

US WARNING

The Africa Bureau of the US State Department warned on Monday that Washington was "prepared to act against those who obstruct Somalia's path to peace."

"The attempted suspension of @MohamedHRoble is alarming & we support his efforts for rapid & credible elections. All parties must desist from escalatory actions & statements," it said on Twitter.

Farmajo has accused Roble of interfering with a probe into a

land-grabbing case and withdrawn his mandate to organise elections.

Roble in turn has accused Farmajo of attempting to sabotage the vote. International observers including the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the US, the European Union, and the United Nations, released a statement late on Monday, urging the political leadership "to put the country's interests first".

"International partners have repeatedly expressed growing concern over procedural irregularities and delays in the Somali electoral process," the statement said. — AFP

Russian court orders rights group Memorial to close

MOSCOW: Russia's Supreme Court on Tuesday ordered the closure of Memorial, the country's most prominent rights group, which chronicled Stalin-era purges and symbolised post-Soviet democratisation.

Judge Alla Nazarova ordered the closure of Memorial International, the organisation's central structure, and its regional branches for failing to mark all of its publications with a label of "foreign agent" as required by law.

The "foreign agent" legislation, which carries Stalin-era connotations, brands organisations

receiving funds from overseas as acting against Russia's interests.

"Disgrace! Disgrace!" some supporters shouted in court after the ruling.

Prosecutors also accused Memorial International of denigrating the memory of the Soviet Union and its victories and rehabilitating "Nazi criminals".

During Tuesday's hearing, a prosecutor said Memorial "creates a false image of the USSR as a terrorist state and denigrates the memory of World War II".

The court decision is the hardest blow yet to the organisation



Supporters of the human rights group International Memorial and journalists gather outside a court building after a hearing of the Russian Supreme Court to consider the closure of International Memorial in Moscow, on Tuesday. — Reuters

founded in 1989 by Soviet dissidents including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov.

Lawyer Maria Eismont said the shutdown was a "very bad sign" but added that Memorial would appeal and press ahead with its work.

"This is not the end," she told reporters.

TRAGEDY FOR RUSSIA

Dozens of supporters gathered outside the courthouse in freezing temperatures and several people were detained. After the ruling, police demanded that members of the public and journalists disperse.

Memorial is a loose structure of locally registered organisations, with Memorial International maintaining the network's extensive archives in Moscow and coordinating its work.

The group has spent years cataloguing atrocities committed in the Soviet Union, especially in the notorious network of prison camps, the Gulag. The move against Memorial caps a year that has seen authorities jail President Vladimir Putin's top critic Alexei Navalny, outlaw his organisations and crack down on independent media and rights groups. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

CAPE TOWN

Omicron could displace Delta: South Africa study

Research by South African scientists suggests that Omicron could displace the Delta variant of the coronavirus because infection with the new variant boosts immunity to the older one.

The study only covered a small group of people and has not been peer-reviewed, but it found that people who were infected with Omicron, especially those who were vaccinated, developed enhanced immunity to the Delta variant.



The analysis enrolled 33 vaccinated and unvaccinated people who were infected with the Omicron variant in South Africa.

KHARTOUM

Over 30 killed in Sudan gold mine collapse

At least 31 miners were killed and eight missing in Sudan on Tuesday when a rudimentary gold mine collapsed, a government official said.

The disaster occurred near Nuhud, a town about 500 kilometres west of Khartoum, said Khaled Dahwa, the head of the state-run Mineral Resources Company in West Kordofan.

"Thirty-one traditional miners were killed because of a mine collapsing," he said, adding one person survived and eight



others were still missing.

Another official at the company said four miners were killed at the same mine in January.

NEW YORK

Judge extends Maxwell deliberation hours

The judge in British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell's sex abuse trial said the jury would deliberate for at least one hour longer than usual if needed on Tuesday due to an "astronomical spike" in Covid-19 cases in the New York area.

"We now face a high and escalating risk that jurors and/or trial participants may need to quarantine," US District Judge Alison Nathan told prosecutors and defence attorneys outside the presence of the jury, which had begun deliberating again



on Tuesday morning. Maxwell, 60, is accused of recruiting and grooming four teenage girls to have sexual encounters with the late financier Jeffrey Epstein between 1994 and 2004.

Let us not become prey to propaganda

Why are Japanese considered as intelligent people? Why are the Chinese industrious and many of the countries dependent on them for manufacturing? Why do we think some cars are considered the best, even though others have better features? Is it just a public relations exercise or propaganda or plain truth?



Bader al Kiyumi
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Look no further than Edward Bernays, an American pioneer in the field of public relations and propaganda, who is known as ‘the father of public relations.’ He worked as a consultant to international companies and set down the principles that companies and governments have used to influence public attitudes over the past century. Propaganda aims to endear people to ideas and information emotionally. This is done through harmless systematic plans. But in many cases it brings unintended harm like wasting people’s money.

Is it possible to change our habits, opinions or increase the desirability of brands?

This reminds me of the words of Bernays who said: “If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without them knowing it.” In politics, for example, the domination of the media by individuals or groups, can influence minds and emotions.

It is important to know that there is a difference between advertising and propaganda. Advertising aims to win new customers and cement customer loyalty. Advertising tells you what to buy, while propaganda seeks to mislead people.

In that sense that propaganda uses emotion to reach the recipient to change his attitude and thought towards a particular topic.

Propaganda infiltrates our minds and misleads us without allowing us to think whether it is suitable or not. Globalisation has also bought in westernisation. Many societies have lost their identity and traditions like the crow who tried to imitate the pigeon in walking and finally became lame.

The social media influencers make their followers rush to buy one brand at the expense of another. They determine the sales of some products and make some dishes popular.

Changes and new ideas are inevitable. One must change opinion or spend money wisely after fair judgment without compromising social values.



VOICE AGAINST OPPRESSION

Israeli forces stand guard as Palestinian women react to the demolition of their home, located within the “Area C” of the occupied West Bank, where Israel retains full control over planning and construction, in the occupied West Bank town of Hebron, on Tuesday. – AFP

Set healthier living as 2022 goal



Samuel Kutty
@samkuttyvp

AFTER TWO YEARS OF UNPRECEDENTED PAIN AND STRAIN, TAKING RESOLUTIONS FOR THE NEW YEAR MAY BE MORE DIFFICULT THAN EVER BEFORE. AND THEY WILL LOOK A BIT DIFFERENT THAN THEY HAVE BEEN BEFORE

As the year 2021 winds to a close, many of us are reflecting on how our lives have been upended. As the Covid-19 scare continues to persist, we are facing physical and mental health challenges. And establishing a new rhythm has become very significant to keeping us afloat!

And when it comes to resolutions for 2022, the pandemic has made the practice feel more helpless.

Normally, a New Year resolution is a tradition in which a person decides to maintain good practices, change an undesired trait or behaviour, accomplish a personal goal, or otherwise improve their life at the start of the year.

After two years of unprecedented pain and strain, taking resolutions for the New Year may be more difficult than ever before. And they will look a bit different than they have been before.

If ambivalence happens at the best of our times, what about a time when we have no idea about what will transpire in the coming months? In fact, making a resolution and keeping it could greatly boost our sense of self-efficacy. It will enhance the trust in our ability to take action that will benefit us and the situation.

The virus has changed many of our daily routines in ways no one anticipated and that has become the new normal. We are all now struggling to figure out what happens next. It seems unfairly self-repudiating to hold ourselves to the same old standards as we once enjoyed.

So amid Covid-19 and its emerging variants and healthcare professionals predicting more cases in the coming weeks, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and protecting others has assumed more importance than ever.

The pandemic has also brought to fore the importance of relationships and connections with family and friends. It has also served as a visceral reminder that something unexpected can land in our well-envisioned path, halting all progress.

Personally, the year 2021 was the worst year for me. Sadly everything unexpectedly crashed and got blown out of proportion after my admission to the hospital following coronavirus infection. As I mentioned in my earlier write-ups, it was not the physical pain that I experienced but the worries and anxiety that my kith and kin had to undergo during those traumatic days are bad memories of the year.

My family members have not yet recovered from the mental anguish left by the virus. Tears flow when they talk about the pain and strain that they underwent during those dark days of my stay in the hospital.

My son still says, “The nightmares just won’t stop. I wake up every night shaking with intense fear. I wake up drenched in sweat.” It has come to a level that any mundane discussion remotely related to the virus sets off a series of alarming responses among them. It could take months or even years for them to come out of the stress even as I am on the path to steady physical recovery.

And I do feel incredibly blessed that I have survived. A survival made possible thanks to the concerted efforts by doctors, nurses, therapists and other medical personnel. Of course the prayers and support from you all made me win over the virus.

Coming back to the resolutions, approach them as your commitments with a dose of self-kindness. Taking any step towards healthier living and protecting others is something to celebrate — no matter how modest that step may be. We still have the power to make a difference in our lives.

What the US misunderstands about Russia



Nina L Khrushcheva

UNTIL THE WEST CHANGES ITS APPROACH, THE CYCLE OF CRISES WILL CONTINUE, WITH ESCALATING RISKS

With thousands of Russian troops now massed near Ukraine’s border, the announcement that Russia and the United States will soon hold security talks is undoubtedly welcome. While a de-escalation of tensions is hardly guaranteed, it is a lot harder to talk past someone who is in the same room.

Russia and the West have been doing just that for most of Vladimir Putin’s 21 years in power. Nowhere is the West’s consistent failure to understand Putin clearer than in American assessments of Russia’s Ukraine policy — especially the claim by senior US officials that Putin may be seeking to “reconstitute the Soviet Union” as part of a “legacy project.”

The late US diplomat and strategist George F Kennan would surely take a more nuanced view.

Kennan would argue that Russia’s behaviour is best explained by a “special-nation” mindset.

Echoing American exceptionalism, there is a sense among Russians that their country is a fundamentally great power with a pivotal historical role to play. According to a 2020 poll, 58 per cent of Russians support the country following its “own special path,” and a whopping 75 per cent think that the Soviet era was the “greatest time” in their country’s history.

Yet, crucially, only 28 per cent of respondents report wanting to “return to the path the Soviet Union was following.” In other words, what Russians want is not to revive the USSR, but rather to preserve their country’s status and influence, which means maintaining its sphere of

influence. The notion that the West could pursue an eastward expansion of Nato without pushback was always pure folly.

Kennan recognised this from the start. In 1998, when the US Senate ratified Nato’s expansion to Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, he predicted that Russia would “gradually react quite adversely,” and the West would claim that is just “how the Russians are.” Since then, Nato has expanded to 11 more ex-communist countries, including three former Soviet republics. And, sure enough, Putin is now demanding that Nato deny membership to former Soviet countries and scale back its military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe. To no one’s surprise, the US and its allies refused.

In fact, the West has consistently dismissed the Kremlin’s security concerns relating to ex-Soviet countries and portrayed Russian resistance to Nato’s eastward expansion as paranoid revanchism. No one is threatening Russia, the logic goes; it is Russia that is threatening its neighbours, including by invading Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

But the West cannot reasonably expect the Kremlin to accept at face value Nato’s claim that it is a purely defensive alliance. After all, since the end of the Cold War, Nato has edged closer and closer to Russia’s borders, embracing lands to which Russia is bound by history, geography and security interests.

That is not all the West is getting wrong about Russia.

Many in the US and Europe also seem convinced that the surge in nationalist sentiment that followed the annexation of Crimea has fizzled out for good.

Again, the reasons for this perception are easy to discern. When the fighting in eastern Ukraine became too bloody, Kremlin propagandists had to work overtime to bolster Putin’s approval ratings. And they only partly succeeded: over time, Russians grew weary of the militant rhetoric, and today, they have little appetite for war.

But this does not mean that Russians are willing to sacrifice their own perceived security. On the contrary, by ignoring Russians’ concerns about Nato, the US and Europe will bolster support for Putin.

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sport



Handball team gears up for Asian Championship

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 28

The Sultanate of Oman national handball team is gearing up to take part at the 20th edition of Men's Asian Handball championship in Saudi Arabia from January 18 to 31. The Asian event acts as a qualifier to the 2023 World Men's Handball Championship which will be held jointly in Poland and Sweden from January 11 to 29, 2023. The top five teams in the Asian tourney will secure spots in the World Championship. The team is currently in Iran for an overseas camp under the watchful eyes of the Algerian head coach Murad Bu Sabt. As part of the intensive preparatory programme, the team will play more preparatory games in the camp against Iran national team and local clubs. Two friendly matches ended in the last few days as the national team suffered a 29-33 loss against Asfahan club and another defeat from Dhobahan club by 26-27.



The camp will provide more opportunities for the players who did not take part in the previous friendlies and the coach will evaluate their technical performance

During the external camp, the coaching staff are working to finalise the kick off list ahead of the Asian championship. Also, the head coach Murad Bu Sabt and his assistant coach Nabil Al Balushi will

aim to test many players during the forthcoming preparatory fixtures. The camp will provide more opportunities for the players who did not take part in the previous friendlies and the coach will evaluate their technical performance. The team was supposed to take part in the GCC Games in Kuwait but the Gulf event was postponed from January to May due to the new Covid (Omicron) infection surges. The teams which will take part at the Men's Asian Handball championship in Saudi Arabia were divided into four groups and each group will feature four teams. The Sultanate of Oman placed in group C along with the defending champion Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Iraq. South Korea is placed in group A beside Kuwait, Jordan and Singapore. The hosts Saudi Arabia will play against Iran, Australia and India in group B. Group D is comprised of Japan, Bahrain, Hong Kong, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.



Mehran heroics help Ruwi, Jiten bowls Amerat to victory

SHAHZAD RAZA
MUSCAT, DEC 28

Oman all-rounder Mehran Khan picked up 3 for 34 and then struck two sixes in the 19th over to pave the way for Amerat Royals' nail-biting 4-wicket win over Bousher Busters in a D20 Cricket League clash at Oman Cricket Turf 1 in Al Amerat on Monday. Bousher's 164 for 5 saw a superb 78 not out by opener Abdul Rauf and a hard-hitting 40 off 20 by former the Sultanate of Oman star Adnan Ilyas but Mehran's three wickets helped Amerat to restrict them to a modest total. Amerat's chase was constructed brick by brick, without any major individual score. Prathik Athavale (25), Vinayak Shukla (21) and Twinkle Bhandari (34) laid the foundation for a close finish before Rafi Ullah (18 off 9) and Mehran (14 not out off 8) saw them home with 4 balls to spare.

Brief Scores (D20): Bousher Busters 164 for 5 in 20 overs (Abdul Rauf 78 – 10x4, 2x6, Adnan Sulehri 40 – 5x4, 2x6, Mehran Khan 3-34) lost to Amerat Royals 166 for 6 in 19.2 overs (Twinkel Bhandari 34 – 4x4, 1x6, Pratik Athavale 25 – 4x4, 1x6, Bilal Mohammad 2-15) by 4 wickets. Jitenkumar bowls Ruwi to victory In another D20 League game on Monday night, outstanding seam bowling by Jitenkumar Ramanandi, who claimed three wickets for only seven runs in his four-over spell, helped Ruwi Rangers to a thrilling 15-run victory against Khuwair Warriors. Ruwi failed to post a significant total on the board, getting bowled out for 123 in 18.1 overs due to brilliant bowling by Danish Mohammed who claimed 3 for 9 and Aqib Javed and Muzahir Raza who bagged two wickets each. Imran Ali (25) and Wasim Ali (25)



Mehran Khan of Ruwi Rangers

were Ruwi's main scorers. Khuwair's chase was derailed by Jitenkumar's superb spell. Hassnain Ali bowled well too, taking 3 for 24 whereas Muhammed Nadeem claimed 2 for 25. Zeeshan Siddiqui top scored with a fluent 40 off 28. Brief Scores (D20): Ruwi Rangers 123 all out in 18.1 overs (Imran Ali 25 – 1x4, 2x6, Wasim Ali 25 – 2x4, 2x6, Danish Mohammad 3-9, Aqib Javed 2-14, Muzahir Raza 2-22, Aamir Kaleem 2-24) beat Khuwair Warriors 108 all out in 18.4 overs (Zeeshan Siddiqui 40 – 5x4, 1x6, Jitenkumar Ramanandi 3-7, Hassnain Ali 3-24, Mohammed Nadeem 2-25) by 15 runs. Parthipan stars in Al Wadd win A magnificent unbeaten 85 off 58 by Parthipan Krishnan powered Al Waad Trading and Contracting to an exciting 4-wicket win over Nibrass Tech in a 20-over C Division League game at Muscat

Municipality Ground 1 in Al Amerat on Friday. Al Waad did well to restrict Nibrass to 157 for 8, Suseendran and Ratheesh taking three and two wickets respectively. Waqas Khalid was the main scorer with 37 off 29. Thanks to Parthipan's magnificent 85 and Aneesh Babu's vital 30 down the order, Al Waad sealed a hard-fought win in 19.2 overs. Waqas Khalid and Syed Ali Naqi took two wickets each. Brief Scores (C Division): Nibrass Tech 157 for 8 in 20 overs (Waqas Khalid 37 – 6x4, Suseendran Siraichezhian 3-24, Ratheesh Puliyakottu 2-21) lost to Al Waad Trad & Contracting Enterprises 159 for 6 in 19.2 overs (Parthipan Krishnan 85 – 9x4, 2x6, Aneesh Babu 30 – 3x4, Waqas Khalid 2-29, Syed Ali Naqi 2-30) by 4 wickets. Sunder hero of Ideal's victory Biji Sunder's excellent all-round

display was the highlight of Ideal Technology's 44-run victory against Mazoon Up in a D Division T20 League match at Muscat Municipality Ground 2. Ideal was able to post a sizeable 191 for 7 on the board thanks to Vijesh Vijayakumaran's 62 and Sunder's 57. Nihad Mohammed claimed 3 for 26. Mazoon struggled to keep pace with the rising net run rate and folded up for 147 in 18 overs, Faisal babu being its topscorer with 28. Sooraj Raj, Jeyakumar and Biji Sunder all bagged two wickets each. Brief Scores (D Division): Ideal Technology 191 for 7 in 20 overs (Vijesh Vijayakumaran 62 – 5x4, 2x6, Biji Sunder 57 – 7x4, Nihad Mohammed 3-26, Rinshad Kattussery 2-27) beat Mazoon UP 147 all out in 18 overs (Faisal Babu 28 – 5x4, Sooraj A Raj 2-22, Jeyakumar Esakkiappan 2-28, Biji Sunder 2-34) by 44 runs.



Cavani salvages point for Man United at Newcastle

NEWCASTLE: Substitute Edinson Cavani scored in the second half to help Manchester United salvage a 1-1 draw at struggling Newcastle United in the Premier League on Monday.

The result stretched Manchester United interim manager Ralf Rangnick's unbeaten start to four games in all competitions but the German will hardly be pleased by a toothless performance with goalkeeper David De Gea rescuing the visitors.

Cavani netted an opportunist 71st-minute equaliser after Allan

Saint-Maximin gave the home side a seventh-minute lead with a fine individual effort, side-stepping two markers before he fired past De Gea.

The result left United seventh in the standings on 28 points from 17 games, behind sixth-placed West Ham on goal difference. Newcastle stayed 19th on 11 points from 19 matches.

Saint-Maximin, who tormented United's shaky defence all evening, beat De Gea with an off-balance shot as he weaved his way into the penalty area.

The visiting goalkeeper kept a lethargic Manchester United afloat with an array of good saves as Newcastle always looked dangerous on the break, with home striker Callum Wilson having a goal ruled out for offside in the 38th minute.

Saint-Maximin spurned a sitter early in the second half with a scuffed shot from five metres and De Gea made two stops in quick succession, keeping out the Frenchman's low drive before he blocked Jacob Murphy's close-range effort.

The home side were punished for their misses as Cavani squeezed a snap shot past keeper Martin Dubravka at the second attempt following a Diogo Dalot cross from the right. United barely survived a late Newcastle onslaught as Murphy hit the post and De Gea clawed Miguel Almiron's shot on the rebound out of the top corner.

Newcastle have now won only one of their eight games under manager Eddie Howe, although they did end a three-game losing streak. — **Reuters**

Spurs look strong after Palace defeat

ANDY JALIL
LONDON, DEC 28

Tottenham Hotspur underlined the rapid progress they are making under the new coach Antonio Conte after their two goals in a space of two minutes set up a 3-0 win against Crystal Palace. They are now unbeaten in six consecutive games, which include four victories, since the arrival of Conte and have speedily moved up the Premier League table to put pressure on the race for a top four finish.

Conte said: "I'm very pleased all three of our strikers scored but they have to say thank you to the rest of the team. We have to continue to improve. We know we have a big job to do. It's good to get three points, to score with your three strikers and keep a clean sheet. But we know we have to work very hard to improve. We could have scored more but there were a lot of positives."

Speaking about Spurs' leading striker, Harry Kane, Conte said: "I always say we are talking about a top-class striker and a player that for us is very important. Today I had the possibility to give him a bit of rest and for him to play only 60 minutes for us was important. Kane is a player it is very difficult to decide to put in a rotation."



minute.

Thereafter, spurs had much the better of the game and opened the scoring in the 32nd minute when Lucas Moura, who had missed a chance to score in the 25th minute, putting his header wide, outpaced the Palace defence to send a perfect cross for Kane to take a shot on the run.

Two minutes later, 5ft 7in tall Moura added the second when he met an excellent cross from Emerson Royal, outjumping 6ft 4in Joachim Anderson and heading powerfully into the net. With Zaha shown the red card, three minutes later — he had earlier been given the yellow card for a foul on the same player — Palace were clearly disadvantaged with Spurs gaining more control of the game.

They put the result beyond doubt in the 74h minute with Moura crossing perfectly for Son Heung-Min to flick a first-time shot past the Palace goalkeeper. The visitors were without their manager Patrick Viera who tested positive for Covid-19 along with several players and their request for a match postponement had been refused as, according to the rules, they still had 14 fit players in the squad.

Assistant coach, Osian Robert said: "It is difficult at the moment because of the situation and all the uncertainty. I don't know how many players we have with Covid or returning from Covid. But we are professional people, we have to adapt at short notice and prepare the best we can."

Mbappe, Lewandowski say quality will suffer with biennial World Cups

PARIS: France forward Kylian Mbappe and Polish striker Robert Lewandowski expressed their reservations about a biennial World Cup, saying quality would take a hit if overworked players are forced to play the tournament every two years.

The idea of a World Cup every two years has been gathering steam with Fifa President Gianni Infantino trying to get support from national federations, saying the switch would create an extra \$4.4 billion in revenues for the world body.

However, the proposal has been met with staunch opposition from UEFA and CONMEBOL, the governing bodies of Europe and South America, respectively,



with UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin threatening to boycott any additional tournament.

"I'm nobody to say if it's a good or bad idea, but my opinion is the World Cup is the World Cup — it's a special thing because it's something (held) every four years," 2018 World Cup winner Mbappe said at the Globe Soccer Awards on Monday. — **Reuters**

South Korea to face Iceland, Moldova in warm-ups for World Cup qualifiers

SEOUL: South Korea will play Iceland and Moldova in friendly matches in Turkey next month as tune-ups for World Cup qualifiers against Lebanon and Syria, the Korea Football Association said on Tuesday.

Head coach Paulo Bento has selected a 26-man squad for the camp featuring mainly domestic-based players, with goalkeeper Kim Seung-gyu, who plays for

Japan's Kashiwa Reysol, the only member of the squad based outside Korea.

The squad also features six uncapped players.

The Koreans play Iceland on January 15 in Antalya before facing Moldova six days later. The games fall outside Fifa-sanctioned international dates and Bento has not called up Europe-based players such as Tottenham

Hotspur's Son Heung-min.

The Koreans play Lebanon on January 27 and Syria on February 1 in the third round of Asian qualifying for Qatar 2022. South Korea, who have appeared at every World Cup since 1986, are second in Group A of Asia's preliminaries, two points behind Iran.

The top two in each group qualify automatically for the finals in Qatar. — **Reuters**



Chess tourney to begin on Friday

MUSCAT: Panaroma mall will host a rapid chess tournament on Friday in the open and junior categories under strict Covid protocols. The rounds will start at 1:15pm while reporting time is at 12:45. The organizing committee arranged an attractive cash prizes which will be given for the top winners. Entries may please be sent through contact 71549460.

Recovering Thiem to skip Australian Open

MELBOURNE: Dominic Thiem has pulled out of next month's Australian Open to work towards regaining full fitness after a long-standing wrist injury, the former world number three said on Tuesday.

The 28-year-old Austrian, who has not played since suffering the injury at the Mallorca Open in June, was unable to defend his US Open title this year.

He had earlier withdrawn from the team-based ATP Cup, which starts on Saturday in Sydney, and other warmup events ahead of the hardcourt major at Melbourne Park.

"I am now feeling well again, my wrist is in optimal condition and I am practicing normally with a very good intensity," Thiem said on Twitter.

"After the short holidays, my team and I have assessed all matters and we have decided to make some changes to my initial tournament schedule."

Thiem, who has slipped to 15th in the rankings, reached

the final at Melbourne Park last year before winning his maiden major title at Flushing Meadows.

He opted against playing five-set matches on his return to competition at the Australian Open, deciding to start his 2022 season in South America at the Cordoba Open in Argentina at the end of January.

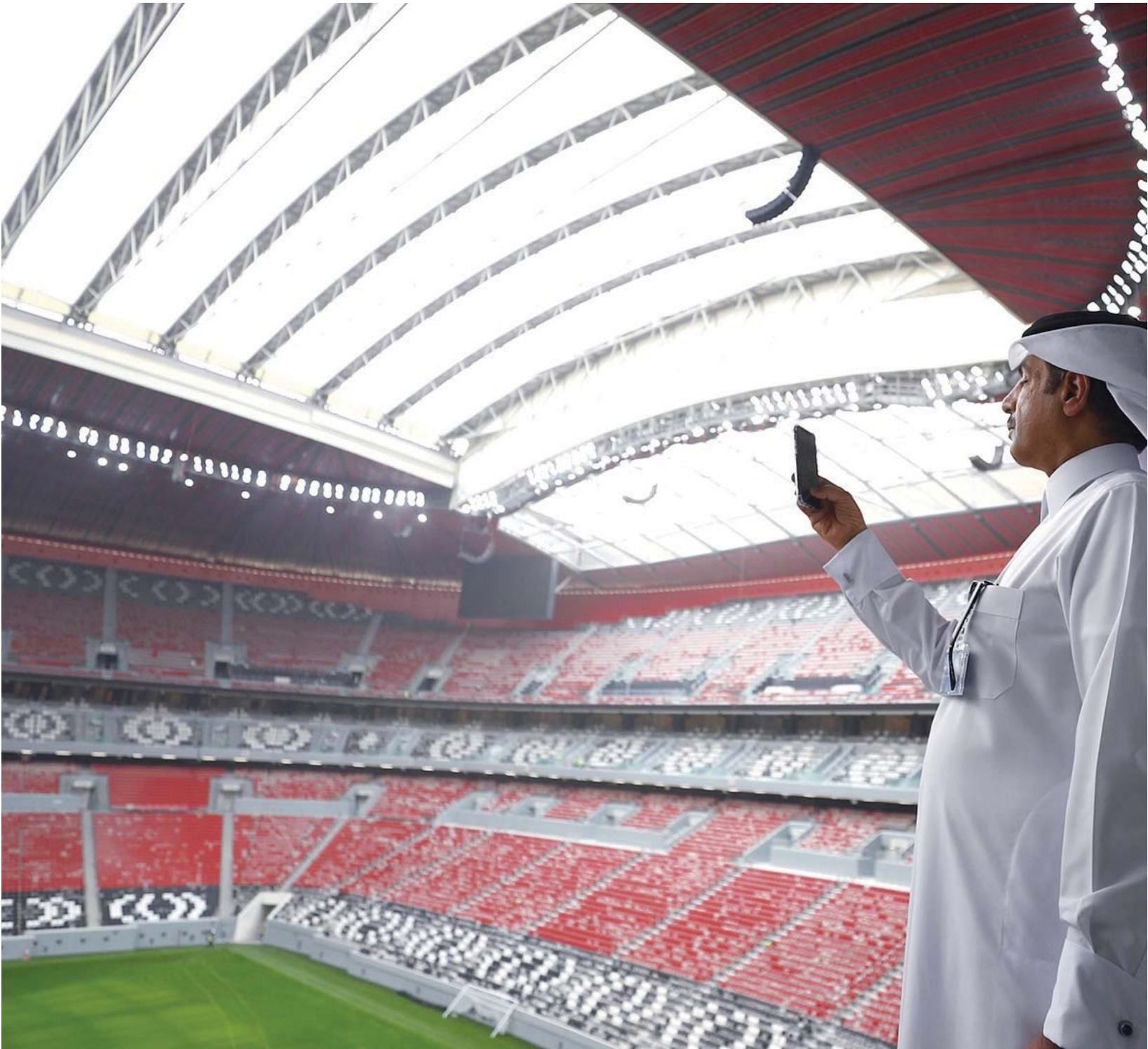
"I will miss the Australian fans, but I will be back (there) in 2023," Thiem added.

"We believe this is the right decision in order to have a good return to competition. For the moment I will remain in Austria for a few more days and then head to practice outdoors and get ready for my first event of the season."

Thiem became the latest top player to pull out of the Grand Slam due to injury after Roger Federer, Milos Raonic, Jennifer Brady, Karolina Pliskova, Serena Williams and Bianca Andreescu.

The first major of 2022 is due to start on Jan. 17.

— Reuters



Beijing's Winter Olympics to Qatar World Cup: Sporting key events in 2022

PARIS: Winter Olympics in Beijing and Fifa World Cup in Qatar are top sporting events to mark the coming year.

BEIJING'S WINTER OLYMPICS

Beijing stages the Winter Olympics from February 4 to 20 under some of the strictest rules for a mass sporting event since the pandemic began. Everybody

attending, including athletes, must be fully vaccinated or face a 21-day quarantine and will be kept in a "closed-loop" bubble from the moment they set foot in the Chinese capital.

Unlike the Tokyo Olympics, there will be spectators but ticket sales are restricted to people living in China.

Activists are calling for a diplomatic boycott over China's

rights record, with an outcry over the fate of tennis star Peng Shuai, who accused a top Communist Party politician of sexual assault, causing Beijing more headaches.

WORLD CUP

Qatar will host the first World Cup in the Middle East, hoping to confound critics who question holding football's showcase in the Gulf state.

The tournament in November and December will be the first played in the northern hemisphere's winter months, after a switch to avoid Qatar's searing summer.

The tournament will be fought out in eight venues from November 21, with the final in the 80,000-seat Lusail Stadium on December 18.

— AFP

Morant's last-second layup lifts Grizzlies over NBA Suns

WASHINGTON: Memphis guard Ja Morant scored the last of his 33 points on a driving layup with a half-second remaining to lift the Grizzlies over host Phoenix 114-113 on Monday.

Desmond Bane added a career-high 32 points with six 3-pointers for the Grizzlies (21-14), who also got 13 points and 16 rebounds from New Zealand center Steven Adams in preventing the Suns from matching Golden State for the overall NBA lead.

"I'm glad everybody is able to see what we're capable of and what we can do against some really good teams in this league," Morant said.

The Suns, trailing 60-48 at half-time and 89-75 entering the fourth quarter, fought back and seized a one-point lead on Devin Booker's 3-pointer with five seconds remaining, setting the stage for Morant's last-second heroics.

"I was supposed to fake the

handoff and go get a bucket and that's what I did," Morant said.

It marked the first time in team history both Grizzlies starting guards scored 30 or more points in the same game.

"That last play Ja had, got that layup, that's something we've run a couple times but the execution was great," Memphis coach Taylor Jenkins said.

"Credit our guys for playing the full 48 minutes. We just found a way to win a really good game against a really good team."

Phoenix, led by Booker's 30 points, fell to 26-7, sliding one game behind the Warriors (27-6) for the Western Conference lead.

Brooklyn's James Harden scored 39 points, added 15 assists and pulled down eight rebounds to spark the Eastern Conference-leading Nets to a 124-108 victory at the Los Angeles Clippers.

With star teammates Kevin



Durant, the NBA scoring leader, and Kyrie Irving in the NBA Covid-19 safety protocols, Harden seized command to lift Brooklyn to 22-9 overall.

Australian guard Patty Mills and Nic Claxton each added 18 for the Nets. Marcus Morris scored 24 to lead the Clippers.

BULLS ROLL IN ATLANTA

Chicago's DeMar DeRozan scored 35 points, going 14-of-20 from the floor, and passed off 10 assists while Zach LaVine added 30 points and nine assists to power the Bulls to a 130-118 victory in Atlanta.

The Hawks rallied within 116-112 before Chicago delivered a 14-4 run to seal a victory over an Atlanta squad that had 10 players in NBA Covid-19 health and safety protocols.

The Bulls won their fourth game in a row and eighth in 10 starts, improving to 21-10 and second in

the Eastern Conference.

"It felt good," Bulls center Nikola Vucevic said. "As soon as our defence picked up, our offense was able to stay solid. We all did a great job and picked up a big win."

The Montenegrin big man contributed 24 points, 17 rebounds, six assists, four blocked shots and a steal.

"Bring energy. Bring toughness. Follow the game plan," Vucevic said of his goals. "Just try and do the best I can."

Cam Reddish scored 33 points and Trae Young added 29 to lead the Hawks.

Minnesota reserve Jaylen Nowell scored 29 points and Nathan Knight added 20 points and 11 rebounds to lead the Timberwolves over the visiting Boston Celtics 108-103. Jaylen Brown led Boston with 26 points while Payton Pritchard added 23.

— AFP

business

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making life easy

Oman oil price rises \$2.85/barrel



MUSCAT: Oman oil price (February delivery 2022) yesterday reached \$76.45 per barrel, comprising an increase by \$2.85 from the price on Monday, which was \$73.60.

The average price of Oman oil (December delivery 2021) has stabilised at \$81.58, thus \$8.80 per barrel higher than November delivery 2021.

OIL NEARS \$80/BARREL

Meanwhile, oil prices extended gains on Tuesday, with Brent crude trading near \$80 a barrel despite the rapid spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant, supported by supply outages and expectations that US inventories fell last week.

Brent crude rose by \$1.04, or 1.3 per cent, to \$79.64 a barrel by 1119 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude rose \$1.15, or 1.5 per cent, to \$76.72.

“Support comes as well from high aggregated production disruptions in Ecuador, Libya and Nigeria and the expectation of another large drop in US crude inventories,” said UBS oil analyst Giovanni Staunovo.

The three oil producers declared force majeure this month on part of their oil production because of maintenance issues and oilfield shutdowns.

A preliminary poll showed on Monday that US crude oil inventories are likely to have dropped for the fifth week in a row, while gasoline inventories were seen mostly unchanged last week.

Investors are awaiting an Opec+ meeting on January 4, at which the alliance will decide whether to go ahead with a planned production increase of 400,000 barrels per day in February.

At its last meeting, Opec+ stuck to its plans to boost output for January despite Omicron. Money managers raised their net long US crude futures and options positions in the week to December 21, the US Commodity Futures Trading Commission said.

The speculator group raised its combined futures and options position in New York and London by 4,634 contracts to 259,093 during the period.

— Reuters

MDO announces strategic partnership with Synergies Casting Oman

COOPERATIVE PACT: Mining sector flagship acquires 14.8 per cent stake in new alloy wheel manufacturing firm

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 28

Minerals Development Oman (MDO), an affiliate of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), has established a strategic partnership with Synergies Casting Oman (SCO), which is set to start commercial operation of its alloy wheel manufacturing plant in Suhar Industrial Estate in Q1 2022. As part of the partnership, MDO is acquiring a 14.8-per cent stake in Synergies Casting.

Set up with an investment of RO 42 million, the Suhar plant has a capacity to produce 1.2 million tonnes of alloy wheels.

It is the first plant of its kind in the Sultanate of Oman that makes high-end aluminium alloy wheels for automobiles.

The project’s shareholders also include Oman Development Fund, Synergies Casting India, Sultan’s Special Force Pension Fund, Al Jeel Al Saeid for Business, and Sohar International Bank.



As part of the shareholding agreement, MDO hired 100 Omanis in a number of technical and administrative jobs within Synergies Casting, thereby increasing the Omanisation to 58 per cent. SOC is also targeting even higher Omanisation rates that will be achieved in the future.

MDO’s CEO, Eng Nasser al Maqbali, said: “This is an

important milestone that MDO is closing the year 2021 with. Recruiting Omani talent, as well as boosting the Omanisation rates in SCO is an achievement that we are proud of.

“This project is an essential element within MDO’s vision to promote the Oman mining sector.” He added: “Alloy wheels as an alternative to the traditional

steel wheels is a trend towards the future due to its lightness, strength, attractive designs and environmental friendliness.

“This acquisition will enhance the company’s ability to attract foreign investments by building commercial relationships with automobile manufacturers around the world in order to deliver sustainable In-Country Value.”

Eng Ahmed al Mazrouei, Executive Director of SCO, said: “We are pleased to welcome MDO as a partner in this leading project as it represents a valuable addition to our expansion plans.” Globally, alloy wheel demand is estimated to increase from 219 million wheels in 2015 to 296 million wheels in 2023, rising to 326 million wheels in 2028.

Rwanda joins Sultanate of Oman in Digital Cooperation Organization

EXPANDING ROLE: Riyadh-headquartered DCO has welcomed Rwanda as eighth member state country of the organisation, following the Sultanate of Oman’s leadership as a founding member of the multilateral organisation, bringing the total member state populations to more than half a billion people

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 28

The Digital Cooperation Organization (DCO) has announced the further expansion of its membership by welcoming the Republic of Rwanda as a member state.

The announcement follows the



Sultanate of Oman’s leadership in joining the DCO as a founding member state in November 2020, and a visit by the Secretary-General Deemah al Yahya to the Sultanate of Oman in October. The DCO, a multilateral organisation dedicated to enabling a globally inclusive digital economy, now represents more than half a billion people globally following its establishment in November 2020.

In announcing the Republic of Rwanda’s accession to the DCO as the eighth founding member,

Secretary-General Deemah al Yahya said: “The Digital Cooperation Organization is now enabling more than half a billion people across member states to connect with and prosper in the digital economy, particularly underrepresented groups such as women and young people. All of our member states should be proud of the impact we have achieved in the year since the DCO’s establishment.”

“I am thrilled to welcome the Republic of Rwanda as a member state of the DCO and commend

Rwanda’s leadership in this area. Rwanda will further strengthen our organisation’s impact in creating a more inclusive global digital economy, particularly as we expand our reach across Africa. We are committed to supporting leaders and communities across Rwanda, whether large or small, public or private, in our efforts to enable digital prosperity for all.”

The announcement builds on the DCO’s significant progress achieved since its foundational year. DCO has built its membership to eight member states representing more than half a billion people, and confirmed five global initiatives to support policy makers, youth, women and entrepreneurs.

The DCO’s current membership includes: Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Nigeria, the Sultanate of Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Rwanda.

China tightens rules on overseas listings



A trader works during the IPO for Didi Global Inc on the New York Stock Exchange floor in New York City. — Reuters

BEIJING: Beijing has tightened the rules on overseas listings by Chinese firms in a series of new regulations that increase scrutiny of companies seeking to raise funds on foreign stock markets.

China has stepped up scrutiny of major overseas listings after a controversial New York IPO by ride-hailing giant Didi Chuxing went ahead this year.

Authorities said companies in industries where foreign investment is banned will have to seek approval from authorities for an overseas debut. — Reuters

Visa awards BankDhofar, Thawani for launch of first digital Visa card

MUSCAT: BankDhofar and Thawani have recently been awarded by Visa, in recognition of the Thawani Mojab Visa card which was launched earlier this year, the First Digital Visa Card of its kind in the Sultanate of Onan.

The highly secure Mojab card is connected to Thawani's virtual wallet and it does not include any bank-related information like card number or CVV code or expiry date. This enables the consumers to perform their payment transactions at ease and with the highest safety measures.

The award was presented to BankDhofar and Thawani at BankDhofar's head office and was received on behalf of BankDhfoar by CEO Abdulhakeem bin Omar al Ojaili, in the presence of official representatives from BankDhofar and Thawani.

Abdulhakeem bin Omar al Ojaili, CEO at BankDhofar said: "We have always been at the forefront in providing state-of-the-art services and cutting-edge financial solutions. We are proud



of our partnership with Thawani that goes in tandem with our digital transformation vision.

The Mojab Visa Card is one of the successful initiatives that has been jointly developed to provide a new payment concept for customers. We are glad to see our efforts recognised today by Visa, and we look forward to providing further convenient and innovative solutions."

"At BankDhofar, we are always adopting advanced technology to provide innovative services catering to the varying needs of our customers and partners. We have collaborated with Thawani and together we created the smartest card experience that's ever been offered to customers. The first of its kind Visa digital card in the Sultanate, will reshape the payment industry. We are glad

to receive the recognition from Visa, and our team is exerting further efforts to design more advanced digital financial services and solutions," Abu Baker Karim al Balushi, Head of Digital Banking, added.

Pre the launch of the card, Thawani Technologies was licensed by the Central Bank of Oman as a payment solutions provider.

Bank Muscat's Floosi account a suitable choice for youth

MUSCAT: In line with its vision "To serve you better, everyday" and its commitment to improving financial inclusion across the Sultanate of Oman, Floosi account from Bank Muscat which is designed to youth in the 15-17 age group, offers a suite of benefits and offers to customers.

This account is one of its kind in the Sultanate as it was designed to work well with this age group's financial needs and raise their awareness in the importance of learning personal finance skills. It can help youth as well to start saving and planning for the future.

The bank launched this product in line with its commitment to improving financial inclusion across the Sultanate after extensive market research in response to customer feedback.

This account is designed to give youth the chance to depend on themselves and enjoy certain benefits like ATM withdrawals



and e-commerce transactions. It is highly popular with both Omanis and expatriates.

The Floosi account helps young people to make savings a regular habit in their lives.

The Floosi debit card comes with a daily limit of RO 50 per transaction and a monthly cumulative limit of RO 200 for Point of Sale (PoS). Youth in the 15-17 year age group may apply for a Floosi account by visiting their nearest branch along with their parent (or legal guardian) and submitting their application and copies of important documents like their National ID card (for Omanis) or Resident Card and Passport (for expatriates).

OCEC set to organise and host Oman Perfume Show 2022

MUSCAT: From February 1-5, 2022, Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre will organise and host Oman Perfume Show 2022 - which promises to be a spectacular showcase and celebration of fine perfumes, fragrances and frankincense.

The show will bring together over 100 local, regional and international perfume brands and fragrance houses all under one roof at the Sultanate of Oman's premier events venue in the heart of Muscat - the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC).

Over five days, Oman Perfume Show 2022 will offer an estimated 5,000 visitors the opportunity to indulge in and sample an array of exquisite fragrances, perfumes, frankincense, and other luxury



aromatic products.

Said al Shanfari, CEO - OCEC, stated, "We are delighted to welcome the luxury fragrance world through our doors over five days in February 2022. As a country, the Sultanate of Oman is held in high esteem as one of the world's 'fragrance capitals' and Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre is perfectly

positioned - both in terms of location, and expertise in organising and hosting events of this nature - to deliver a truly exceptional Oman Perfume Show 2022 for all visitors and guests, as well as exhibitors and sponsors. We hope you are as excited about celebrating the finest perfumes, fragrances and frankincense as we are."

COCHIN GOLD & DIAMONDS OPENS NEW OUTLET IN OMAN AVENUES MALL



MUSCAT: Cochin Gold & Diamonds has opened their fourth outlet at the Oman Avenues Mall on December 24, 2021. The event was attended by Managing Director Jagajith Prabhakaran, Director Hamed bin Ibrahim bin Ali al Wahaibi, Director Ahmed bin Mubarak bin Khalfan al Jabri and Director Nima Sushi. The showroom was officially inaugurated by Hamed bin Ibrahim bin Ali al Wahaibi. "As a part of the grand opening, we will provide our customers with special offers such as no making charges, buy 1 get 1 diamond jewellery, 25 per cent off gold making charges, free 1 gramme gold coin on RO 200 worth diamond purchase and a free Apple device with diamond purchase above RO 1,000" said Managing Director Jagajith Prabhakaran.

Test-drive the GAC Motor GS8 and win exciting prizes

MUSCAT: GAC Motor fans can now look at winning with their favourite brand by walking-in and getting a chance to win exciting prizes, like 1 iPhone 13 Pro 128 GB and 4 Redmi Note 10 S 128 GB phones.

Besides this, customers owning any of the GAC Motor vehicle can benefit with 5 years / 150,000 kms manufacturer's warranty, comprehensive 1 year insurance (Oman coverage), assured service 10 years/100,000 kms on GA8 & GN8 models, 4 years /40,000 kms on GS3, GS4 & GA4 models and 3 years /30,000 kms on GS8 model and 3M window tint (For 21 & 22 YM Models).

The campaign is valid until February 3, 2022 (Conditions apply. The offer is presently valid only in Muscat Governorate and Nizwa. For more details, please

visit any GAC Motor showroom).

Giving you the lead in the GS8 on every journey is the powerful 2-liter turbo engine that is capable of producing 198 HP and 320 Nm of torque. The engine is made more efficient by its pairing to a six-speed automatic transmission.

The GS8's design is attractive and instantly recognisable. Right from the front grille to the headlamps, all the way to the alloy wheels and the tail lamps, the GS8 draws all eyes making it one of the most admired vehicles in its category.

It is equipped with 19" alloy wheels, LED high mounted brake light, shark fin antenna and roof rails. Overall, the exterior design of the GS8 is one of its very strong points. Moving to the interior, the GS8 is warm and welcoming owing to its



leather seats.

Also, a look around will reveal ample space which offers good comfort for all occupants. The leather seats spell luxury all over. All of the seats provide utmost comfort and convenience.

The driver's seat is 6-way Power Adjustable, while front passenger seat is 4-way, and both of them are

heated and ventilated.

For the second row the seats are equipped with 60:40 split and sliding configuration, while the third row has a 50:50 Split and fold flat. For additional cargo space, the GS8's supersized flat-bottom trunk offers huge amount of space—a perfect feature for families taking on adventures.

Adding to the joyous experiences on every journey, the GS8 is filled with features that provide nothing less. It's equipped with three-zone climate control air conditioning, central control door lock system, and power sunroof with jam protection, among other features.

For in-cabin entertainment, the GS8 is equipped with an advanced infotainment system, with a 10-inch colour touch screen display system with Apple CarPlay, that is also available with Bluetooth and USB connectivity.

Besides this, the GS8 is also equipped with a metre-cluster with 7-inch trip computer, 6 speakers, speed-based volume control, front and rear parking sensors, Surround View Parking Camera, Cruise Control and more. Playing a very impressive role at

providing all round safety is an array of active and passive safety features. They include dual front/ front side/side curtain airbags, electronic stability programme, hill-start hold control, tyre pressure monitoring system, Hill Descent Control, impact sensing door unlock, lane change assist, and more.

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Russian gas supplies to Europe under scrutiny

BERLIN: With the arrival of winter in Europe and energy prices soaring, tensions are running high over the provision of gas from Russia — especially through the Yamal-Europe pipeline that runs through Poland and Belarus.

But the Yamal pipeline is just one part of a complex gas infrastructure network shaped not only by energy needs, but also wider economic interests and politics, including strife between Russia and Ukraine.

The pipeline, opened in 1994, runs over 2,000 kilometres to Germany from the city of Torjok in central Russia, transiting through Belarus and Poland.

It delivers 30 billion cubic metres of gas to Europe each year, making it one of the most important vehicles for the provision of Russian gas to the continent. Russia sells Germany gas at a cheaper rate than it does to Poland, in part to make up for the higher transit fees through the longer delivery distance.

But this means that it is more cost efficient for Poland to buy Russian gas from Germany. Some of the gas sold by German traders to Poland flows directly into Polish territory, or if that is not sufficient, the pipeline can also operate in reverse to send more to Germany's eastern neighbour.

Since December 21, the pipeline has been operating in reverse, with gas flowing



A man rides his bicycle near a symbolic monument, a section of a gas pipeline Yamal-Europe in Slonim, Belarus. — Reuters

east back into Poland from the German border, according to data from management company Gascade.

This means that over the last days, Germany itself has not been receiving gas via Yamal.

Meanwhile, Russian gas continues to flow to Europe through other major pipelines such as Nord Stream 1 and TurkStream. It is not unusual for the Yamal pipeline to operate in reverse for short periods, but this latest about-turn comes against a backdrop of political tension

over fears that Russia may invade Ukraine.

In Germany, the government has said that in the event of any “escalation”, it will put the brakes on another gas pipeline, Nord Stream 2, which is still awaiting the green light from the authorities. Some European states, such as Poland and Ukraine, have accused Moscow and Russian energy company Gazprom of cutting gas supplies to Europe to exert political pressure over these tensions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the change in gas

flow through the Yamal pipeline is purely down to fluctuating orders and denied of any political motive. Gazprom, for its part, has called accusations that it is failing to deliver enough gas to Europe “absolutely groundless and unacceptable” and blamed Germany for dipping into its reserves to supply neighbouring Poland.

Berlin denied any intervention on its part. “It is not the government that decides on gas flows, but the market, the traders,” the economy and climate ministry said.

According to George Zachmann, a specialist in energy issues for the Brussels-based Bruegel think tank, Gazprom may also be “favouring its own pipelines” over those it does not 100 per cent control, such as the Yamal pipeline.

A spokeswoman for the German economy and climate ministry said that “security of supply is still guaranteed”. But Berlin, which has “relatively low” gas reserves with its tanks just 53 per cent full, could soon have “difficulties”, according to Christophe Bonnery, president

The change in gas flow through the Yamal pipeline is purely down to fluctuating orders and denied of any political motive

VLADIMIR PUTIN
Russian President

of the Association of Energy Economists.

“If contracts are adhered to there will be no problems until at least March,” said Zachmann. But “if Russia cannot or will not deliver gas for technical or other reasons, then supplies could fall short.”

The wrangling comes amid an explosion in gas prices, which are up to seven times higher than at the beginning of the year.

The surge is thought to be partly down to a particularly cold winter and an increase in activity linked to the post-coronavirus economic recovery.

With 40 per cent of gas consumed in Europe coming from Russia, Moscow is suspected of taking advantage of the tensions on the world market to reduce supply and drive up prices. The International Energy Agency in September called on Russia to be a “reliable supplier” and send more gas to Europe. — AFP

2021 was a mindboggling year for equities



PETER GARNRY

As investors are getting ready to close their books for the year it is always worthwhile reflecting on the year that has just passed. If we told you that S&P 500 would be up 28 per cent and MSCI World up 21 per cent for the year as the US core inflation hit almost 5 per cent, the highest since the early 1980s, then you would not have believed it.

The key to understand why equities are higher despite inflationary pressures are rooted in the bond market's reaction to rising inflation.

The bond market sided with the Fed perceiving inflation to be transitory, but even as the Fed has terminated this language and said inflation is more deep rooted and persistent than initially thought, the bond market keep predicting inflation to remain low.

This is based on the high debt-to-income levels in many parts of the world, ageing populations, and technology advancements all suppressing inflationary forces longer term.

The stubbornly low nominal yields while realised and expected inflation are rising have caused a

massive downward pressure on real yields, which sets in motion a sizeable reallocation into equities.

Why would you invest in bonds when your capital is being destroyed in real terms? You might as well swing for equities despite historically high prices and valuation because maybe you can at least defend capital against the corrosive inflation.

In other words, TINA (there is no alternative) is still very much alive in financial markets as 2022 approaches, because as John Maynard Keynes and Warren Buffett both have observed but in different context, inflation is the enemy of the capitalistic economy and investors.

PROFIT BONANZA

While low nominal yields have played their part in the equity rally this year through their impact on the cost of capital which is used for discounting future free cash flows, investors should not ignore the fact that earnings in the MSCI World Index are up 104 per cent for the first three quarters of 2021 compared to the same period of 2020.

For those who think that this is just the rebound effect should note that earnings in the first three

quarters of 2021 are up 28 per cent compared to the same period of 2019.

In other words, the earnings power of companies coming out of the pandemic has been extraordinary and driven by the enormous loose monetary and fiscal stimulus operating on a combined level not seen since the post WWII years.

The deficits across many of the world's largest economies have created a corresponding surge in private sector surplus.

The irony of high profits and stellar equity returns in 2021, is that 2022 might go “wrong” for equities due to inflation outlook as a reaction in the bond market of 100 basis point in the long end of the US yield curve (10-year Treasuries) could push down equities regardless of earnings growth.

We have recent estimated growth stocks such as Pinterest and Adobe to have interest rate sensitivity of 18 per cent and 26 per cent which means that is negative impact on their equity valuation from a 100-basis point move in the US 10-year yield holding all other things constant.

The overall US equity market

probably has an equity duration around 15-18 per cent which means that simply higher nominal yields could offset earnings growth next year.

The chart below is from our recent equity research note Interest rate sensitivity is back in town haunting technology stocks showing how NASDAQ 100 and STOXX 600 are moving in opposite directions to large changes in the US 10-year yield.

US technology stocks have a negative excess return compared global equities on days when long-term yields are increasing while European equities exhibit positive excess returns as they have a larger weight on financials, energy and mining.

We still think investors should continue to rebalance their equity portfolios towards being better at absorbing higher interest rates and inflation in 2022. This includes adding exposure to the commodity sector, financials, semiconductors, logistics, and financial trading firms which benefit from higher volatility and can also work as a hedge against tail losses in equity portfolios.

GREEN TRANSFORMATION

Our green transformation

basket is down 6 per cent this year giving up some of its massive gains from 2020 when investors poured capital into this theme. Driven by a major breakthrough year for electric vehicles production next year, the green transformation trade will come back with a vengeance.

The green transformation in terms of electric vehicles, solar, wind, energy storage, hydrogen production will continue due to put upward pressure on many key metals and long-term we believe the green transformation will add significantly to the long-term inflation rate.

China was on the defensive this year being oddly out of sync with the rest of the world.

The housing crisis is causing a negative impact on the economy, credit markets and consumer confidence. While the industry needs a solution, it has to be balanced against the “common prosperity” narrative and we are already seeing signs that the government and central bank are beginning to mitigate the impact on the economy.

Public stimulus will come back in 2022, but the looming question is where profitability goes from here as the technology crackdown and other reforms such as the new data privacy law are having an impact with analysts constantly lowering their estimates for growth. We do not have a firm view on where Chinese equities go next, except for our bullish view on consumer goods businesses as they are not intrinsically data-driven. *(The author is Head of Equity Strategy at Saxo Bank)*

Japan's factory output soars as car production returns



Employees work on the automobile assembly line at a car factory in Kawasaki. — Reuters

TOKYO: Japan's factory output jumped at the fastest pace on record in November, as easing global supply chain bottlenecks helped car production leap out of its recent slump, lifting prospects for a strong fourth-quarter economic rebound.

Factory production gained 7.2 per cent in November from the previous month, posting its largest jump since 2013 when comparable data first became available, thanks to rising output of motor vehicles and plastic products.

That meant production rose for the second straight month after increasing 1.8 per cent in October and posted a faster rise than the 4.8 per cent gain expected in a poll.

“Output recovered to where it was previously because car production rebounded,” said Takeshi Minami, chief economist at Norinchukin Research Institute. “But seen from a global perspective, supply bottlenecks and especially the chip shortage are likely to be prolonged so that will slow down the recovery pace of output.” — Reuters



Re-engineering project begins: Germany

Germany is turning over a new leaf. Its new chancellor, Olaf Scholz, wants a greener and more digital economy, and so do corporate titans like Volkswagen and Siemens. Their combined efforts will launch a complete revamp of Europe's biggest economy. Failure to do so would spell decline for German companies and jobs losses for their workers, but the task is a mammoth one. The country is more dependent on making things and shipping them abroad than other major European economies.

Exports of goods account for more than a third of its GDP, twice the proportion for France or Britain.

Meanwhile German manufacturing contributes 18 per cent to economic output, twice as much as is the case for the other two major European industrial nations.

Vast public and private investment will be required to retool such an economy.

Take cleaning up the car industry. VW's capital expenditure bill will surpass 20 billion euros in 2022, according to the Refinitiv median estimate, compared with an annual average of 13 billion euros between 2018 and 2020.

Building a local plant to produce battery cells could cost at least the same again, which means Chief Executive Herbert Diess will probably need the government's help. Scholz will have to find a way of squaring that with his own restrictive budget pledges.

Germany's digital infrastructure could also use a jolt. Fewer than one in 10 households are connected to full-fibre broadband, but state-backed Deutsche Telekom can help fix that.

And the country needs to attract tech-savvy workers from overseas as its population ages. Scholz can help by relaxing rules for work permits for skilled labour while large companies like Siemens do their bit by retraining existing employees.

The desire to deliver all this will have to be strong to overcome some short-term hurdles. A global supply chain crisis is pushing up producer prices.

Meanwhile, Scholz's plan to increase the minimum wage to 12 euros per hour and labour shortages will push up wage costs. All this will eat into companies' profit margins. But there won't be any long-term gains without some short-term pain. — Reuters

German manufacturing contributes 18 per cent to economic output, twice as much as is the case for the other two major European industrial nations



BREAD FOR LIFE

An Afghan burqa-clad woman worker cooks bread at a workplace to sell in market in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Germany's new foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, pledged to work with international partners to help avert in Afghanistan what she called 'the worst humanitarian catastrophe of our time'. Outlining an 'action plan' two weeks after taking office, Baerbock said Berlin sought to assure that outside aid reached the neediest Afghans. "Major sectors of the economy have collapsed, many people are starving," Baerbock told reporters.

— AFP

Virus curbs hit economy, optimism



ANDY JALIL

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OMICRON VARIANT IS DEALING A BLOW TO ANY OPTIMISM THAT PEOPLE MAY HAVE HAD. CONSUMER CONFIDENCE EDGED BACK ONE POINT OVER THE LAST MONTH TO MINUS 15 IN DECEMBER

Strict restrictions in the UK on daily lives are causing havoc on the economy, revealed a closely watched survey released last week.

The flash purchasing managers' index (PMI) a timely indicator of the health of the British economy, plummeted to 53.2 in December, a 10-month low and down from 57.6 in November, according to IHS Markit and the Chartered Institute of Procurement and supply.

The steep drop was driven by the British services industry being hit by "tighter pandemic restrictions and renewed business uncertainty," IHS Markit said.

Greater reticence to socialise in a bid to avoid catching the Omicron strain, compounded by workers coming out of city centres after the government advised Britons to start working from home again, has severely hit demand for consumer-facing activities.

Chief business economist at IHS Markit, Chris Williamson, said the PMI underlines "the UK economy is being hit once again by Covid-19, with growth slowing sharply at the end of the year led by a steep drop in spending on services by households."

A malfunctioning services industry will weigh heavily on the UK economy. The industry generates around 80 per cent of output, indicating the economy could be headed back into contraction this month

and the early stages of next year, analysts warned.

Chief UK economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, Samuel Tombs, said: "Near-real-time indicators have also weakened over the past two weeks particularly in the consumer services sector."

He added: "It's looking highly likely then, that GDP will drop in December and January, driven by declines in consumer services activity."

Separate data published last week reveals the Omicron variant is dealing a blow to any optimism that people may have had. Consumer confidence edged back one point over the last month to minus 15 in December, research by GfK found.

The dip has been driven by households' confidence in their personal finances over the coming year taking a hit.

The survey indicates measures to curb the spread of the new variant and concern about catching it is already swaying consumers towards adopting a more cautious approach.

Omicron has intensified uncertainty over the trajectory of the UK economy over the coming months as virus restrictions dial up once again in a bid to curb infections.

Client strategy director at GfK, Joe Staton, said: "News about the Omicron variant could not have arrived at a worse time for festive celebrations. "As thoughts began turning to Christmas and the New

Year, Omicron jumped out of nowhere and threatened to bring Santa's sleigh crashing to a halt."

GfK's major purchase index went back three points to minus six in a sign retailers' sales will be hit. Furthermore, retailers are faced with huge rent payments to landlords by the end of this quarter, despite plummeting seasonal sales.

Inflation too is a huge concern as it will affect household incomes triggering a snap back in consumer spending and weighing down economic growth.

The British economy will grow 4.2 per cent next year, a downward revision from 5.2 per cent, according to projections made by the business group the British Chamber of Commerce (BCC).

The BCC expects inflation to scale to 5.2 per cent next spring, 0.2 percentage points higher than the Bank of England's expectation.

Ongoing delivery problems exacerbated by shortage of drivers and supply chain difficulties will affect trade flows, compounded by worker shortages and price rising rapidly, will also weigh on growth.

Head of economics at the BCC, Suren Thiru, said: "Consumer spending is likely to be more restrained than expected over the near term."

(The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK)

Mark Zuckerberg's ring of power



YANIS VAROUFAKIS

The author, a former finance minister of Greece, is leader of the MeRA25 party and Professor of Economics at the University of Athens

Once upon a time, in the ancient kingdom of Lydia, a shepherd called Gyges found a magic ring, which, when rotated on his finger, made him invisible.

So, Gyges walked unseen into the royal palace, seduced the queen, murdered the king, and installed himself as ruler.

If you were to discover such a ring or another device that granted you exorbitant power, Socrates asked, would it be wise to use it to do or get whatever you want?

Mark Zuckerberg's recent announcement of some fabulous digital metaverse awaiting humanity gives new pertinence to Socrates' answer: People should renounce excessive power and, in particular, any device capable of granting too many of our wishes.

Was Socrates right? Would reasonable people renounce the ring? Should they? Socrates' own disciples were not convinced.

Plato reports that they expected almost everyone to succumb to the temptation, pretty much as Gyges had. But could this be because Gyges' ring was not powerful, and thus not scary, enough?

Might a device far more powerful than a ring that merely makes us invisible cause us to shudder at the thought of using it, as Socrates recommended?

If so, what would such a device do? The ring allowed Gyges to overcome rivals physically, thus removing several constraints impeding his desires.

But, while invisibility allowed Gyges to murder the King's guards, it went nowhere near removing all of Gyges' constraints. What if

there were a gadget, let's call it the Freedom Device, that removed every constraint stopping us from doing whatever we want?

What would a constraint-free existence be like once this Freedom Device was activated? We would be able to fly like birds, travel to other galaxies in an instant, and perform feats experienced within the universes designed by talented video game developers.

But that would not be enough. One of the harshest constraints is time: It forces us to forego reading a book while swimming in the sea or watching a play.

So, to remove all constraints, our theoretical Freedom Device should also allow for infinite, concurrent experience. Still, one final constraint, perhaps the most perplexing, would remain: other people.

It is not hard to imagine Zuckerberg salivating at the thought of such a device. It would be the ultimate version of the "metaverse" into which he has said he wants to immerse Facebook's two billion-plus users.

I can imagine him letting us sample a cornucopia of pleasures for an instant, free of charge, just enough to crave more, at which point he would charge users accordingly.

Every nanosecond of immersion in this multiverse would produce enormous multiple pleasures – for which he would charge us again and again.

Excessive power is counterproductive, even self-defeating, because we crave interaction with other minds that we cannot control, even while craving to control them.

When others do what we do not want them to do, we feel disappointed, angry, or sad. But the moment we controlled them fully, their consent would give us no pleasure, and their approval would not boost our self-esteem.

Learning to appreciate that control is an illusion is hard, especially when we are prepared to sacrifice almost everything, to pay any price, to control others.

But if we are to stop others – Zuckerberg, for example – from controlling us, it is a lesson we must learn. Socrates was keen to warn us against yielding to the temptation of the magical ring, pointing to Gyges' unhappiness.

Today, with techno-feudalism and various immersive metaverses in the pipeline, his warning is more relevant than ever.

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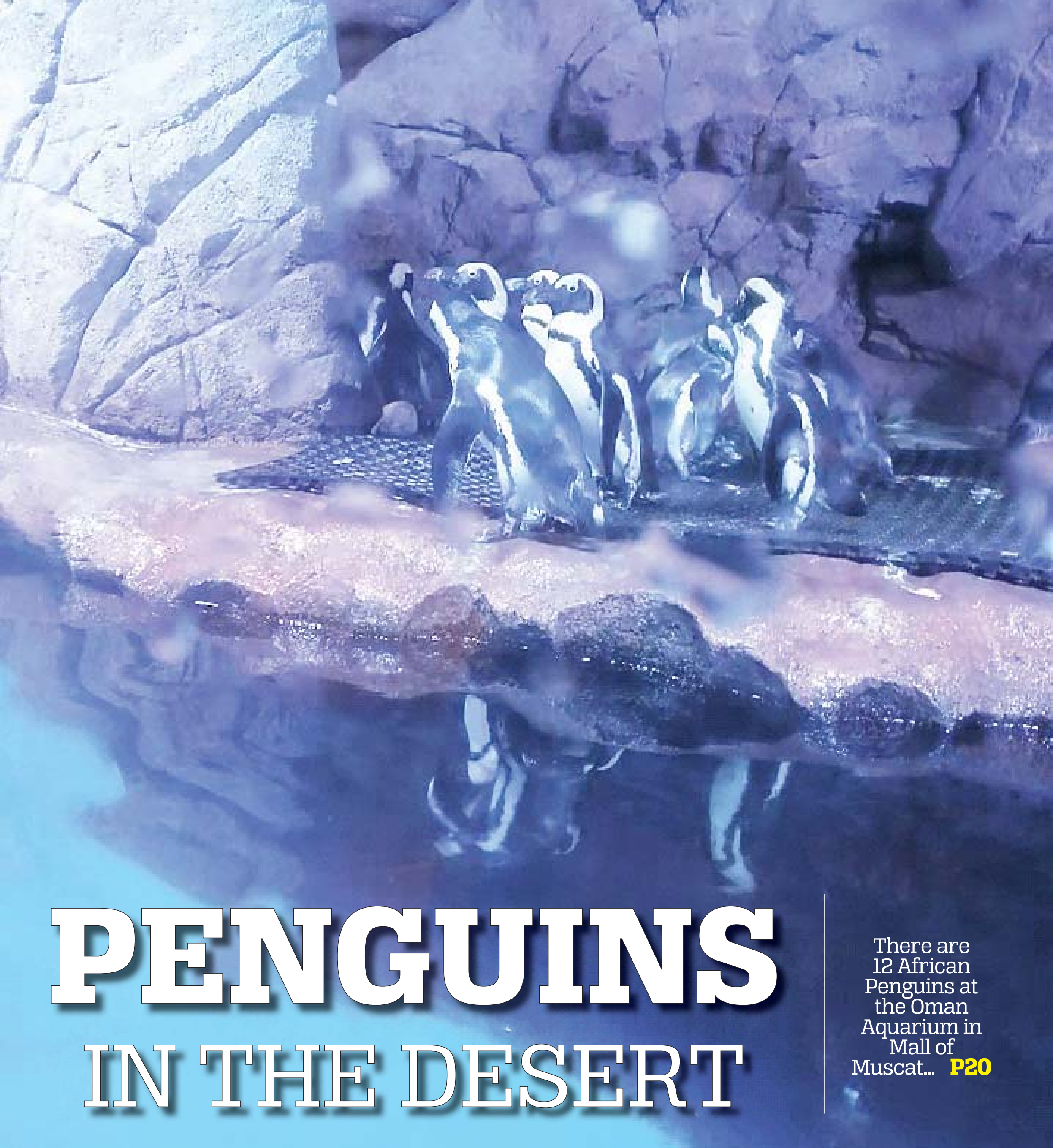
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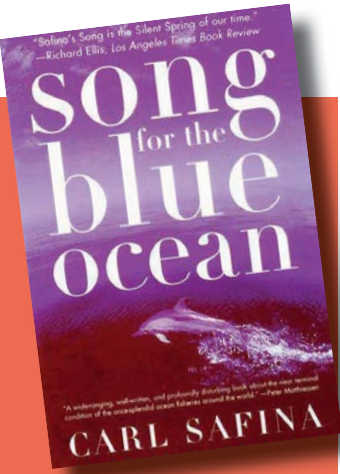


PENGUINS IN THE DESERT

There are 12 African Penguins at the Oman Aquarium in Mall of Muscat... **P20**

STUDY

READ



SONG FOR THE BLUE OCEAN
BY CARL SAFINA

A Peabody Award-winning NPR science reporter chronicles the life of a turn-of-the-century scientist and how her quest led to significant revelations about the meaning of order, chaos, and her own existence.

France possible source of half of Britain's ancient genes: study

A MAJOR MIGRATION into Britain from continental Europe, likely from France, about 3,000 years ago could explain a difference in ancestry between the island's northern and southern populations.

The findings published in Nature Wednesday come from the largest ever analysis of ancient DNA and may also help shed light on how Celtic languages spread into the British Isles.

According to previous research, people living across Britain some 4,500 years ago shared similar ancestry.

But today that has changed with southern residents

showing more genetic similarities to an ancient population known as early European farmers.

To figure out why, Harvard geneticist David Reich and his team in the US sequenced ancient DNA samples from across England and much of continental Europe from a time spanning BC 1500 to 43 AD.

The resulting timeline shows an influx of migrants between 3,300 to 2,800 years ago whose genetic material most closely resembled ancient samples from France.

Reich said "one of the most exciting things about the study is the number and geographic diversity of ancient DNA covered."

With genomes from nearly 800 individuals, the study is



the largest in ancient DNA ever carried out and lists over 220 authors.

The migration finding may also support a recent theory that Celtic languages came to Britain around the same

time.

Reich said similarities between names of geographic features in southern England and France also seem to point to France as an origin for the spread. — **AFP**



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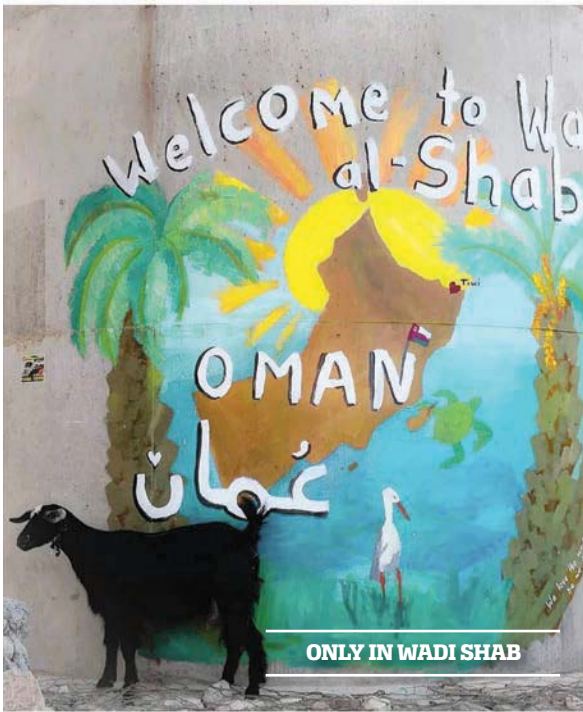
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AROUND THE WORLD

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS

Unfazed by pandemic, supply chain woes, Santa Claus readies for annual flight



UNDAUNTED BY PANDEMICS, supply-chain woes and labour shortages plaguing Earth-bound commerce, Santa Claus was set to launch his reindeer-powered sleigh on Friday to deliver Christmas gifts to good girls and boys worldwide, according to military officials tracking his flights.

"Santa's been doing this for centuries, he's a professional," said Canadian Army Captain Alexandra Hejduk, a spokesperson for the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD).

The joint US-Canadian military command based at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, Colorado, is charged with monitoring air defences and issuing aerospace and maritime warnings.

NORAD'S Santa-tracking practice originated in 1955, when a Colorado Springs newspaper misprinted the number of a local department store for youngsters to call in and speak to Santa, mistakenly listing the number for what was then called the Continental Air Defence Command.

An on-duty officer took the calls and assured the children that Santa, also known as Kris Kringle or Saint Nicholas, knew of their wish lists and was on his way.

The annual tradition has continued for 66 years, becoming part of NORAD's mission.

Followers of the jolly old elf can obtain real-time updates at noradsanta.org or through social media platforms. Or, they can call a NORAD-sponsored Santa hotline to speak with a live operator.

Other US government agencies were likewise gearing up.

The US Secret Service, responsible for protecting the president, also provides security for Santa, the agency said in a Twitter statement, accompanied by a video of agents preparing for Santa-protection duties.

"The Big Red Protective Detail is selected, assembled and stands ready," the statement said. "The American public can rest assured that Mr. S. Claus, here from the North Pole, will travel safely and securely throughout his US tour." — Reuters



HISTORY

Hans Christian Andersen museum gets fairytale makeover



DENMARK IS HONOURING its most famous writer, Hans Christian Andersen, with a revamped museum that aims to immerse visitors in the fantasy worlds he created.

Visitors have expressed delight with the new museum, which reopened in the summer and saw renovation work completed this month before it was shut as part of Denmark's efforts to fight a Covid resurgence.

From "The Little Mermaid" to "The Snow Queen", Andersen's works — which the author called his "children" — have inspired countless Disney films, ballets, songs and books.

The old Hans Christian Andersen museum in the writer's hometown of Odense in central Denmark was a "traditional biographical museum" filled with "a lot of artefacts and text", said Lone Weidemann, marketing coordinator for Odense museums.

But visitors "were looking for his fairytales, because that's what they know".

In a magical transformation that any fairy godmother would be proud of, city authorities have overseen a seven-year renovation of the museum into a sprawling complex above and below the cobbled streets of Odense's old town.

After entering the redesigned museum, visitors move through the modest

cottage where Andersen spent his childhood in the early 1800s, before being swept into a vast underground space devoted to his stories — filled with animations, interactive exhibits and music.

The museum "takes you to a complete other world", said Ara Halici, a tourist from the Netherlands who made the trip to Odense especially for the museum.

"How fantastic it is to be taken away from your daily struggles in life," he said.

Having arrived just days before Denmark shut down cultural venues to fight a resurgent coronavirus pandemic, his story at least had a happy ending.

Andersen's life story is woven through the exhibits, which chart his humble beginnings as the child of an illiterate washerwoman and an impoverished shoemaker.

Born in 1805 and losing his father aged 11, Andersen left Odense three years later and headed for the capital, Copenhagen, where he dreamt of becoming an actor.

By the time of his death in 1875, Andersen had produced 158 fairytales and 800 poems, enjoying success in later life thanks to the popularity of tales including "The Emperor's New Clothes" and "Thumbelina".

Artefacts still have their place in the new exhibition,

including the writer's inkwell and a champagne glass given to him by Jenny Lind, a Swedish singer who turned down his marriage proposal.

"The rooms, together with the architecture, the sound and music — it's a whole experience," said Danish teacher Jonna Vind, who was there with a group of her students.

"It binds together all the senses."

The new museum designed by Japanese architect Kengo Kuma — the man behind Tokyo's new Olympic stadium — opened in the summer but work was only completed in early December.

From above, its circular structures and winding outdoor gardens resemble four green buttons supported on wooden stilts.

With two-thirds of the exhibition space below ground, the architect was inspired by "The Tinderbox", Andersen's story in which a hollow tree is a gateway to an underground world.

"The idea behind the architectural design is similar to Andersen's method, where a small world suddenly transforms into a larger universe," Kuma said.

The museum's metamorphosis began in the early 2010s after Odense authorities drew up a plan to keep cars out of the centre of the city of 205,000 inhabitants.

— AFP

A PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE



Dr Yousuf Ali al Mulla

A chance to start over!

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I met a man with the kind of experience you usually find only in fiction. As a young man, he was involved in a serious car accident that resulted in a head injury and he suffered from total amnesia, followed by months of convalescence. The truth is that when he recovered, he was not the same: his family relations weakened, he even cut off former friends and found new ones. As his interests and tastes changed, I could say that he became more open and less aware, no longer caring much about what other people thought of him.

Oddly enough, his parents always attributed these major personality changes back then to that (the bump on the head). But he told me, remembering the past that these changes had nothing to do with his injury. Instead, it was a time to go back and recover, far from the usual routine and I might say here that it was what he did that created the punctuation mark in the long sentence of his life.

In fact, if we look at this incident and what happened with that man, we will consider how that person had a unique opportunity to assess his priorities. As if he had vowed not to take anything from his previous life as it was given. He tore up his beliefs to the end and reconstructed them. All of this and I ask him in the end, how was this trip? He replied smiling: that he became happy for the first time in his life!

However, you could notice with me, that when people talk about life before the virus (Covid-19) for instance, their memories are often emotional: about (the old days) and during the pre-pandemic period, you might say: I love my job and I love my social life. Maybe you meant it or maybe you didn't! Most people are

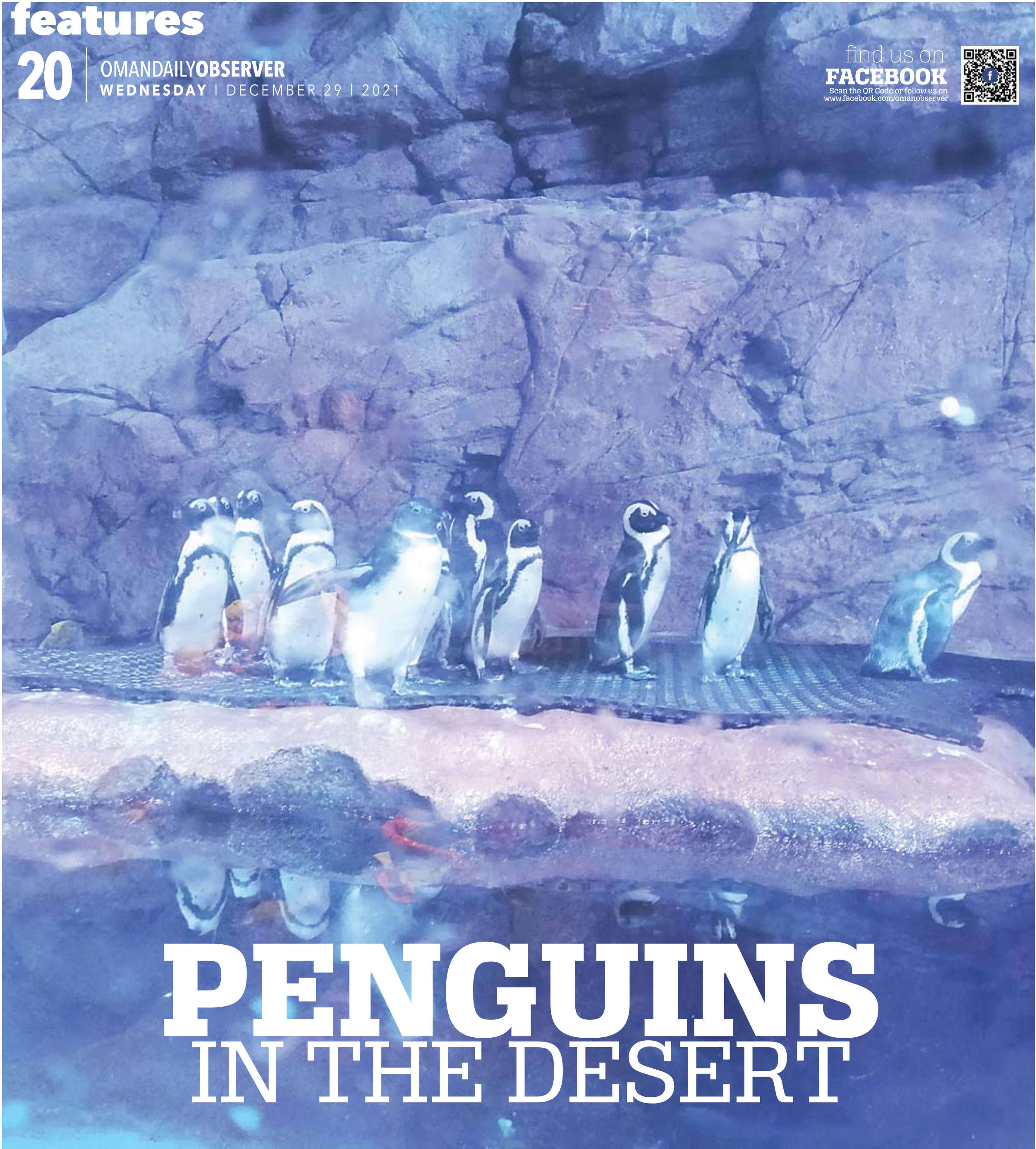
probably more adept at lying to themselves, because somehow it was certainly appropriate to say that your life makes you happy, right? And maybe in some areas of your life prior to the pandemic, you were also fooling yourself to avoid having your boat shaken, but then your boat capsized because of the coronavirus!

Here I tell you that it may be time to give some serious thought to those outward appearances, and be specific about which of your daily dealings have been toxic, unproductive relationships and lifestyles that have made you unhappy. So you might start by making a list of things to leave behind. While it isn't possible for everyone, it may make sense for some to start looking for a new job somewhere they'd rather live.

On the other hand, you may need to start now to think about how to re-engineer your job — so to speak — to re-engineer your life and consider your priorities. This brave adventurer, that is you, must not be someone you hear about someone else — or even indirectly, as in the case of explained friend.

At the end, it is time for you to prepare for a new normal life than your previous life — before the pandemic or before ending of this year? Actually, the truth is that each of us has a choice: to be the subject of a beautiful and long poem, which (a bold move), which is certainly useful and calculated. Or is that narrator, who a little terrified and too nervous to make these changes. Undoubtedly, this is your chance and each of us has his own decision.... So take it!

Dr Yousuf Ali Al Mulla is a physician, medical innovator and a writer.



PENGUINS IN THE DESERT

By Kabeer Yousuf

Sounds weird, isn't it? Beg to differ... There are penguins living in the Sultanate of Oman, where there are no arctic or Antarctic islands or Southern Hemisphere!!

There are 12 African Penguins comprising 6 females and 5 males and a baby penguin at the Oman Aquarium at Mall of Muscat in Mabela. Belonging to the Black Foot Penguin family, this colony of penguins is attracting a steady stream of visitors comprising elders as well as children every day from 10 am to 10 pm on weekdays and till 11 pm on weekends.

"I'm seeing these creatures for the first time in my life. Although small in size, they are as cute one can imagine and the most interesting part is that my children enjoyed the visit thoroughly," Abdussamad al Balushi, a visitor, said.

African penguins originate from the rocky South-Western coast of Africa, and are considered to be an endangered spe-



cies.

"We are proud to play an active role in the efforts to protect this endangered species and we are extremely thrilled to welcome the new member to the colony of penguins in Oman Aquarium," says Mahmood al Jarwani, Chairman of Tamani Trading and Entertainment LLC, the Operator of Oman Aquarium.

The baby penguin was born

at the first and only indoor public aquarium in the Sultanate of Oman on September 9, 2021. The world over, the birth of a Black Foot Penguin boosts the survival of this species.

"These cute animals are commonly referred to as 'Jackass' because their gawking sounds are similar to a donkey's bray, and unique to each individual penguin," says Hermel Montero, animal train-

er who is the chief of the animal care.

All these penguins might look very identical but they have a unique spots on their belly similar to our fingerprints, which helps caretakers differentiate between them.

Historically, African penguins are natural predators who mostly hunt fish. Their favourite food is Sardine fish and each penguin consumes

an average of 3 to 8 Sardines a day. They take meals three times a day.

They do not grow taller than two feet and have webbed feet and legs that are set back on the body. The legs and tail are used like rudders for steering. Diving down to catch fish, African penguins can stay under water for as long as five minutes and can swim at an average rate of three to six mph (5-10 kph).

A team of four consisting, besides Hermel, Khalid al Breiki, Aquarius, Nuwaier al Jalandani, assistant animal trainer, and Sumayya is on constant watch to care for these animals which need proper care and attention.

"I'm fond of penguins and that love took me to work for them inside the Mall of Muscat and I enjoy educating the public about them," confesses Sumayya al Shehhi, educator.

A visit to the penguin zoo is nothing short of an immersive experience where one will get a close encounter with the penguins as they come out from time to time. Other times, they find themselves sitting, chatting and mating on the huge icicles at 18 degrees Celsius arranged inside the pen.