

Oman-Belgium ties reinforced

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Port of Duqm officially opened



Continued from Page 01
“The very first international project of PAI was the shareholding participation in the Port of Duqm Company together with our Belgian partner which is now DEMA Concessions. While Port of Antwerp International has strong ambitions for further internationalisation, the Port of

Duqm is and will always remain an important part of our growing international network,” she added.
Minister Annick affirmed that Port of Duqm has the potential to become a success story, which the Port of Antwerp will continue to support.
In her speech, she also spoke

about the green hydrogen project - Hyport Duqm - which is a collaboration between OQ and DEMA Concessions.
Later, Sayyid Asaad, chief guest at the opening ceremony, unveiled a commemorative plaque marking the official opening of Port of Duqm in the presence of the King and Queen of

the Belgians.
The official opening ceremony of Port of Duqm was attended by ministers, undersecretaries, sheikhs and dignitaries of the Governorate of Wusta, as well as members of the official delegation accompanying the King and Queen of the Belgians.
ONA



Honourable Lady hosts Belgian Queen



Muscat - The Honourable Lady received Mathilde Marie Christine Ghislaine d’Udekem d’Acoz, Queen of the Belgians, at Al Alam Palace on Thursday.
The Honourable Lady welcomed the Queen of the Belgians and wished her a pleasant stay in Oman. She also expressed her best wishes

to the Queen of the Belgians and further progress and welfare to the Kingdom of Belgium.
Later, the Honourable Lady hosted a luncheon in honour of Queen Mathilde.
The luncheon was attended by high-ranking ladies, including members of the Royal Family, members of the State

Council and Shura Council and undersecretaries of ministries.
On her part, Queen Mathilde expressed her happiness at meeting the Honourable Lady, wishing her good health, happiness and a long life. She also wished the sultanate further development and prosperity.



NCDs cost Omani economy RO1.1bn annually

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) released a study titled 'The Case for Investment in the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases' on Thursday. It found that non-communicable diseases (NCDs) cost the Omani economy RO1.1bn annually.

The study was released at a meeting attended by H E Dr Mohammed bin Saif al Hosni, Undersecretary for Health Affairs in MoH, H E Dr Fatima bint Mohammed al Ajmi, Undersecretary for Administrative, Planning and Financial Affairs in MoH, and Sulaiman al Dakheel, general manager of Gulf Health Council.

Representing Oman, MoH conducted the study as part of a joint GCC project, which the Gulf Health Council supervised. The research team included members of several organisations, including the United Nations



(Supplied photo)

Development Programme, United Nations Interagency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases, World Health Organization, and MoH - represented by the Department of Non-communicable Diseases in the Directorate General of Primary

Healthcare.

The study was conducted in view of the significant burden of NCDs in society. NCDs cause 72 per cent of all deaths in the sultanate.

An estimated one in five adults - under the age of 70 - dies of an NCD. The study re-

vealed that NCDs cost the Omani economy RO1.1bn every year, which was equivalent to 3.59 per cent of the GDP in 2019. This annual cost included RO609mn in healthcare expenditure and RO486mn in lost productive capacity due to premature mortality and disabil-

ities.

In 2017, the NCD causing the most deaths in Oman was cardiovascular disease, accounting for 36 per cent of all deaths in the country, followed by cancer - 11 per cent deaths - and diabetes - eight per cent deaths.

The study indicated that

The study, titled 'The Case for Investment in the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases', was conducted in view of the significant burden of NCDs in society. NCDs cause 72 per cent of all deaths in Oman

Oman could reduce its burden of NCDs by investing in four cost-effective and proven policy and intervention packages over the next 15 years (till 2034).

In doing so, Oman could save RO671mn in economic output losses. Furthermore, by investing in these four interventions and

policy packages, Oman could save at least 18,724 lives and reduce the incidence of diseases.

According to the study, the intervention packages are associated with benefits far outweighing the costs. Salt reduction had the highest return on investment (8.6:1), followed by tobacco control (4.8:1), cardiovascular and diabetes clinical interventions (2.3:1) and diet and physical activity awareness (2:1).

An extended 20-year analysis shows that the return on investment continues to increase to 16.6, 10.9, 3.8 and 3.7 for the intervention packages in the same order as listed above.

One of the key recommendations of the study is the importance of strengthening multi-sectoral, government and societal action on NCDs. This would help Oman reap significant health and economic benefits from scaled-up investments to reduce NCDs.

Yanqul Charity Team hands over four houses worth RO40,000

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In keeping with its efforts to spread the spirit of solidarity in the community, Yanqul Charity Team - in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs - recently handed over four housing units to social security families.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Suad Abdullah al Alawi, head of Yanqul Charity Team, informed that four houses worth RO40,000 were handed over in January 2022.

The charity team launched an initiative called 'Ma'awa' (A Home) in January 2021 to help needy families live in the comfort of modern houses.

Yanqul Charity Team started in 2011 and conducts its activities under the umbrella of the Social Development Committee of the Ministry of Social Development in Yanqul.

"We cooperate with the Zakat Committee of the Ministry of



(Supplied photo)

Awqaf and Religious Affairs. We collected over RO42,000 to build four housing units. We also help families whose monthly income is less than RO400," Suad informed.

The Ma'awa campaign will benefit families that haven't obtained a housing loan from any government agency.

"Our charity is currently also trying to improve the standard of lives of needy families and help

insolvent families become productive. Additionally, we sponsor orphans and have maintained and restored many homes."

According to Suad, raising funds for its charity activities has become increasingly difficult in the current economic situation. "Some private sector companies, however, have come forward to help us as they understand it's a worthy cause."

Yanqul Charity Team has

launched a campaign to collect more than RO100,000 in February 2022 to complete ongoing projects, including maintenance and construction of new homes for social security families and to support orphans.

"We thank all those who have supported us and we hope the private sector will continue to participate in our activities for the benefit of underprivileged members of society," Suad said.

Iranian Taban Air starts weekly direct flights from Shiraz to Sohar

Muscat - Sohar Airport welcomed the first flight of Iranian airline Taban Air from Shiraz on Friday evening with a traditional water canon salute.

Taban Air - officially Taban Airlines - will operate a direct flight between Sohar and Shiraz once a week.

The launch of Taban Air flights to Sohar takes the number of carriers operating from Sohar Airport to five, including Fly Dubai, Air Arabia, Qasham Air



(Supplied photo)

and Salam Air.

Launching this direct route is part of Oman Airports' initiatives

to continue promoting air traffic at civil airports that are under its supervision.

WEATHER WATCH			PRAYER TIMINGS	
	Max	Min	Fajr	5.28am
Abu Dhabi	22	15	Sunrise	6.45am
Doha	21	13	Duhr	12.26pm
Kuwait City	19	10	Asr	3.38pm
Manama	20	13	Maghrib	6.02pm
Muscat	26	19	Isha	7.14pm
Riyadh	19	7		

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Graffiti artists pay tributes to 2 Sultans

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In an expression of their patriotism and to pay tributes to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and the Late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, Khalil Mohammed al Salmi and Ahmed al Ghafri have painted a portrait of the two leaders on a wall in Al Khoudh market, Seeb.

Visitors to the market have been marveling at the giant portrait of the sultans.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Salmi, 21, said, "I have been doing graffiti art since childhood. Ahmed and I painted the images of His Majesty Sultan Haitham and Sultan Qaboos in pop-art style. We started painting on January 16; it took four days to complete."

The portrait of the two sultans is 3.5m high and 8m wide.

The two artists from the wilayat of Rustaq used water-colours and acrylics. The graffiti includes iconic elements of Omani architecture and inspirational quotes of His Majesty Sultan Haitham and the Sultan Qaboos urging the advancement of Oman.

Talking about his work specifically, Salmi said, "In 2020, I painted portraits of His Majesty



(Supplied photo)

Ahmed and I painted the images of His Majesty Sultan Haitham and Sultan Qaboos in pop-art style. We started painting on January 16; it took four days to complete

KHALIL MOHAMMED AL SALMI

Sultan Haitham and Sultan Qaboos at the entrance of Wadi Hoqain in Rustaq, which took eight days to complete."

Salmi and Ghafri have created outdoor graffiti at several sites in Rustaq and other parts of the country and believe their art enhance the attraction of these locations, help promote tourism and encourage people to conserve the environment.

Both artists plan to continue painting on natural canvases, like mountains and sheer cliffs to promote Omani tourism. "We hope Omani painters are allowed to paint in public places and on bridges to promote tourism," Salmi said.

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Duqm Port: A partnership for growth

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The official opening of the Port of Duqm is a pivotal step in Oman's continuous efforts to build an integrated logistics ecosystem and diversify the economy beyond oil and gas.

With its world-class infrastructure development and unique geographical location, which is ideal to serve international shipping lines between Asia and Europe, the Port of Duqm reflects a strategic and long-term partnership for future growth between Oman and Belgium.

Belgium's Port of Antwerp – the second largest port in Europe – and DEME Group are the main partners in the Port of Duqm project, along with Oman's government and Asyad Group.

During his speech at the official inauguration of the Port of Duqm on Friday, H E Eng Ahmed Hassan al Dheeb, deputy chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), said, "The Port of Duqm has been equipped with high specifications and is planned to be a logistical hub serving international shipping lines between Asia and Europe."

The Port of Duqm consists of three main berths: commercial berth, government berth and liquid materials berth. Total length of the breakwaters is about 8.7km and the port's basin depth is 18m, while the entry canal is 19m, which qualifies it to receive and handle the world's largest container ships and very large crude carriers.

The port provides multiple services for ships of all sizes, and through its integration with the dry-dock, ship maintenance service is also provided.

H E Dheeb pointed out that one of the most important components of the port is container cranes and bridge cranes. The



Duqm Port project has accelerated logistics sector's advancement in Oman, cementing the sultanate's position as a competitive international logistics hub

ABDULRAHMAN AL HATMI



completion rate of the Cranes Supply and Installation Project has reached 60 per cent, which will be placed in the commercial berth to deal with the world's largest container ships.

"The installation of these cranes at the port will start in March 2022, with an expected completion to be in the first quarter of 2023," he added.

Addressing the Port of Duqm's opening ceremony, Eng Abdulrahman Salim al Hatmi,

CEO of Asyad Group, said that the Port of Duqm is one of most significant infrastructure developments in the logistics sector, which translates Oman's vision towards economic diversification. He added that the Duqm Port project has accelerated logistics sector's advancement in Oman, cementing the sultanate's position as a competitive international logistics hub.

"Through joint efforts, sustained support of various govern-

ment authorities and fruitful strategic partnership between Asyad Group and the Port of Antwerp; the Port of Duqm is proceeding at a deliberate pace towards becoming a driving force for the national economy and a commercial gateway connecting international shipping routes from the east to the west," Hatmi said.

Speaking about the strategic partnership with Belgium's Port of Antwerp, Hatmi said, "This

partnership captures the close ties between Oman and Belgium that we look forward to consolidate, while bringing the Port of Duqm to the forefront of regional maritime landscape."

"We appreciate our Belgian partner's continuous support to our national logistics capabilities by enabling Asyad Group's national arm for ports and terminals management to operate Duqm's general cargo terminal since 2021, and by providing maritime

services through our partnership with CTO," he added.

Luc Vandenbulcke, CEO of Belgium's DEME Group, said, "We are very proud to be partners with Asyad Group and the Port of Antwerp on the development of the Port of Duqm. Especially, as I see the partners working to a common goal, as one team."

He affirmed that the inauguration of Duqm Port is a fruit of the works done by partners with

intensive and open-minded co-operation.

Strategic port of the future

The Port of Duqm is perfectly positioned to serve both the Eastern and Western corridors, thanks to its central geographic location. Established with the objective of diversifying Oman's economy, Duqm Port is fast emerging as a hub of economic activity due to its central location in the sultanate.

The Ministry of Economy in a tweet on Friday said that Duqm Port and Duqm Hyport projects reflect the strategic partnership between Oman and Belgium and are linked to the sectors targeted in the tenth five-year development plan, in particular transportation and logistics sector and renewable energy sectors.

According to Hatmi, the Port of Duqm, over the past three years, attracted 2,242 vessels and recorded an increase in general cargo handling traffic, heading towards profitability at early stages.

Moreover, the Port of Duqm will be a major catalyst in enabling Oman to play a vital role in the international stage in the future clean energy projects, such as the green hydrogen projects, Hatmi noted. He further pointed out that the port also contributes to empowering the fisheries sector by providing logistic solutions for fish exports to the international markets at high standards.

"Asyad Group ramped up its efforts to develop the Port of Duqm's capabilities and increase its competitiveness by developing Asyad Drydock Services up to international standards, as an integral part of the port. Thanks to Asyad's Container Line Service as well which was the first container shipping line calling Port of Duqm, and connecting it with other ports in Oman," Hatmi noted.



Oman crude climbs to \$91

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The prices of Oman crude oil on Friday climbed more than three per cent to hit nearly US\$91 per barrel.

As per the data released by the Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME), where Oman crude is traded, the Oman crude contract price jumped by 3.01 per cent to US\$90.65 per barrel on Friday.

The average price of Oman crude (for February delivery) has stabilized at US\$73.14 per barrel, which is US\$7.12 per barrel lower than the January delivery price, the DME data showed.

Global oil prices also kept climbing on Friday, with both Brent and US crude benchmark contracts topping US\$93 a barrel on a combination of factors that

include cold weather in the United States and uncertainty over Ukraine.

Brent crude on Friday closed 2.4 per cent up at US\$93.27 per barrel in London, while US benchmark West Texas Intermediate climbed 2.3 per cent at US\$92.31 per barrel.

"With demand standing resilient, it appears stronger supply will have to be the answer for calming market prices, but new production is notoriously slow in reacting to changing conditions," said Robbie Fraser of Schneider Electric.

"While OPEC+ continues to slowly increase exports, US shale continues a slow pace of additions, even as prices are well beyond breakeven levels for all key regions."

(With inputs from AFP)

UAE's Adnoc discovers offshore gas reserves

Abu Dhabi, UAE – The United Arab Emirates on Thursday announced the discovery of the first gas reserves from its offshore exploration concessions as it seeks to achieve gas self-sufficiency.

The Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (Adnoc) said that between 42.5bn and 56.5bn cubic metres (between 1.5tn and 2tn cubic feet) of raw gas was found off the oil-rich country.

"This discovery marks the first from Abu Dhabi's offshore exploration concessions," it said in a statement.

Adnoc's CEO Sultan al Jaber said the discovery would help "create long-term value for the UAE".

A consortium led by Italy's ENI and PTT of Thailand won the exploration rights for the offshore block in 2019.

The UAE has some of the world's largest gas reserves, with approximately 273tn cubic feet



of conventional gas and 160tn cubic feet of unconventional gas.

But it currently supplies most of its domestic demand with imports from neighbouring Qatar.

The statement gave no details of the timeframe for the new gas resources to come onstream.

In 2020, the UAE said it had discovered huge reserves of gas that would help it meet its needs.

Adnoc said about 80tn cubic feet of shallow gas reserves were discovered between the emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the largest in the seven-member UAE.

Meanwhile, the UAE has said it hopes to be carbon neutral by 2050.

However, it forecast last year that the oil and gas industry would need to invest "over US\$600bn every year until 2030" just to keep up with projected demand.

AFP

IMF approves \$1bn loan disbursement for Pakistan

Washington, US – The IMF has approved a US\$1bn loan disbursement for Pakistan after signaling approval with recent government reforms.

The money comes from an agreement that was approved in July 2019 for a US\$6bn loan over a period of more than three years under the Washington-based crisis lender's Ex-

tended Fund Facility.

However, only a third of the money has been sent out thus far, with the IMF holding back until Islamabad implements reforms it had committed to.

To secure the release of the latest tranche, the government submitted a new budget to the IMF last month, which includes ending tax exemptions on basic

commodities and foodstuffs.

"The Pakistani economy has continued to recover despite the challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, but imbalances have widened and risks remain elevated," IMF deputy managing director Antoinette Sayeh said in a statement.

"The authorities' recent pol-

icy efforts to strengthen economic resilience are welcomed," she said, noting "Timely and consistent implementation of policies and reforms remain essential to lay the ground for stronger and more sustainable growth."

Pakistan's growth is expected to reach four per cent this year, but the IMF warned

its economy remains vulnerable to disruptions from the pandemic and geopolitical tensions.

To head off a debt default, Pakistan recently obtained loans of US\$3bn each from China and Saudi Arabia, and US\$2bn from the United Arab Emirates.

AFP

Facebook parent Meta's profit slips

San Francisco, US – Facebook's parent firm Meta delivered a gloomy mix of a sharper-than-expected drop in profit, a decrease in users and threats to its ad business.

Already jittery markets have punished pandemic-era darlings including Netflix for disappointing results, with Meta getting a taste of that after its US\$10.3bn quarterly profit and daily user-growth fell short of expectations.

Yet the signature Facebook platform also reported losing roughly one million daily users globally between the last two quarters of 2021 – a tiny number on an app with nearly two billion daily users, but a potentially worrying signal of stagnation.

CFO Dave Weiner told analysts that user growth was impacted by "headwinds" including disproportionate growth in the Asia-Pacific during the pandemic that has slowed and an increase

in mobile data prices in India.

"In addition to these factors, we believe competitive services are negatively impacting growth, particularly with younger audiences," Weiner added.

The company's executives have repeatedly referred to competition from TikTok but also from other networks, while they face numerous probes and complaints of abuse of dominance.

Analysts expected 1.95bn daily active users on Facebook, but Meta reported 1.93bn – a key indicator of the growth trajectory for a company fuelled by the people who choose to interact with its platforms.

On the financial side, Meta achieved a turnover of US\$33.67bn, in line with its forecasts, but it made US\$10.3bn in net profit in the fourth quarter, eight per cent less than last year.

As an explanation for the disappointing performance, Meta



noted competition and supply chain difficulties suffered by its customers, the advertisers.

At the same time, the company said the rules imposed by Apple last year on ad targeting had a negative impact on its financial results in the fourth quarter.

In the update of iOS, its mo-

bile operating system, Apple required application publishers to ask permission before collecting data, much to the regret of companies like Meta that rely on that information for ad targeting.

"Meta may only generate single-digit revenue growth. And that's before any further legal and regulatory developments

and actions," Third Bridge analyst Scott Kessler said.

"It seems that many are re-evaluating in real-time," he added.

As of December 31, 2021, 2.8bn people were using one of its four platforms and messenger services at least once a day, and 3.6bn at least once a month.

Metaverse cost

These are the first results released since the company's name change in late October, which was both a turn toward the metaverse vision and a turn away from its scandal-prone social media empire.

The Silicon Valley giant's whistleblower crisis last year highlighted accusations that executives prioritized growth over keeping their billions of users safe.

Scathing news reports based on internal documents leaked by ex-employee Frances Haugen rekindled long-deadlocked regulation efforts, but US lawmakers have made little progress since.

An activist group calling itself The Real Facebook Oversight Board seized on the results to warn of what may come next.

"Facebook appears to now be feeling the impact on ad revenues from Apple's new privacy

first approach," the group's statement said.

"This will no doubt make them more desperate to drive ad revenue by any means necessary," it added.

Meta is betting heavily on its belief that the metaverse is the next major evolution of how humans live with the internet.

In this future that evokes science fiction, the public will use augmented reality glasses and virtual reality headsets to find their way around, work or play.

But its construction means tens of billions of dollars of investment in the Facebook Reality Labs branch, without any benefits for a long time.

"There's a lot of uncertainty about Meta's investments in the metaverse and if or when they will have a positive impact on the company's bottom line," said analyst Debra Aho Williamson.

AFP

ECB opens door to 2022 rate hike

Frankfurt, Germany – European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde on Thursday left open the possibility of interest rate hikes this year for the first time, as the eurozone comes under pressure from soaring prices.

The "situation had indeed changed," Lagarde said in a press conference after inflation unexpectedly rose to 5.1 per cent in the euro area in January, an all-time high since records for the currency club began in 1997 and well above the ECB's two-per cent target.

"Inflation is likely to remain elevated for longer than previously expected," Lagarde said, following a meeting of the bank's 25-member governing council.

The surge could largely be ascribed to soaring energy costs, Lagarde said, but along with supply bottlenecks, the driving forces for price rises were expected to "subside" this year.

But the former French finance minister acknowledged that "risks to the inflation outlook are tilted to the upside, particularly in the near term", saying it could go higher.

"We need to continue to monitor very carefully," she said.

At the bank's last meeting in December and on several occasions since, Lagarde had said it was "very unlikely" that the ECB would raise its ultra-low rates in 2022.

On Thursday, the ECB president declined to repeat that claim, saying she would "never make pledges without conditionalities", and that the bank's next moves would be "data dependent".

In doing so, Lagarde had "opened the door... to a rate hike this year", said Carsten Brzeski, head of macro at the ING bank.



ECB chief Christine Lagarde

eral Reserve to take tough action.

ECB policymakers held their interest rates at record lows on Thursday, including a negative deposit rate that charges financial institutions to park their cash with the central bank overnight.

The ECB's more cautious response is predicated on its forecasts that see inflation dropping below the central bank's two-percent goal in 2023 and 2024 and a promise to end stimulus bond purchases before hiking rates.

At its last meeting in December, the ECB announced a "step-by-step" reduction in its vast bond-buying programme.

Lagarde pushed back expectations of any policy adjustment until the ECB's next meeting in March, when governing council members will have new growth and inflation projections to work with.

"We will not be complacent, but we're not going to be rushed into a process", Lagarde said, adding that inflation was "getting closer to target" over the

medium-term.

The rising cost of living was a "hardship" for those "who have to fill up the tank and who have to put food on the table", Lagarde added.

The eurozone economy reached its pre-coronavirus pandemic level in the fourth quarter of 2021, but growth could be "subdued" through 2022 due to a similar set of factors as those driving inflation, Lagarde said.

The risks to the economic outlook are "broadly balanced over the medium term," said Lagarde.

While "uncertainties related to the pandemic have abated somewhat, geopolitical tensions have increased," she said, hinting at tensions between Moscow and the West over the massing of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine.

"The geopolitical clouds that we have over Europe, if they were to materialise, would certainly have an impact on energy prices" and the rest of the economy, Lagarde said.

AFP

IMF says it is 'ready' to help Sri Lanka

Washington, US – The International Monetary Fund is ready to discuss "options" with Sri Lanka if the government asks for financial support, its mission chief for the island told AFP on Thursday.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disastrous impact on Sri Lanka's economy, which has been deprived of its tourism bonanza while workers' remittances from abroad have fallen sharply.

"While the IMF has not received a request for financial support from Sri Lanka, the staff stands ready to discuss options if requested," mission chief Masahiro Nozaki said in a written statement to AFP.

On Wednesday, Sri Lanka's finance minister announced the country had sought advice from the fund and was considering seeking an international bailout.

This "referred to an ongoing technical assistance mission by the IMF," Nozaki said Thursday.

"The mission aims to



strengthen the Macro Fiscal Unit at the Ministry of Finance and focuses on training staff at the Unit, as part of our capacity development activities," he added.

"The mission is being conducted virtually until February 9," he said.

The IMF continues to "closely monitor economic and policy developments in Sri Lanka,"

Nozaki added.

He said a fund team had visited Colombo in December last year as part of the annual bilateral discussions to review economic developments and policies.

A board meeting will be held at the end of February to review the latest economic data from the country.

AFP

Association for Early Intervention for Children with Disabilities

Announcement: Invitation to attend the 2022 General Assembly meeting

The Board of Directors of the Association of Early Intervention for Children with Disabilities is pleased to invite its distinguished members to attend the annual general assembly meeting, which is scheduled to be held on Sunday the 27/3/2022 at (4:30 Evening) at the Association of Early Intervention in North Azaiba and also through the Zoom.

Agenda of the meeting

1. Board of Directors administrative report of the year ended 2021 and draft work plan for the year 2022.
2. Balance sheet and closing account for the ending fiscal year and draft work of New Year budget.
3. Discuss the Auditor report.
4. Nomination of New Board Members
5. Appointing/approval of the auditor for the year 2022 and determining his remuneration, without preconception to the provisions of the State's Financial Supervision Law.
6. Any Other Matters.

Nomination of Board Members and Renewal of membership for members whose membership expired during 2020 – 2021, will be closed on Monday 7/3/2022, Any application received after the above date will not be considered.

Note: all the above reports will be available at the association's office in Azaiba and in the electronic media for the members review and information. If there are any inquiries, please call 24496960.

US economy adds 467,000 jobs in January

Washington, US – Despite a renewed onslaught of COVID-19 infections caused by the Omicron variant, the US economy added 467,000 jobs in January, the government said Friday, far more than had been expected. The Labor Department report, which also showed the unemployment rate rising slightly to four per cent, was a positive surprise

for the world's largest economy since many analysts expected it had either seen weak or negative hiring in the first month of 2022.

Major industries that hired last month included the bars and restaurants that comprise the leisure and hospitality sector, which gained the most of any sector with 151,000 positions.

Professional and business services added 86,000 positions and retail trade 61,000.

Overall, the economy had added 19.1mn jobs since the nadir of the COVID-19 crisis in April 2020, but it is still short 2.9mn positions, the data said.

There were signs of the coronavirus's impact in the data, including a jump to six million in the number of people

who said they couldn't work because their employer's business was closed or otherwise affected by the pandemic.

In December, only 3.1mn workers were in this position.

The government also revised its data for 2021, and said employment that year was higher by 217,000 jobs than first reported.

AFP

INFINITI Q50 brightens up every trip

INFINITI Q50 which offers an optimal blend of ride comfort and class-leading agility continues to impress luxury motoring enthusiasts in Oman.

The Infiniti Q50 sedan, which represents dynamic and bold styling delivers empowering performance and rewarding drive.

It has been the key driver of Infiniti's success in the sultanate due to its sensuous feel, segment leading features and pulsating performance that delivers excellent output, a press release said.

A senior spokesperson at Infiniti Oman, said, "With an athletic front bumper and a rich textured double-arch grille, the Infiniti Q50 boosts a sporty, sophisticated look. Step inside and experience premium materials with performance inspired accents that take refinement to the next level.

Above all, it comes with advanced technological features like intelligent cruise control with full speed range, lane departure warning and prevention, forward emergency braking and backup collision intervention."

The brand puts put high performance at the heart of the Infiniti Q50. The 400hp twin-turbocharged 3ltr V6 engine offers class-leading per-



formance that's bound to get your heart racing. With 475Nm of torque, acceleration is effortless. You can also choose the brand's class-leading twin-turbocharged V6 that returns 300hp and 400 Nm of torque.

The INFINITI Q50's suspension shapes the drive around you. As road conditions change, it automatically adjusts your vehicle's body roll, pitch and bounce rate for smooth, comfortable ride.

The Dynamic Digital Suspension comes equipped with two distinct settings, Standard and Sport. Select Standard mode for comfortable, dynamic handling. Engage Sport mode for firmer dampening and greater agility.

With Infiniti Q50, one can set their preference for a soft or firm ride through the Drive Mode Selector. Electronically adjusted dampers do the rest, applying the right amount of force to keep the drive feeling balanced.

SBA is largely committed to supporting Infiniti Oman's growth in the sultanate through major emphasis on customer satisfaction and by providing world-class after-sales services in Oman.

With a national network of more than 40 showrooms, service centers and parts outlets, SBA has further built upon its legacy of trust, excellent customer service and providing value for money.

KR's Eshraqa marks 5th anniversary of service



Substantiating its five-year long presence in the country as the social development arm of Khimji Ramdas, Eshraqa has collated its projects and initiatives to showcase some of its major milestones in five wilayats, and announce its intent to focus on Wilayat Dima Wattayeen in 2022.

Over the last five years, Eshraqa has played a pivotal role in conceptualising and implementing social impact projects that benefited a total of 85 schools, four hospitals, two health centres, four NGOs dedicated to people with disabilities and five women's associations, among others. It invested its resources to explore novel approaches that helped develop transformative projects for the betterment of communities across the sultanate, a press release said.

It has consciously espoused the policy of 'one wilayat at a time', providing comprehensive support for all communities in the wilayat; creating avenues for better health, education, community well-being and entrepreneurship. So far, communities in the wilayats of Samail, Izki, Bidbid, Ibra and Bidiyah have benefitted from the initiatives, with Wilayat Dima Wattayeen earning its attention during the course of the current year.

Congratulating Eshraqa on its impressive progress in a short span of time, Nailesh Khimji, Di-

rector of Khimji Ramdas, said, "When we established Eshraqa as our social development arm in 2016, we wanted it to embody our vision of empowering local communities through projects that have far-reaching impact. It has not only surpassed this vision with several distinctive milestones, it has corroborated our commitment to contribute to the nation's well-being and development.

"Eshraqa continues to inspire our youth with inclusive ventures that engage with them on different levels. It has employed novel approaches to coalesce with the community and collaborate with educational institutions to bring about all-round development; it has introduced special projects to support persons with disabilities, enhance the capabilities of Omani youth and empower women to realise their full potentials. 2022 will mark another major milestone in its successful journey, as it brings Wilayat Dima Wattayeen under its developmental scheme."

Eshraqa aims to achieve best outcomes by directing its efforts towards specific sectors that have direct and indirect impact on the lives of the people. In line with this aim, it has stepped in to meet requirements like medical equipment for health centres, housing for the underprivileged, buses for local women's associations, sponsorship for the national Paralympics Association,

and funding for research on nutrition, in partnership with the Ministry of Health. In addition, its training pillar has benefited over 4000 people through learning programmes.

Of particular significance are its key projects like Tasees, Stemazone, Qudurat, Eshraqa e-learning center at Oman International Maritime College, and Sindbad Library. While Tasees (Eshraqa Entrepreneurship Academy) is engaged in creating an entrepreneurial mindset in the youth and developing knowledge and skills among professionals through a mentorship programme, Stemazone is designed as a unique educational programme to introduce children to the world of Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics.

Pointing out that Eshraqa's primary beneficiaries are Omani youth, women and persons with disabilities, Nailesh Khimji stated that Eshraqa is tailored for those whom every opportunity matters. "We believe that with a little support, they can then go on to make a real difference for their families and in their communities.

Our objective is to make a holistic impact on society through the educational sector, by helping equip young Omanis to be future-ready - beginning at community schools, and moving right up to the incubation of entrepreneurial start-ups," he added.

Alila offers romantic Valentine's escapades

Fall in love all over again this Valentine's Day at Oman's most romantic destinations, Alila Hinu Bay, Salalah and Alila Jabal Akhdar.

Alila Hotels and Resorts have announced a collection of whirlwind experiences set to sweep your loved ones off their feet. A romantic five-star escape awaits you, pulling out all the stops to create magical memories and delight the senses. With sweeping views, an array of extraordinary activities and award-winning gastronomy, the sultanate's most idyllic and 'surprisingly different' properties will make this special day irresistible, a press release said.

Discover Salalah's hidden gem, Alila Hinu Bay, nestled beautifully in the coastal town of Mirbat, where the 'sea and

mountain hug'. The recently opened property is the perfect place for an undisturbed romantic getaway.

With its sophisticated design and quaint setting, the resort offers a haven of nature. Lying on an endless bay with miles of glittering turquoise waters and private beach, Alila Hinu Bay creates an unprecedented level of discovery. The resort offers the best of both worlds, with a portfolio of activities from sea-wreck, scuba diving and wadi treks to laid-back wellness escapades.

Guests can rejuvenate at Spa Alila and enjoy an inclusive couples massage or cosy up for a romantic dinner at Sea Salt Restaurant, serving the finest fresh catch and decadent dishes all from locally sourced produce.

Mall of Muscat announces Winter Festival raffle draw winner

The Winter Festival organised by Mall of Muscat came to a celebratory end with one lucky person bagging the Grand Prize - a brand new Suzuki Jimny. Wael Mohamed Hussein Orban won the draw held as part of the Winter Festival by Mall of Muscat which ran over a period of two months, a press release said.

Orban was presented the key to the prize-winning Suzuki Jimny at a special ceremony held

at Mall of Muscat by the organisers on January 27. Strategic partners of the Winter Festival that included Oman Aquarium, Novo Cinemas, Matalan, Fabyland, HomesRUs and Suzuki were also felicitated during the ceremony for their partnership and bringing the popular promotion to a successful culmination.

Thousands of people took part in the raffle draw that was held as the grand finale of the Winter Festival from November 2021 to January 2022. To participate in the draw, visitors of Mall of Muscat had to shop for RO20 at any of the participating outlets or RO40 at Lulu Hypermarket to be eligible. Mall of Muscat recorded over 700,000 footfall over the promotional period, attracting all age groups with various activities and exclusive promotions for kids, families, and individuals during the festive.

Home to unique Fashion, Food & Beverage, and Entertainment brands in the Sultanate of Oman, such as Debenhams, Shakeshack, Café Di Roma, Molten Chocolate, Victoria's Secret Pink & Novo Cinema, Mall of Muscat is one of the top shopping destinations in the city.

"We are thrilled with the response we received for the Winter Festival," said Hussain Jamal, Operations Head, MoM.

Oman's first 'Luban Spa' opens at Al Husn

Following a period of lockdowns and global restrictions, Shangri-La Al Husn, Muscat, is back to unveil a world of bespoke experiences for luxury seekers from around the world, the latest being Luban Spa (The Spa of Frankincense).

This is the first of its kind wellness experience in the sultanate, a different way of living that sends you to a world of beauty, peace and luxury, a press release said.

Luban (Frankincense) is a precious resin originating in Oman from the Boswellia tree and is treasured over the world for its healing and beauty properties paired with its warm and comforting essence. For thousands of years, Luban has been known as the gift of kings and has been as highly valued as gold.

As such, Luban Spa offers a myriad range of precious Omani Frankincense treatment rituals for the body and mind infused



with warm Arabian hospitality.

Located 45 minutes from Muscat International Airport and 20 minutes from downtown Muscat, Shangri-La Al Husn is Oman's exclusive cliff-top retreat where an air of peace and tranquility prevail.

The resort caters to adult guests aged over 16 and offers a locally inspired guest experience, amenities, privileges, and bespoke tours to the most discerning travellers.

Touches from Oman's rich heritage begin from the moment of arrival at the palatial Al Husn - meaning 'Castle' in Arabic. Designed to reference the historic architecture of Omani forts - guests are immersed in the courtyard design elements, arches, water features and palm trees.



Bank Nizwa initiative supports tourism in Oman

Bank Nizwa, has been at the forefront of conceptualising innovative campaigns to support the economic diversification goals of the sultanate.

Recently, the bank hosted a creative two-day event titled ‘What is happening in Nizwa’. The event brought together 12 credible social media influencers in Nizwa and also welcomed a number of individuals from the local community as guests, a press release said.

The social media influencers, who were selected based on the values they exhibit and their skills in the field of videography, were divided into four groups to

allow them to compete on conceptualising unique video ideas to promote Nizwa.

The teams were then given a map highlighting the main attractions in Nizwa that included popular historical and tourist sites like Nizwa Fort, Nizwa Souq, amongst many others. Apart from social media influencers, each team also had a tour guide to further assist the team members.

Commenting on the event, Khaled al Kayed, CEO of Bank Nizwa, said, “Bank Nizwa had organised a similar event in 2019 which was well-received by the community and had garnered

immense praise. Hence, we decided to organise another event that would once again give us an opportunity to engage with the community in Nizwa.

“‘What is happening in Nizwa’ is a one-of-a-kind event that portrays the abundant beauty of Nizwa through the eyes of creative videographers and social media influencers who also mirror the same vision, values and ethics that the bank takes great pride in upholding.

This will not only give a boost to the tourism sector but will also support national talents by giving them a platform to showcase their expertise.

At Bank Nizwa, we will continue to align ourselves with the national goals through meaningful endeavours that are creative, engaging and add value to the community.”

With an allotted time of 24 hours to explore, document and create videos of the selected destinations, the campaign ended with a number of stunning videos that were uploaded on Bank Nizwa’s account and made available for public voting. By adopting this unique approach, the bank ensured maximum reach and engagement with not just the local community but with its extensive list of followers

from all over the country.

“We also commend the work done by the social media influencers who have truly demonstrated their creativity in producing striking videos. With the help of Bank Nizwa’s extensive social media platforms, these videos will certainly contribute to inculcating interest in the minds of people and cement Nizwa’s position as a key tourist site.

The Wilayat of Nizwa is the city where the bank derives its name from and the event also played tribute to the link between the bank and this flourishing city,” Kayed added.

AGS principal participates in Aramex D2M sailing race

A’soud Global School (AGS) has announced the participation of its Principal, Lee Davies in the coveted 29th edition of the Aramex Dubai To Muscat Offshore Sailing Race (Aramex D2M).

Davies will be sharing his experience with a four-person crew, competing in the challenging 360-nautical mile sailing voyage, signifying the importance of leadership and self-reliance through adventurous activities. He set sail from Dubai to Muscat on February 5, a press release said.

The widely acclaimed event is the MENA region’s longest running offshore race, and takes place aboard the famed ‘Shebeen’ - a 33’ yacht renowned for completing several ‘Dubai To Muscat’ races across her thirty-year Gulf sailing tenure. Davies and the crew will sail from Dubai, through challenging conditions over the five-day sailing course, to culminate in Muscat.

Speaking on why he wanted to compete in the race, Davies said, “At AGS, we have just launched the Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award for our students to learn leadership and self-reliance through adventurous activity amongst other tasks.

I felt it was important to show that you are never too old to challenge yourself through taking on an adventure.

It is also wonderful to promote Oman’s seafaring traditions by raising the

profile of this established race within the community of Muscat.”

He further said, “By doing this race, I hope in some way to support the promotion of Oman as an outstanding sailing destination in the world.”

Beginning from Dubai Offshore Sailing Club (DOSC), the AGS crew will navigate through a variety of weather conditions across the shallow waters of the Arabian Gulf to the deep waters of the Indian Ocean.

They will pass through the picturesque Strait of Hormuz, with the final leg taking a south easterly route across the Gulf to the Marina Bandar Al Rowdha, in Muscat.

Twenty teams aboard a mix of keelboats and multi-hulls are competing for five successive days, enduring a maximum of 120 hours of seafaring challenges, with the fastest yachts expected to complete the race in 50 hours or less.

The competition offers a significant adventure challenge for sailors of all levels, from professionals and hard-core racers to amateurs and low-key cruisers.

The race is organised by the United Arab Emirates Sailing & Rowing Federation (UAE SARF) and DOSC, in association with the Oman Maritime Sports Committee, sponsored by Aramex and recognised by the Royal Ocean Racing Club (RORC), to promote UAE and Oman as sailing destinations.



Air Arabia launches direct flights to Osh

Air Arabia, the Middle East and North Africa’s first and largest low-cost carrier (LCC) operator, has announced the introduction of a new route to Osh, in Kyrgyzstan, from Sharjah, starting February 20.

The new service represents the second city that Air Arabia flies to after Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, a press release said.

Located in the south of the country and referred to as ‘the capital of the south’, Osh is considered the second largest and oldest city is Kyrgyzstan which represents a major economic

and cultural center of the country. Osh invites business and leisure travelers to enjoy its unique charm and mystery of the ancient East.

Ensuring the highest standards of safety at every step of the journey by following all health and safety protocols, Air Arabia has also added to the convenience and confidence of passengers by introducing free COVID-19 insurance coverage. The insurance is automatically included as part of the booking and no additional documents are required from passengers.

Concert at Expo 2020 to feature Anoushka Shankar

The one-of-a-kind, all-women Firdaus Orchestra will perform today (February 6) at Expo 2020 Dubai’s Jubilee Park complemented by the star power of multiple Grammy-nominated sitar player, producer, film composer and activist Anoushka Shankar.

Mentored by decorated musical maestro A R Rahman, the ground-breaking orchestra is made up of 23 nationalities from across the Arab world, with an age range from 16 to 51, a press release said.

Rahman said, “Representation in music is powerful. It’s incredible to welcome a musical powerhouse such as Anoushka Shankar to perform with the inspiring Firdaus Orchestra. To fill a void left behind by the master world-music icon Pandit Ravi Shankar is not easy, but his daughter Anoushka has gracefully stepped into the void with her own powerful voice, talent and courage to do brilliant collaborations with masterful elegance.

“Both Firdaus Orchestra and Anoushka symbolise a shift in the arts towards a more inclusive and beautiful world. It brings me immense joy to stage this show at the Expo 2020 Dubai.”

The orchestra’s upcoming show will feature a wide and varied repertoire, from Shankar’s virtuoso sitar performance to music from Rossini’s classic opera The Barber of Seville, as well as The Khorumi, a Georgian war dance.

The orchestra’s conductor,



Yasmina Sabbah, said she was honoured to be performing with Shankar. “I am so excited to resume our season with a very special concert.

The eclectic repertoire, ranging from great symphonic works, to contemporary and oriental compositions, represents the diversity this orchestra has to offer.”

Multitalented British-Indian-American Shankar, who has picked up seven Grammy nominations during her career and is

the youngest and first woman to receive a British House of Commons Shield, said she cannot wait to experience first-hand the iconic Expo 2020 Dubai.

“From childhood, music has taught everything from memorisation and number patterns to spirituality and the art of cultivating a craft.

It has also opened my heart to empathy and connection with other humans. Empathy is at the heart of any generous act and central to any activism,”

Anoushka said.

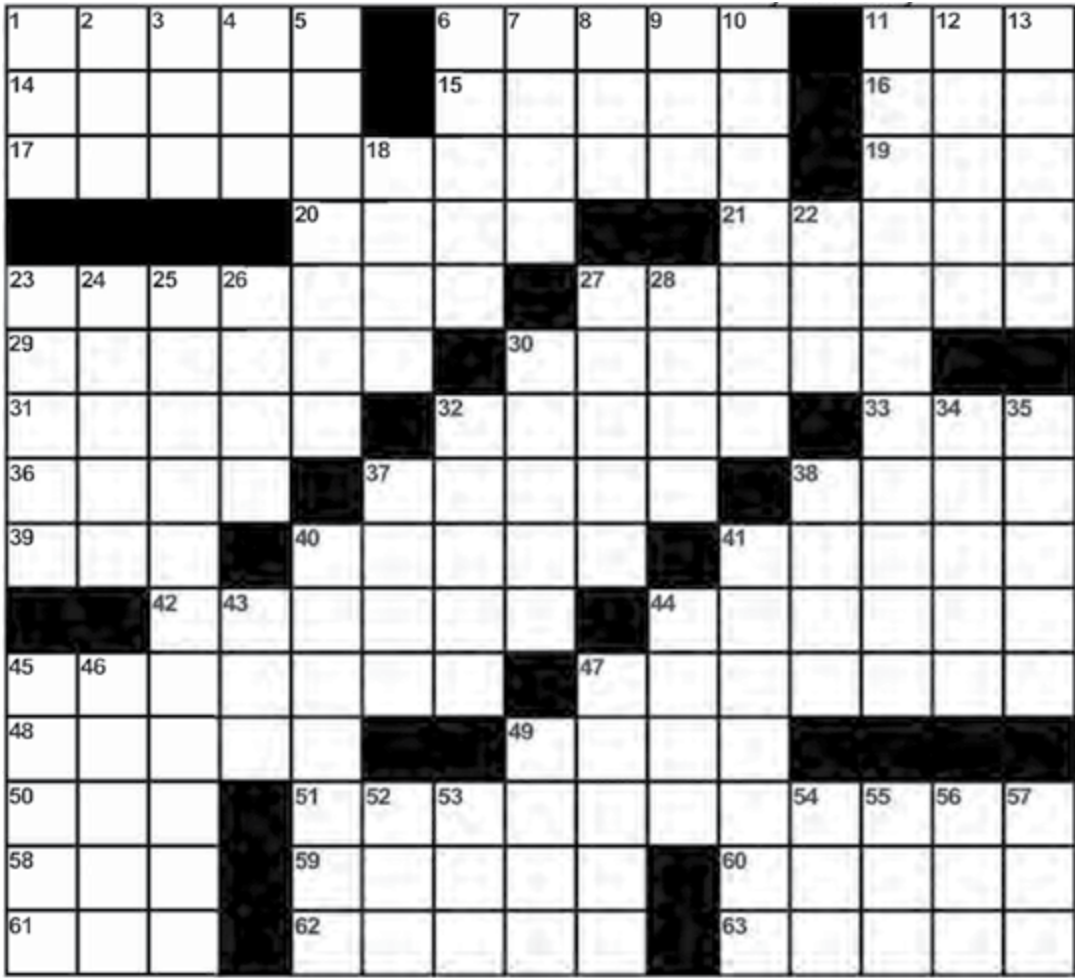
The ensemble’s collaborative process is one that resonates strongly with Shankar. “Collaboration helps me to reach heights I can’t reach on my own. When I bring my strengths to the table and they marry with someone else’s, it feels like an alchemy and magic can happen. It’s an opportunity to learn from another person, culture and tradition and to move my own work forward,” she added.

As an activist working with

numerous causes and charitable organisations, particularly ones that support women and refugees, Shankar is proud to be part of an all-female project. “Issues as big as gender-equality have no quick-fix solution, but I’m not saying they’re insurmountable.

Education plays an important part in raising humans who believe in equality across all differences. In music, this comes down to opportunity and representation,” she said.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Definitely on one's toes
6) Inundated
11) Be competitive
14) Lift a lawyer's license
15) Large book size
16) Common connector
17) Smaller part of a larger zoned area
19) Mai _ (rum cocktail)
20) Requirement
21) Hard to make out
23) One delivering a dressingdown
27) Wall candleholders
29) Brought to mind
30) Fine cigar
31) Editor's insertion symbol
32) Cop's treat in stereo-types
33) Prefix with "natal"
36) Betting figures
37) "Dined" partner
38) Tablet-producing company
39) Formerly known as, in maiden names
40) Puts money in the bank
41) Peculiar
42) Musketeer's need

44) Combat pilot's flight
45) Cause disorder to
47) Any pest
48) Strengthened a poker pot
49) One way to make a sweater
50) 1040 reviewer, briefly
51) Doing one's job, and how!
58) Primitive dwelling
59) Flynn of old Holly-wood
60) Suddenly bright stars
61) Absorbed, as a cost
62) Roll in a roller derby
63) First square of many board games

DOWN

1) Magazine revenue sources
2) Bucharest currency
3) Emulate a certain tide
4) "Awesome!" in the '90s
5) Bauble
6) Label for the skinny picture
7) Dictionary entry
8) Late boxing champion
9) "I'm quoting this ex-actly"
10) Cruel barracks "gag" of old
11) Where the Pope lives
12) Nonsensical
13) Cuts and pastes
18) Part of an apple
22) Andy's raggedy doll
23) Exploratory mission, for short
24) Give the slip to
25) Pennsylvania, to Maryland
26) Miniature guitars, in-formally
27) Loudness units
28) Yucky deposit
30) Funnel-shaped
32) Thing that courteous golfers replace
34) Like a haunted house
35) Gavel pounder's word
37) Enterprise speed unit
38) Plane-related
40) Unusable finger-prints
41) Chinese dumplings
43) "_ you nuts?"
44) Trivial tizzy
45) Russian country home
46) Contributed sugges-tion, e.g.
47) Approach to an arti-cle

49) Shoelace problem
52) Mork's home planet
53) Savings for a distant rainy day
54) Nursery schooler

55) Egg of old Rome
56) Tolstoy title word
57) Catcher of a clumsy acrobat

NOTE PAD

POEMS VAPOR FIT
VIGIL ISSUE ANA
CLOSE BEHIND IDS
SNOWY CARRIE
ESCUDO SECULAR
CLOSET COSTLY
LAM REGAL SECT'S
AVIS DRIES SLIP
TENTS INSET OBI
GOOGLE PRESET
ACCRUAL TENETS
RULERS ANIMA
ITO CLOSE COMBAT
SIS EIDER LOUPE
ENE STEAD ORBED

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You can feel that your future is absolutely bursting with potential. If anyone can smell opportunity and the chance to jump on it, it's you! Your instincts may be telling you to sit still, though, but try not to doubt yourself. Don't listen to anyone who's telling you to lower your expectations. Waiting isn't that easy for you, but if winning is the end result, it's still the best way to go for now.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Everyone gets several sets of parents, though not everyone realises it. The first ones are simply the ones we're most strongly connected with, but teachers, mentors, friends, and even mates can offer a little parenting. You should be pleased with someone who's working in that capacity. They're more than happy to help you with the thing you need the most, which is the one thing you don't yet know you need.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Your conspicuous lack of enthusiasm for handling money matters is wreaking havoc today. That doesn't mean you can't handle things, of course, just that those spreadsheets aren't nearly as much fun as hitting the town with friends. If you can put in your time now and get it all behind you, then you can use an evening out as a reward. It might be the best of both worlds.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Your subconscious has decided that you need to take a trip. It might be an actual journey to a new place you've dreamed of visiting, or it might just be a trip down memory lane. Once you're on the road, you'll be glad that you went! It feels so good to get away from it all, and you know that you're long overdue. Invite someone else along, and you might create memories that you can share forever.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Sure, you're good at your job, but you also pride yourself on being an expert at some personal hobby. Whether it's painting, photography, poetry, or something more esoteric, you should know that you're plenty good enough at it to make a little part-time cash. Earning money from what you love doesn't lessen its value! Don't pass up any chance now to share your skill with others.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

This is not the right time for hiding out, regardless of the reason. You're due for a serious run of luck, including your guaranteed quarter hour in the spotlight. The paparazzi might not actually be on the way, but your talents are sure to be showcased for the world (or some small part of it). You might be better off deciding which is your better side (for the photographers or anyone else)!

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You've been more than a bit distracted from practical business lately, largely because you're thinking about more pleasant things, maybe a new person in your life, for instance. Today, your attention is drawn back to a situation where it's badly needed: finances. In particular, joint finances need careful consideration. Don't let things go a day longer without direct intervention, and do whatever you need to do to straighten it all out permanently.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You are famous for your romantic nature. All you really need right now is someone to please, which could be a delightfully enthusiastic suitor or a long-time partner. Your companion can't help but realize how lucky they are to have been chosen, so the evening looks fine. Your only mission is to be sure you're getting a mix of indoor and outdoor activity.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

No matter what you're up to, you can expect big revelations today. They may come from you: someone may be prompting you to reveal a secret that you're not quite comfortable revealing yet. Between now and the end of the day, try to find a way to make peace with yourself and with the owner of said secret. It's got to come out somehow. Bring it out as gently as possible.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You've never had trouble waiting your turn or sitting back until the time was right to make something happen. At the moment, you're rather pleased with yourself because your tremendous patience has paid off big time. After all this time, someone you've been wanting to snuggle up with has come around, so you could be making long-term plans well before you thought you might.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You know the art of persuasion like no other. You can talk just about anyone into just about anything as long as you believe what you're saying. Right now you're feeling the need to communicate something important to someone just as important, to convince them of something they need to know. There's really no way to fail. It could be that someone else gets to them first, though, so move!

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

One particular secret that you've always wondered about, something you've never really understood from way back, is about to come to the surface now. When the truth is finally revealed, you might be equally relieved and startled to learn how it all fits together. The good news is that the outcome you've always wished for is most likely what comes out.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Which of these was an important part in the car that travelled in time in the "Back to the Future" series of films?
A. Warp drive
B. Flux capacitor
C. Difference engine
D. Nuclear fribulator

2. Which of these is a form of alternative medicine, first proposed by German physician Samuel Hahnemann in 1796, which uses reference books known as "repertories"?
A. Abroadopathy
B. Awayopathy
C. Homeopathy
D. Houseopathy

3. Which US President has figured on the cover of the magazine Sports Illustrated, twice?
A. George W Bush
B. Ronald Reagan
C. Dwight Eisenhower
D. Donald Trump

Answers: 1. b 2. c 3. b

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

H	F	A	O
G	R	U	C
A	I	H	S
D	E	F	A

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Dispute on Israel accreditation erupts at African Union summit

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia - Palestinian prime minister Mohammed Shtayyeh on Saturday urged the African Union to withdraw Israel's accreditation, bringing simmering tensions to a head as the 55-member bloc opened a two-day summit in Addis Ababa.

Even as the continent reels from a spate of military coups and the coronavirus pandemic, the relationship with Israel is expected to figure prominently during the summit this weekend. The dispute was set in motion last July when Moussa Faki Mahamat, chair of the African Union Commission, accepted Israel's accreditation to the bloc, triggering a rare dispute within a body that values consensus.

As heads of state gathered in Ethiopia's capital on Saturday, Shtayyeh called on the body to reject Faki's move.

"Israel should never be rewarded for its violation and for the apartheid regime it does impose on the Palestinian people," he said. "Your excellencies, I'm sorry to report to you that the situation of the Palestinian people has only grown more precarious." The summit may see a vote on whether to back or reject Faki's decision, which could yield an unprecedented split in the bloc.

Israel's accreditation last year drew quick protest from powerful members, including South Africa and Algeria which argued that it flew in the face of AU statements supporting the Palestinian Territories.

Earlier on Saturday Faki said the AU's commitment to the Palestinian push for independence was 'unchanging and can only continue to go stronger'. He defended Israel's accred-



People walk in front of a banner displayed as part of 35th ordinary summit of the African Union in Addis Ababa, on Friday (AFP)

itation, however, saying it could be 'an instrument in the service of peace' while calling for 'a serene debate' on the issue.

‘Resurgence of military coups’

This year's summit comes as the continent grapples with a string of military coups and the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. Four member states have been suspended by the AU's Peace and Security Council since mid-2021 because of unconstitutional changes of government - most recently Burkina Faso, where soldiers ousted President Roch Marc Christian Kabore last month.

Addressing African foreign ministers this week, AU Commission chair Moussa Faki Mahamat denounced a 'worrying resurgence of military coups'.

But the AU has been accused of an inconsistent response to the putsches, notably by not suspending Chad after a military council took over following the death of longtime President Idriss Deby Itno on the battlefield last April. The summit should discuss how to be more proactive in addressing factors that spark coups, including terrorism-related instability and frustration over constitutional revisions that extend leaders' time in power, said Solomon Dersso, founder of the AU-focused Amani Africa think tank.

"It is only when crisis hits that we say, 'Gosh, how come this country is falling apart like this so quickly?'" Solomon said.

Disease and diplomacy

On Saturday, South African

President Cyril Ramaphosa, who is attending the summit virtually, is expected to provide an update on Africa's response to the coronavirus pandemic, nearly two years after the continent's first case was detected in Egypt. As of January 26, only 11 per cent of Africa's more than one billion people had been fully vaccinated, according to the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

The African Union is also facing pressure to push for a ceasefire in Ethiopia, where a 15-month war has killed thousands of people and, the UN says, driven hundreds of thousands to the brink of starvation. It is unclear whether and how leaders will address the conflict, which pits Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government against fighters from the northern

Tigray region.

The fact that Ethiopia hosts the AU makes any intervention by the bloc especially delicate, and Faki waited until last August - nine months after fighting began - to appoint Nigeria's former president Olusegun Obasanjo as a special envoy tasked with trying to broker a ceasefire. Ethiopia has also held a seat on the Peace and Security Council, though it failed in a bid to stay on the 15-member body this week, diplomats said.

"AU member states should not ignore the serious crimes committed by all warring parties, including federal government forces, in Ethiopia's conflict," Carine Kaneza Nantulya, Africa advocacy director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement on Friday.

AFP



An aerial view of burnt buildings from fires in Mingin Township, in Sagaing Division, on Thursday (AFP)

Myanmar villagers accuse junta troops of burning homes

Bangkok, Thailand - Myanmar villagers and anti-coup fighters have accused troops of burning hundreds of homes in the country's restive northwest, as the junta seeks to crush resistance to its rule. Mass protests against last year's coup have been met with a brutal military crackdown, and violence has flared across Myanmar as civilians form 'people's defence forces' (PDF) to oppose the junta.

A woman from Bin village in the Sagaing region, which has seen recent clashes, said troops had arrived in the early hours of Monday.

"They shelled artillery and fired guns before coming in," she said on Friday, adding that the sound had sent villagers fleeing.

Troops then set fire to around 200 houses, including her own, she said, requesting anonymity.

"We could not bring anything with us. We took some warm clothes only, and then we just ran away." Troops also torched houses in nearby Inn Ma Hte village after a local pro-junta militia was attacked by anti-coup fighters who then fled, according to one of the rebels.

"When the PDF left the village, the army burnt it down," the fighter said, adding that 600 houses had been torched.

Local media also reported that

hundreds of homes had been razed in the two villages, and images obtained by AFP purporting to be of Bin village showed the remains of dozens of burnt-out buildings. AFP could not independently verify the reports from the remote region.

The fires consumed properties, motorbikes and carts, said another local who was helping to coordinate aid for those displaced from Inn Ma Hte.

"For them, it will be difficult to regain their livelihoods," he said, requesting anonymity.

State-run TV ran a report on Thursday accusing PDF fighters of starting the fires, and published images it claimed showed burnt-out buildings destroyed by 'terrorists'.

The Southeast Asian country has been in chaos since a coup last February, with more than 1,500 people killed in a crackdown on dissent, according to a local monitoring group.

In August the junta said it was considering raising village militias to combat opposition to its rule, as it struggles to assert control over swathes of the country.

In mid-December the United States and UN condemned the junta over 'credible and sickening' reports of the killing of 11 villagers in the Sagaing region.

AFP

Iran: US steps on sanctions 'good but not enough'

Tehran, Iran - US steps on lifting sanctions are 'good but not enough', Iran's foreign minister said on Saturday, hours after Washington announced it was waiving some sanctions on Iran's civilian nuclear programme.

"The lifting of some sanctions can, in the true sense of the word, translate into their good will. Americans talk about it, but it should be known that what happens on paper is good but not enough," Hossein Amir-Abdollahian was quoted as saying by ISNA news agency.

The US State Department on Friday said it was waiving sanctions on Iran's civilian nuclear programme in a technical step necessary to return to the 2015 nuclear agreement.

The waiver allows other countries and companies to participate in Iran's civilian nuclear programme without triggering US sanctions on them, in the name of promoting safety and non-proliferation.

Iran's civilian programme includes increasing stockpiles of enriched uranium.

The step came as talks to restore the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, which then president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from in 2018, were at an advanced stage.

Amir-Abdollahian reiterated that one of the 'main issues' in the talks is obtaining guarantees that the US will

US said it was waiving sanctions on Iran's nuclear programme to return to 2015 agreement

not withdraw from the 2015 deal again.

"We seek and demand guarantees in the political, legal and economic sectors," he said, adding that 'agreements have been reached in some areas'.

The Vienna talks, which include Iran, the United States, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, are at a stage where the parties have to make important 'political decisions', different parties to the negotiations said last week. "Our negotiating team in the Vienna talks is seriously pursuing obtaining tangible guarantees from the West to fulfil their commitments," Amir-Abdollahian said.

Earlier on Saturday, Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said: "Naturally, Tehran is carefully considering any action that is in the right direction of fulfilling the obligations of the JCPOA," local media reported.

Talks on reviving the nuclear deal were halted last week and the negotiators returned to their capitals for

S Korea accuses China of 'cultural appropriation'

Seoul, South Korea - A leading South Korean presidential candidate has accused China of 'cultural appropriation' after a performer wearing a traditional Korean dress appeared at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. Friday's grand opening of the Games featured a young woman carrying a Chinese flag in a pink and white Korean traditional dress - known as hanbok - as part of a group of other performers representing the country's ethnic groups.

China is home to one of the



Performers take part in opening ceremony of Beijing Games (AFP)

world's largest populations of overseas Koreans and the countries share deep cultural links.

But the appearance of the hanbok sparked anger online in South Korea, with many accusing Beijing of 'stealing' the country's culture. Lee Jae-myung, the ruling Democratic Party's candidate in upcoming presidential elections, condemned China's 'cultural appropriation'.

The office of his main opponent, conservative Yoon Suk-yeol, also accused Beijing of being 'disrespectful' in its deci-

sion to feature the dress, urging Seoul to seek an apology from China. South Korean culture minister Hwang Hee - who attended Friday's opening ceremony - said Seoul has no plans to officially complain to Beijing over the costume.

But, he added, the issue 'may create misunderstandings' between the two countries.

Seo Kyoung-duk, a professor at Sungshin Women's University and activist, said the incident would serve as an opportunity to "introduce our traditional culture

to people around the world."

"Our history and culture must be protected by ourselves," he wrote on Facebook.

South Korea and China have often clashed over issues of cultural heritage. Beijing's efforts to label kimchi - a staple of Korean cuisine made of cabbage - as a variant of Chinese pickled vegetables known as pao cai sparked fury in the South, where the side-dish is a much-loved accompaniment to almost every meal.

AFP

US recommends release of Guantanamo detainee

Washington, US - American authorities have recommended releasing a mentally ill inmate from Guantanamo Bay and repatriating him to Saudi Arabia, according to a government document published on Friday.

Suspected of being Al Qaeda's intended 20th hijacker for the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States, Mohammed al-Qahtani was tortured by interrogators at the US military base in Cuba where he has been detained for nearly two decades.

The government dropped its case against him in 2008 due to the abuse he experienced at the prison.

The detention of al-Qahtani is 'no longer necessary to protect against a continuing significant threat to the security of the United States', the Periodic Review Board, a panel composed of several US national security agencies, said in a summary of its



This file photo shows abandoned military detention centre Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay on January 27, 2017 (AFP)

decision. In its final determination dated February 4, the board said al-Qahtani was 'eligible for transfer' and recommended that he be repatriated to Saudi Arabia where he could receive comprehensive mental health care and

be enrolled in a rehabilitation centre for extremists.

The body noted his 'significantly compromised mental health condition and available family support'.

Security measures, including

surveillance and travel restrictions, were also recommended.

Al-Qahtani was one of the first prisoners sent to Guantanamo in January 2002.

He had flown to Orlando, Florida on August 4, 2001, but

was denied entry to the country and sent back to Dubai.

He was eventually captured in Afghanistan in December 2001.

His torture at the prison was widely documented and spurred on international human rights groups' calls for the site to be shut down. He was subjected to prolonged isolation, sleep deprivation, sexual humiliation and other abuses.

"We tortured Qahtani," Susan Crawford, a top judicial official in the Bush administration said in 2009, according to a *Washington Post* article.

In January, the United States approved the release of five of the remaining 39 men still at Guantanamo.

Ten others, including the alleged mastermind of the September 11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, known as 'KSM', are awaiting trial by a military commission.

AFP

China's Xi Jinping hosts banquet for world leaders after 2 years of isolation

Beijing, China - Chinese President Xi Jinping hosted a banquet on Saturday for heads of state and international organisations attending the Winter Olympics, part of a diplomatic blitz following nearly two years without face-to-face meetings due to the pandemic.

Xi has launched a diplomatic marathon in the leadup to the Games, meeting with Russian president and 'old friend' Vladimir Putin on Friday and attending the Olympics opening ceremony later in the day with dozens of foreign guests.

Beijing is keen to shore up international support and pull off a Games that will burnish its reputation, despite multiple countries including the United States, Australia, Britain and Canada announcing diplomatic boycotts over China's rights record.

Dozens of dignitaries - many from autocratic nations friendly to Beijing - were treated to musical performances and a traditional handicrafts display

alongside the meal at the Great Hall of the People, state media reported.

This week's meetings are a striking change for Xi, who has avoided travelling abroad or meeting foreign visitors face-to-face since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

China has largely closed its borders for the last two years in a zero-COVID strategy that has seen daily infections dwindle.

Besides Putin, the banquet guestlist included Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as well as a handful of leaders from Europe and Asia Pacific, according to Chinese state media.

Heads of international bodies including the World Health Organization's Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, whom state media said was among the Olympic torchbearers, were



Vladimir Putin (left) and Xi Jinping arrive to pose for a photograph during their meeting in Beijing on Friday (AFP)

also invited.

Xi gave a toast at the banquet calling for all present to 'work together for a world of durable peace', according to an official transcript.

State broadcaster CCTV said International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres also gave speeches praising China's management of

Xi has launched a diplomatic marathon in the lead up to the Games, meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin on Friday and attending the Olympics opening ceremony later in the day with dozens of foreign guests

venues as its centrepiece, lit from above by crystal chandeliers. Chefs also recreated scenes from nature using food, including a group of frolicking panda figurines.

The Chinese president had individual meetings on the sidelines of the banquet on Saturday, including reaffirming his

support for the Kazakh president, state broadcaster CCTV reported.

Beijing in January praised Tokayev's 'strong measures' against protesters after the Kazakh leader took a hardline approach to quell demonstrations - including authorising his forces to shoot to kill.

On Saturday, Xi told his Kazakh counterpart that China 'is ready to help Kazakhstan maintain stability', according to a readout after the meeting.

Xi was photographed greeting Putin on Friday with both men going maskless, even though the Russian leader had skipped the lengthy quarantine normally required in China for people arriving from overseas.

The two signed a joint statement criticising the United States' global influence and opposing the further expansion of NATO, amid a diplomatic standoff between Moscow and Washington over Ukraine.

AFP

German chancellor seeks to build trust in Washington debut

Berlin, Germany - Olaf Scholz makes his Washington debut as German chancellor on Monday, trying to dispel doubts over Berlin's resolve to stand up to Russia in the standoff over Ukraine.

As Scholz seeks to emerge from the long shadow of his veteran predecessor Angela Merkel, the new German leader will meet US President Joe Biden with several points of friction on the table.

While the US under Barack Obama relied heavily on Merkel's unique rapport with Russian President Vladimir Putin after Moscow's annexation of Crimea, Scholz has come under fire on both sides of the Atlantic for his vague stance in the current crisis.

Biden has taken pains to restore relations with Europe after the mutual recriminations of the Donald Trump years, but critics say Scholz has made that task more complicated.

Berlin's refusal to consent to shipping arms to Ukraine, its often muddled messaging on potential sanctions and above all its refusal to call off the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project to provide cheap Russian gas to Germany have all vexed Washington.



Olaf Scholz (AFP)

They have turned in a shaky start faced with surging coronavirus infections and the looming prospect of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Scholz has often struggled with his messaging given divisions within the government and the influence of 'Putinversteher' (Putin sympathisers) in his own party who tend to view Washington more suspiciously than Moscow.

The German coalition agreement sets out a 'restrictive' arms export policy, arguing that sending weapons into conflict zones is more likely to fuel than resolve them.

But several European partners as well as the US administration have argued this leaves Ukraine particularly vulnerable as tens of thousands of Russian troops mass on its borders, and could tempt Putin rather than placate him.

'Stand up for security'

Despite occasional rifts, close transatlantic ties have remained a cornerstone of German foreign policy since World War II.

It is for this reason that the sour tone with Washington has opened the German chancellor up to stinging rebukes.

Johann Wadephul, a leading MP with Merkel's Christian Democrats, told AFP he had received emails from colleagues in Washington 'raising doubts about Germany's reliability'.

John Kornblum, a former US ambassador to Germany, noted Berlin and Washington had long fostered different notions of stability. "Germany is a country which does not like to take risks, it's a country which feels very uncomfortable if other people take risks," he told a Johns Hopkins foreign policy podcast recently.

AFP

'Lost their marbles'

The chairwoman of the German parliament's defence affairs committee, Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, was even more alarmist about the young government's standing in Washington.

"In some quarters in the US there is the impression that the Germans have lost their marbles," she told AFP.

Scholz took office in December at the helm of a complex three-way coalition between his Social Democrats, the ecologist Greens and the pro-business Free Democrats.

Sculpture of Algerian hero vandalised in France

Amboise, France - Vandals in central France damaged a sculpture of an Algerian military hero who resisted France's colonisation of the North African country, just hours before it was inaugurated on Saturday, AFP journalists reported.

The lower part of the steel sculpture in the town of Amboise, where Emir Abdelkader was imprisoned from 1848 to 1852, was badly damaged in the attack which comes in the midst of an election campaign dominated by harsh rhetoric on immigration and Islam.

Amboise mayor Thierry Boutard said he was 'ashamed' of those responsible and decided to proceed with the inauguration ceremony regardless.

"I was ashamed that someone would treat an artwork and an artist in this way," he told AFP.

"My second sentiment is of



The sculpture in tribute to Emir Abdelkader is seen vandalised prior to its inauguration, in Amboise, central France, on Saturday (AFP)

course one of indignation. This is a day of harmony and unity and this kind of behaviour is unspeakable," he said.

Police said they were investigating the incident.

The sculpture was commissioned to coincide with the 60th anniversary of Algeria's independence from France, won after a brutal eight-year liberation war that continues to poison relations between the two countries.

It was suggested by a historian tasked by President Emmanuel Macron with coming up with ways to heal the memories of the war and 132 years of French rule in Algeria.

The sculpture of Abdelkader, an Islamic-scholar-turned-military-leader who resisted French rule but was feted as a hero in France for his later defence of Christians in the Middle East, looks across the Loire river at the

castle where he was imprisoned.

'Nauseating atmosphere'

Algeria's ambassador to France Mohamed Antar Daoud, who attended the inauguration, condemned the attack as an act of 'unspeakable baseness' and said he was confident that the halting process of reconciliation underway between the two countries would endure.

Ouassila Soum, a 37-year-old French woman of Algerian background who attended the inauguration, said the vandalism left her 'with a knot in my stomach'.

"It's a shame and yet it's not surprising with the rhetoric of hate and the nauseating current atmosphere," said Soum, hailing the sculpture as 'a symbol of the reconciliation between peoples and civilisations'.

AFP

Cyclone Batsirai approaches Madagascar, poses 'very serious threat' to millions

Vatomandry, Madagascar - Madagascar braced up for Cyclone Batsirai set to hit the eastern parts of the Indian Ocean island on Saturday, with powerful winds and torrential rains posing a 'very serious threat' to millions.

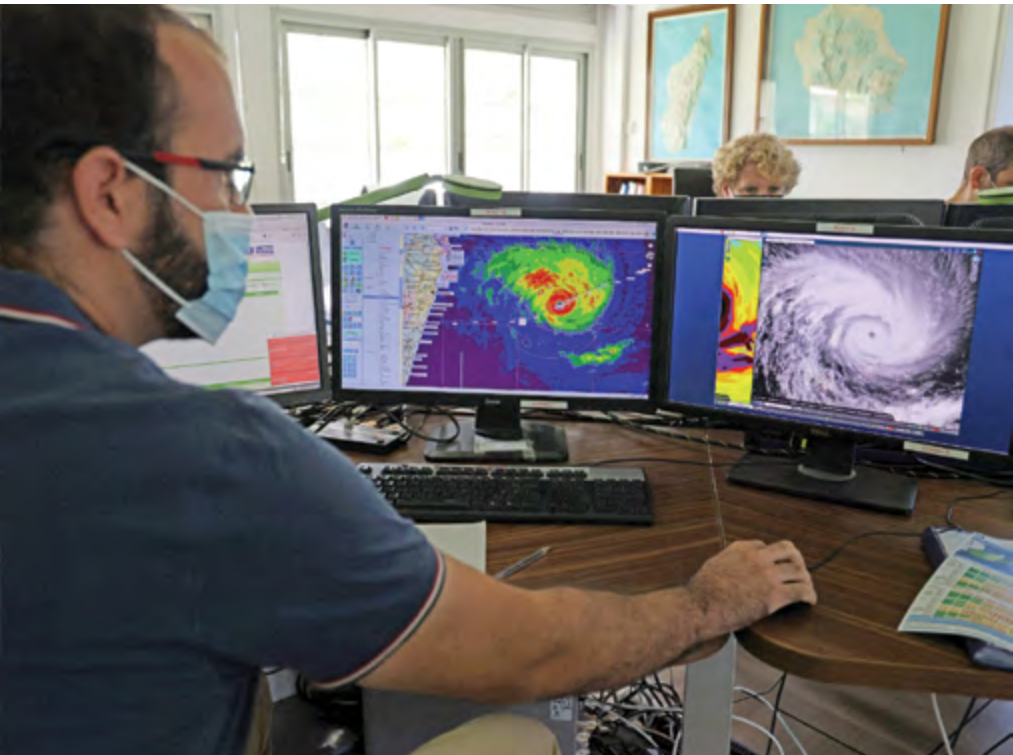
Residents hunkered down before the storm makes landfall in an impoverished country still recovering from the deadly Tropical Storm Ana in late January.

The Meteo-France weather service warned of winds of up to 260km per hour and waves as high as 15m.

The weather service said Batsirai would likely make landfall on Saturday afternoon as an intense tropical cyclone, 'presenting a very serious threat to the area' after passing Mauritius and drenching the French island of La Reunion for two days with torrential rain.

Residents in the eastern coastal town of Vatomandry were stockpiling supplies in preparation for the storm.

"We have been stocking up for a week, rice but also grains because with the electricity cuts we can not keep meat or fish," said Odette Nirina, 65, a hotelier in the seafont town of



Forecasters of Meteo France are seen monitoring 'Batsirai', in Saint-Denis in La Reunion island last week. (AFP)

Vatomandry.

"I have also stocked up on coal. Here we are used to cyclones," she told AFP.

Gusts of winds of more than 50km/h were pummelling Vatomandry town on Saturday morning accompanied by intermittent rain.

Residents have reinforced

corrugated iron roofs with sandbags.

'We are very nervous'

The United Nations said it was ramping up its preparedness with aid agencies, placing rescue aircraft on standby and stockpiling humanitarian supplies.

The impact of Batsirai on

Madagascar is expected to be 'considerable', Jens Laerke, spokesman for the United Nations' humanitarian organisation OCHA, told reporters in Geneva on Friday.

At least 131,000 people were affected by Ana across Madagascar in late January. At least 58 people were killed, mostly in

the capital Antananarivo. The storm also hit Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, causing dozens of deaths.

The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) pointed to estimates from national authorities that some 595,000 people could risk being directly affected by Batsirai, and 150,000 more might be displaced due to new landslides and flooding.

"We are very nervous," Pasqualina Di Sirio, who heads the WFP's programme in Madagascar, told reporters by video-link from the Indian Ocean island. Search and rescue teams on the island have been placed on alert and residents reinforced their homes.

Inland in Ampasipotsy Gare, sitting on top of his house, Tsarafidy Ben Ali, a 23-year-old coal seller, held down corrugated iron sheets on the roof with large bags filled with soil.

"The gusts of wind are going to be very strong. That's why we're reinforcing the roofs," he told AFP. The storm poses a risk to at least 4.4mn people in one way or another, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Canada protest against vaccine mandates set to be 'dangerous'

Ottawa, Canada - A week-long occupation of Canada's capital by truckers opposed to vaccine mandates was set to ramp up Saturday with thousands of demonstrators expected to pile into Ottawa while other cities also braced for protests.

Police said they were expecting up to 2,000 protesters as well as 1,000 counter-protesters to join the hundreds already parked in front of parliament, but organisers said tens of thousands were headed to Ottawa.

Similar protests are also planned for Toronto, Quebec City and Winnipeg.

"This remains... an increasingly volatile and increasingly dangerous demonstration," Ottawa police Chief Peter Slosly told a news conference on Friday.

Following thousands of complaints from local residents of threats and harassment by protesters who have made even sleep difficult with incessant honking, and an online petition signed by 40,000 demanding action, Slosly vowed to crack down on what he called an 'unlawful' protest. But he did not offer a timeline.

Reached for comment by AFP, protest coordinator Jim Torma said on behalf of organisers that the protesters would not back down.

"They're not going to hide us," Torma said. "We're going to be in (politicians') faces as long as it takes" to force an end to public health restrictions aimed at slowing the spread of COVID-19.



Truckers and supporters continue to protest vaccine mandates and restrictions, in Ottawa, Canada on Friday (AFP)

With tensions already high and counter-protesters expected to now converge on the city, however, 'the prospects for confrontation remain high', warned federal Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino.

Trump backs 'Freedom Convoy'

The so-called Freedom Convoy started on Canada's Pacific coast in late January and picked up supporters along its 4,400km trek to the capital, as well as more than 10mn Canadian dollars (US\$8mn) in online donations.

However, the online fundraising platform Go-

FundMe said on Friday that it had removed the Freedom Convoy fundraiser from its site after receiving evidence from law enforcement that the demonstration 'has become an occupation, with police reports of violence and other unlawful activity'.

The number of protesters in Ottawa had peaked at several thousand last Saturday, according to officials, before dwindling to a few hundred by midweek.

Donald Trump Jr. and Elon Musk have both tweeted support for the truckers.

On Friday, former US president Donald Trump encouraged them too, saying in a statement

that the 'harsh policies of far left lunatic Justin Trudeau... has destroyed Canada with insane COVID mandates'.

A recent Abacus poll showed 32 per cent of Canadians supported the protesters, although only 10 per cent of Canadian adults are unvaccinated.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who is isolating after contracting COVID, has refused to meet with the truckers, as others stepped up criticisms of the protesters, accusing them of racism and even terrorism - labels organisers reject.

This weekend, bridges and roadways into Ottawa will be blocked, with protesters asked

to park in lots on the outskirts and walk or use city transit to downtown.

In Toronto, Mayor John Tory said officials were doing "everything we can to avoid the situation that we're seeing in Ottawa." Toronto police started closing off streets late on Friday and installing CCTV cameras to help keep an eye on the planned demonstrations.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford, meanwhile, urged the truckers in Ottawa to go home, echoing the protesters' dislike of restrictions but insisting they are 'necessary' to keep the population safe.

AFP



People queue at a mobile specimen collection station for COVID-19 testing in the Mongkok area of Hong Kong on Saturday (AFP)

Hong Kong reports record number of new infections

Hong Kong, China - Hong Kong's 'zero-COVID' policy was on the ropes on Saturday as authorities announced a record number of new infections, sending officials scrambling to ramp up testing capacity and warning that a tightening of virus-control measures could be needed.

Like mainland China and much of East Asia, Hong Kong has long followed a strategy of fighting the virus through contact tracing, targeted lockdowns and lengthy quarantines. And as much of the world has chosen to open up and live with COVID-19, the city has dug in its heels, with Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam insisting she was still committed to achieving 'zero-COVID' even as infections mount.

On Saturday the city recorded 351 confirmed cases, its highest daily figure since the pandemic began, with 161 cases being either untraceable or pending investigation.

"Based on the current

growth rate of cases, we estimate that facilities will soon be unable to quarantine all patients," health chief Sophia Chan told reporters. Chan urged Hong Kongers to stay at home to slow the spread of the virus, though said that sewage analysis had revealed the virus had already been found in much of the city.

Health officials also said they would loosen rules that have seen thousands of close contacts of infected people detained in a government facility, suggesting they may be able to quarantine at home depending on their risk level.

This would free up hospital beds and take into account the fact that the Omicron variant - which makes up the majority of Hong Kong's new cases - causes milder symptoms, authorities added. Last month authorities locked down thousands of residents of a public housing estate after a super-spreader event.

AFP

Austria expands its 'Everybody Gargles' COVID-19 testing system

Vienna, Austria - Throughout the day, vans loaded with bags full of COVID PCR test kits arrive at a Vienna laboratory, currently analysing an average of 370,000 tests per day.

With more than 144mn tests carried out since the beginning of the pandemic, the Alpine nation of nine million is a leader in COVID testing.

But with the latest Omicron wave sending cases spiralling in the country, health experts and policymakers are asking if widespread testing - paid by taxpayers' money - is necessary and efficient.



Employees examine the PCR gargle tests in Vienna last week (AFP)

The Lifebrain laboratory, which accounts for a major part of the country's testing, has been expanding rapidly since it began work just over a year ago on the sprawling ground of a public hospital on Vienna's outskirts.

Under the 'Alles Gurgelt' ('Everybody Gargles') system, Viennese can register online, go to a drugstore, pick up a test kit, gargle at home and then drop the kit back and wait for an email with results within 24 hours.

"It's extremely low-threshold," Lifebrain CEO Michael

Havel tells AFP.

Better screening

Vienna came up with the system in late 2020 to offer better screening for the capital's two million people.

Havel's laboratory, which analyses the 'Everybody Gargles' tests, now employs 1,800 people full time and can analyse up to 800,000 tests a day and run 24/7.

A third of its workforce were hired in the last two months alone. The city pays six euros (US\$6.80) per test to drugstores and others giving them

out. At the laboratory, workers from dozens of countries drag the bags full of test kits through the aisles of the laboratory set up in rooms in several old buildings on the hospital campus.

Scanning the bar codes on the test tubes one-by-one, they place the tubes into trays for analysis in designated high-tech machines. Computers eventually spit out results saying which batches contain positive COVID samples.

Currently mainly receiving tests from Vienna, Havel says he is prepared to expand capacities within Austria. Before the

pandemic Lifebrain, which Havel co-founded, was most active providing laboratory work in Italy.

'Everybody Gargles' tests are already part of the rigorous testing regime in schools - with students tested several times a week - and Vienna is now looking to expand the system into kindergartens too.

Ulrich Elling, a researcher at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, who helped develop the gargling method, said the 'Alles Gurgelt' system was 'extremely efficient'.

AFP

Metres to go in effort to free Moroccan boy from well

Bab Berred, Morocco - Moroccan rescuers were only metres away on Saturday in their nerve-racking but increasingly urgent effort to rescue Rayan, a five-year-old boy trapped underground whom they hope to find alive.

For five days the complex and risky earth-moving operation has gripped residents of the North African kingdom and even sparked sympathy in neighbouring Algeria, a regional rival.

Abdelhadi Tamrani, an official in charge of the operation, said he had 'big hopes' of pulling the boy out alive from the well.

But the more time that passes, the more fears arise over his condition.

Rayan accidentally fell about 32m down the tight, empty shaft near his home in the remote village of Ighrane in Chefchaouen province on Tuesday afternoon.

Rescue crews, using bulldozers and front-end loaders, exca-

vated the surrounding red earth down to the level where the boy is trapped and are now digging horizontally towards him.

They face a risk of landslides, and on Saturday they had to manoeuvre around a large rock.

In darkness, crews moved a heavy pipe into position in the area. One rescuer lugged what appeared to be a jackhammer.

"We're almost there," said one of the operation's leaders, Abdesalam Makoudi, adding 'tiredness is kicking in, but the whole rescue team is hanging on'.

Working through darkness

A glacial cold has gripped this mountainous and impoverished region of Rif, which is at an elevation of about 700m.

On Thursday Moroccan media reported that rescuers managed to deliver oxygen and water to the bottom of the well.

Thousands of people gath-



Moroccan emergency service climbers work to rescue Rayan from a well shaft he fell into, in the village of Ighrane on Friday (AFP)

ered around the site, surrounded by olive trees, where AFP reporters said the tension was palpable. Some applauded to encourage the rescuers.

"We are living a real catastrophe in the Ighrane region. We pray to God that he can be saved, to bring happiness to all Moroccans," Othmane Azzouz, one of the onlookers, told AFP.

The shaft, just 45cm across, was too narrow to reach Rayan, and widening it was deemed too risky - so earth-movers dug a wide slope into the hill to reach him from the side.

The operation has made the landscape resemble a construction site. It involves engineers and topographers, and was made more complex by the mix of rocky and sandy soils.

Red-helmeted Civil Defence personnel have at times been suspended by rope, as if on a cliff face.

Overnight they worked non-stop under powerful floodlights

that gave a gloomy air to the scene.

'Moving a mountain'

"I keep up hope that my child will get out of the well alive," Rayan's father told public television 2M on Friday evening. "I thank everyone involved and those supporting us in Morocco and elsewhere."

The boy's mother told Moroccan media that Rayan had been playing nearby when he disappeared on Tuesday afternoon.

"The whole family went out to look for him then we realised that he'd fallen down the well," she said with tears in her eyes.

The drama has sparked an outpouring of sympathy online, with the Arabic hashtag #SaveRayan trending across North Africa.

"Rescuers are literally in the process of moving a mountain to save little #Rayan. I hope that their efforts will not be in vain and that those who prayed for

him will see their prayers answered," one internet user wrote.

The boy's fate has attracted crowds of people to the site, where parked cars lined the roads around the village and supporters are camping.

Police reinforcements have been sent and metal barricades erected in an effort to prevent the swarm of onlookers from impeding rescuers.

But one volunteer said he was there to help.

"We've been here for three days. Rayan is a child of our region. We won't leave until he's out of the well," he said.

The accident echoes a tragedy in Spain in early 2019 when a two-year-old child died after falling into an abandoned well 25cm wide and more than 70m deep. Julien Rosello's body was recovered after a search and rescue operation that lasted 13 days.

AFP

BIODIVERSITY

ORCHIDS AND MORE

Britain's Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew has unveiled its annual orchid festival, turning a sliver of southwest London into a riot of tropical colour and flora celebrating biodiversity hotspot Costa Rica.

Kew's 26th orchid showcase, which opened yesterday, has this year been themed around the central American country hailed for conservation and features more than 5,000 orchids, some native to the nation on the Panama isthmus.

They include the national flower, a critically endangered orchid - named Guarianthe skinneri - bearing pink-purple petals and found in humid forests on tree trunks and branches or on granite cliff banks at some altitudes.

The month-long exhibition, housed in Kew conservatory set to tropical temperatures and conditions, also promotes Costa Rica's famed fauna, with handcrafted sculptures of some of animals made from natural materials and nestled in amongst the plants.

"Through the glass house we tried to bring in as much colour to just transport people into that sort of feel good world of Costa Rica... to make it really pretty and smashing," florist and Kew volunteer Henck Roling told AFP.

The Dutchman, who in keeping with the orchid theme had dyed his hair and beard bright colours and was adorned with an orange garland, said the team had spent much of the past two years thinking about the festival. It is returning to Kew after a one-year hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Around 6,000 plants have been brought in for the showcase, including the 5,000 orchids originating from around the world.

Biggest plant family

Various individual displays of the different orchid types are dotted around Kew's expansive and misty Princess of Wales conservatory, interspersed between water features, ferns, monstera and other greenery.

The colourful host of plants began arriving in January and took dozens of volunteers and staff weeks to assemble by hand into their immaculate displays, said Alberto Trinco, acting supervisor of the conservatory.

"It's one of the biggest plant families and they are such an amazing array of shapes, colours, and other adaptations and co-evolution with their pollinators, which is quite mind-blowing sometimes," he added.

A section of the exhibition delves deeper into orchids, explaining everything from family tree and anatomy to their use for celebrations in Costa Rica.

Trinco noted the organisers chose the country, which is home to more than 1,600 orchid species, to 'celebrate its biodiversity, its effort towards conservation and its culture'.

The Central American nation covers just 0.03 percent of the planet but is home to six per cent of the world's flora and fauna species and has been praised for how it manages the natural environment.

UK's Kew pays tribute to Costa Rica at annual orchid fest. Around 6,000 plants, including 5,000 orchids, are on display



Through the glass house we tried to bring in as much colour to just transport people into that sort of feel good world of Costa Rica... to make it really pretty and smashing

HENCK ROLING
Florist and Kew volunteer

Costa Rica was last year one of the inaugural winners of Prince William's UN-backed Earthshot Prize, in recognition of its efforts to tackle environmental degradation and promote sustainability.

Alex Munro, a botanist at Kew specialising in discovering new plant species in the tropics, said he and colleagues had worked with the Costa Rican ambassador in London to help inform some of the science behind the exhibits.

"They have lots of species in Costa Rica which you wouldn't find anywhere else," he said. "They capture fully the diversity of orchids in the Americas."

Other countries previously as a theme for the yearly showcase include Indonesia, India and Colombia.

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ROYAL RUINS

BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON

Saddam Hussein's palace complex near Baghdad International Airport

Iraq struggles to make use of Saddam Hussain's crumbling palaces, most in a deplorable state, especially in Tikrit, the 'city of palaces' near Baghdad, on the Tigris river

Scattered across Iraq lie more than 100 opulent palaces and villas built by former dictator Saddam Hussein - some in use, many in ruins like much of the war-scarred country.

With their marble columns, ornate carvings and gaudy furniture, they reflected the megalomania and delusions of grandeur of Saddam, who visited some of them only once or twice.

In his Babylon residence, the feared strongman's profile is engraved in bas-relief like that of the Mesopotamian emperor he idolised - Chaldean dynasty king Nebuchadnezzar II.

In many places, the initials 'S H' are still visible as reminders of the despot who was toppled by the 2003 US-led invasion, captured later that year, and executed in 2006.

Most of his palaces were looted during the chaos of the invasion, when thieves scavenged all they could carry, even ripping electric cables out of walls. Since then, only a handful of the palatial residences have been given a second lease of life, often as military bases or public administrations, more rarely as museums.

"We can turn palaces into museums, at least in Baghdad - a tapestry museum, for example, or on the royal family or Islamic art," said Laith Majid Hussein, director of Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage.

But he conceded that rehabilitating many of Iraq's 'gigantic castles' would require 'astronomical sums'. Red tape and entrenched graft spell other hurdles, said a senior government official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Bureaucracy and corruption hinder the restoration of these palaces to turn them into tourist complexes

or heritage centres," he said.

Symbol of dictatorship

Saddam, during his more than two decades in power in the oil-rich country, had many monuments and palaces built while cheerfully defying the Western embargo of the 1990s.

In the turmoil of war, many were damaged in fighting or used as bases by US and other foreign forces. In Baghdad, three palaces now house the presidency and the prime minister's offices.

The sumptuous Al Faw complex - encircled by an artificial lake - has since 2021 housed the private American University, built by an Iraqi investor. Al Faw, situated near the airport for Saddam's VIP guests,



We have managed to transform this symbol of dictatorship into a symbol of culture

QAHTAN AL OBEIDI

once served as an American base. Now its stone and marble buildings house auditoriums, amphitheatres and a food court.

The university's president Michael Mulnix voiced pride about the project which saw 'the palace of a former dictator and a fairly ruthless man' become an institution of higher learning. While the main palace had survived relatively intact, he said, all of the other buildings were destroyed.

"The windows were all broken out, there were birds flying around, snakes on the floor, literally. So it was

very messed up. We had to go in and do substantial renovation."

In the southern city of Basra, three palaces remain. Two are used by the Hashed al Shaabi, a pro-Iranian paramilitary alliance now integrated into the Iraqi regular forces. The third has become an antiquities museum.

"We have managed to transform this symbol of dictatorship into a symbol of culture," said Qahtan al Obeidi, the provincial head of antiquities and heritage.

In a deplorable state

To date, he said, Basra is the only Iraqi province to have transformed a palace into a heritage building. Iraq has a total of 166 Saddam-era residences, villas and other complexes, he added.

An architect from the former regime, also asking not to be named, said that since 2003, Iraqi governments had built little and proven unable to match what Saddam erected.

Majid Hussein said, in Babylon province, authorities plan to turn a palace overlooking the UNESCO World Heritage site there into a museum. The imposing palace sits atop a hill of the city whose history dates back 4,000 years. After years of neglect the walls are covered in graffiti and chandeliers have been broken, but some outer buildings now house a hotel complex.

"When we first came in 2007, the site was in a deplorable state," said its director, Abdel Satar Naji, who added that local authorities have decided to turn it into a recreational centre.

The Iraqi city known as the 'city of palaces' was Tikrit, the despot's home town northwest of Baghdad on the Tigris river. The presidential complex boasted some 30 villas, but they, too, are now an abandoned memorial to excess.

AFP



Saddam Hussein's palace complex turned into an antiquities museum in the southern city of Basra



A portrait of Saddam Hussein on one of his palaces in the Babylon Tourist Resort in Babil Governorate, in Iraq



The entrance to Saddam Hussein's palace complex turned into an antiquities museum, in Basra



Saddam Hussein's palace in the Babylon Tourist Resort, in Babil Governorate in central Iraq

Rohit Sharma returns to lead India in 1000th ODI



Indian cricket team captain Rohit Sharma (3R) speaks with teammates during a training session at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Motera on February 5, 2022, on the eve of the first one day international (ODI) cricket match against West Indies. (AFP)

INDIA VS WEST INDIES

Ahmedabad, India - India will play their 1000th One Day International when they take on West Indies in Ahmedabad on Sunday, becoming the first international team to cross the four-figure mark. Rohit Sharma returns to lead the Indian team after missing the South Africa series with a hamstring injury. KL Rahul, who led the side in Rohit's absence in the 0-3 loss to South Africa in the ODI series last month, will, however, miss the first game of the series.

With Shikhar Dhawan and Ruturaj Gaikwad in isolation after testing positive for COVID-19 and Mayank Agarwal, who was later added to the ODI squad, still in quarantine, skipper Rohit Sharma confirmed to the media that Ishan Kishan would open the batting with him.

West Indies, meanwhile, come off the back of a 3-2 T20I series win against England and will hope to test their pool of players in conditions where they will play the next Men's ODI World Cup in 2023. Veteran fast bowler Kemar Roach notably made a return to their ODI squad and could be in line to play the first game with Jason Holder, Alzarri Joseph, Romario Shepherd, and Odean Smith being the other quick-bowling options in the Kieron Pollard-led side.

West Indies' ODI record in the recent past, though, isn't as compelling. They were whitewashed in Bangladesh (0-3) in early 2021 and suffered series losses to Australia (1-2) and Ireland (1-2), both at home. The latter, in par-

ticular, was a huge blow to the Windies, who are now seventh in the ICC Cricket World Cup Super League points chart with 50 points. India, being hosts, have automatically qualified to the 2023 ODI World Cup, and the Super League points do not matter as much for them.

Sharma on Saturday ruled out drastic team changes in the wake of Virat Kohli's departure.

"We have played good ODI cricket over the course of few years, more than four years actually, so suddenly a loss of series doesn't mean that there is panic," Sharma told reporters.

"South Africa series was a great learning (experience) for us as to what we didn't do collectively as a team," he added.

"What is important for us, moving forward, is the role clarity of certain individuals in the squad."

While Kohli was known for aggression in his seven-year term as captain across formats, Rohit, who has led the Mumbai Indians to five IPL titles, is known to lead with calm.

Rohit, called "Hitman" for his flamboyant batting and big hitting, said he will not tinker with the template that Kohli created.

"When Virat was captaining, I was the vice-captain so we pretty much went about the team in a similar fashion," said Rohit. "I just have to take it from where he left. The team pretty much knows what is expected out of them. And we want to continue the same template," he added.

ICC/AFP



Ishan [Kishan] is the only option we have and he will open with me in the first ODI. Shikhar [Dhawan], Ruturaj [Gaikwad] and Shreyas [Iyer] are still in isolation. Mayank [Agarwal] was added to the squad and he is still in quarantine.

ROHIT SHARMA



We've got to believe that nothing is impossible and continue to be happy for one another's success and continue to build as a team

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Tears and anger as Australia cricket coach Langer departs

Sydney, Australia - Australian cricket greats responded to Justin Langer's resignation as men's coach with sadness Saturday, hailing his role in turning a scandal-tainted team around.

Langer, a storied Test batter-turned-manager, left the role Saturday after failing to secure the support of key players and following acrimonious contract talks with governing body Cricket Australia.

Langer's long-time partner at the crease Matthew Hayden led emotional tributes that were barbed with anger at the way events had unfolded.

On the verge of tears, and having to pause mid-interview to compose himself, Hayden said he was "pretty emotional" at the news. He said Langer, who took up the role in 2018 as Australian cricket was reeling from the sandpaper ball-tampering scandal that shocked the nation, had ended a toxic win-at-all-costs culture and made Australians



File photo taken on January 13 of Australian coach Justin Langer (AFP)

proud of their team again.

"He came into one of the most toxic environments in Australian sport" Hayden told ABC.

"We in the Australian cricket community love Justin because he came in and said 'no way, you know we're going to do we're going to play this game in a manner that actually is going to make Australians proud again'."

"Not about winning, not about

losing - because you know, plenty of that professional sport - but to make the public proud."

"For that father to look down at his son and go 'this is the Australian cricket team'. Gosh, that's what JL brought back to us," he said, his voice wavering.

Langer and Hayden became one of the most prolific opening batting combinations in history, seeing off the new ball in 113

Tests for a combined 5,655 runs at an average of 51.58.

Despite Cricket Australia's insistence that Langer was "not only a legend of the game but an outstanding individual," there is simmering anger at the way his departure was handled.

Another of Langer's playing partners, legendary Australian Test captain Ricky Ponting expressed his frustration while playing down talk of a widespread player revolt against Langer's brusque style.

"A very small group of the playing group and -- he believes -- a couple of other staff around the team haven't entirely loved the way that he's gone about it," Ponting said.

"That's been enough to force a man that's put his life and heart and soul into Australian cricket and done what I believe a sensational job... (that) has been enough to push him out of his dream job."

AFP

Fresh health setback for NZ great Cairns with cancer diagnosis

Wellington, New Zealand - New Zealand cricket great Chris Cairns revealed Saturday he has suffered a further health setback and has been diagnosed with bowel cancer.

Cairns was only discharged from hospital last week, five months after he underwent a life-saving heart operation and was then paralysed by a subsequent stroke.

"Another fight ahead but here's hoping this one is a swift upper cut and over in the first round," the 51-year-old, one of the world's top all-rounders in the early 2000s, said on social media.

"I was told yesterday I have bowel cancer... big shock and not what I was expecting."

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WHAT'S

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This combination of file pictures shows Egypt's forward Mohamed Salah (left) in Garoua on January 15, and Senegal's forward Sadio Mane in Yaounde on February 2 (AFP)

Wily Egypt in Senegal's path to first Cup of Nations title

Yaoundé, Cameroon - Senegal once again stand on the brink of a first Africa Cup of Nations title but they must get the better of record seven-time champions Egypt in Sunday's final in Yaounde which sees Liverpool stars Sadio Mane and Mohamed Salah face off for the trophy.

It has been a difficult tournament for Cameroon, scarred by the deadly Olembe Stadium crush of January 24 and troubled by organisational chaos and poor attendances, yet it has thrown up a heavyweight final showdown between two African giants.

Cameroon hoped to be there themselves, but the five-time AFCON winners who dreamed of lifting the trophy on home soil were beaten on penalties by the

We knew it was not going to be at all easy to get to two straight AFCON finals, but the most important for us now is to go all the way and win it

SADIO MANE

Egyptians in Thursday's semi-final.

As a country, Egypt have the experience of seven past Cup of Nations victories, although the most recent was in 2010 when they claimed their third in a row.

Salah made his international debut the following year and is now desperate to win with the Pharaohs having already been in the team that lost the 2017 final to Cameroon and then went out prematurely as hosts in 2019.

Senegal, meanwhile, have the status of Africa's top-ranked national team but also the pressure of a nation to finally claim their first Cup of Nations crown after losing to Algeria in the deciding game two and a half years ago.

"We knew it was not going to be at all easy to get to two straight AFCON finals, but the most important for us now is to go all the way and win it," Mane said after scoring one goal and making another in the 3-1 semi-

final defeat of Burkina Faso.

The Lions of Teranga are hoping it will be third time lucky in the final after they also lost the title decider in 2002, going down on penalties to Cameroon.

Aliou Cisse was the captain of that team and then the coach in 2019. Nobody knows better than him what it would mean to Senegal to get the monkey off their back.

Egyptian fatigue a factor?

His side must take advantage of the extra day's rest afforded them given their semi-final was played 24 hours earlier than that of their opponents, and Senegal have also come through all three knockout ties in 90 minutes.

In stark contrast, Carlos Queiroz's Egypt required penalties to beat the Ivory Coast in the last 16 and extra time to overcome Morocco in the quarter-finals before another shoot-out against Cameroon - the equivalent of a whole extra match in often energy-sapping conditions.

That explains why Egypt assistant coach Diaa al-Sayed suggested moving the final back a day to allow his team more time to recover. "Senegal have one extra day to train and therefore maybe we should play the final on Monday," he said.

Egypt will be without veteran Portuguese coach Queiroz after he was shown a red card against Cameroon.

AFP



Ursa Bogataj jumps during a ski jumping normal hill official training session on February 4 in Zhangjiakou (AFP)

Bogataj gives Slovenia historic ski jumping Olympic gold

Zhangjiakou, China - Ursa Bogataj came from behind to win the women's individual ski jump title at the Beijing Olympics on Saturday - Slovenia's first ever gold medal in the sport.

Bogataj trailed Germany's Katharina Althaus after her first attempt but nailed a jump of 100 metres with her second try to finish on 239.0 points.

Althaus took silver on 236.8 points, followed by Slovenia's Nika Kriznar on 232.0. "I didn't realise, but it felt very good when I saw the medal was mine," said Bogataj, who is currently third in the World Cup standings.

"Then I saw Nika had one too and I was even more happy."

Slovenia had previously won one silver and two bronze medals in Olympic ski jumping, all in men's events.

Bogataj said she hoped her golden success would boost the sport's popularity among girls in her country.

"Maybe in the future it will be as popular as it is with boys," she said.

Althaus, who is second in the World Cup standings, had a 3.1 point lead after the first jump but could not match Bogataj's dynamic second attempt. "I'm very, very happy with my silver medal -- it was a good competition for me," said Althaus, who also won silver at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games.

"It was cold but I like the cold, so it's not a problem for me." A few hundred local spectators braved freezing conditions to cheer and wave flags at Zhangjiakou National Ski Jumping Centre.

Japan's Sara Takanashi, who has a record 61 World Cup victories but has never won the Olympic title, finished fourth.

World Cup overall leader Marita Kramer of Austria was ruled out of the competition after testing positive for COVID-19.

AFP



(L-R) China's Wu Dajing and China's Ren Ziwei celebrate victory in the final A of the mixed team relay short track speed skating event (AFP)

China thrill crowd with first gold at Beijing games

Beijing, China - Hosts China claimed their first gold medal of the Beijing Winter Games on Saturday, winning the short track speed skating mixed relay on the event's dramatic Olympic debut.

On the first full day of competition, China, who were favourites going into the race, almost failed to reach the final but had a reprieve when the United States were penalised for blocking by an infield skater.

Cheered on vociferously by a small but enthusiastic crowd of

about 300 people at the Capital Indoor Stadium, China crossed the finish line in a winning time of 2:37.348.

That fell short of the fastest time of the night -- the Netherlands' 2:36.437 in the quarter-final, which by default becomes the event's Olympic record.

The Dutch, who were also fancied for gold, started strong but dropped out in the semi-final after one of their skaters skidded and fell.

AFP

Norway's Johaug wins first gold of Beijing Olympics

Zhangjiakou, China - Norway's Therese Johaug won the first gold medal of the Beijing Winter Olympics on Saturday, storming ahead of the competition in the women's 7.5km-plus-7.5km skiathlon cross-country skiing.

Johaug, the clear favourite ahead of the event, finished the course in 44min 13.7sec to take what is expected to be the first of many cross-country skiing medals for Norway at these Games.

Natalia Nepryaeva battled it out with Austria's Teresa Stadlober for second place, with the Russian prevailing to finish 0.3 seconds ahead to clinch silver.

It was a triumphant Olympic comeback for Johaug. She won relay gold at the 2010 Olympics and a bronze and silver in 2014, but missed the 2018 Pyeongchang Games because of a doping suspension.

She had tested positive for a steroid which she said was in a lip balm given to her by a team doctor.



Norway's Therese Johaug celebrates after winning the women's skiathlon 2x7.5km event during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games (AFP)

According to sports statisticians Gracenote, Norway are expected to take home 45 medals in Beijing, including 21 golds.

Dinigeer Yilamujiang, a 20-year-old Uyghur athlete thrust

into the spotlight after being chosen by China as one of two athletes to light the cauldron in Friday's opening ceremony, finished 43rd in Saturday's race.

AFP

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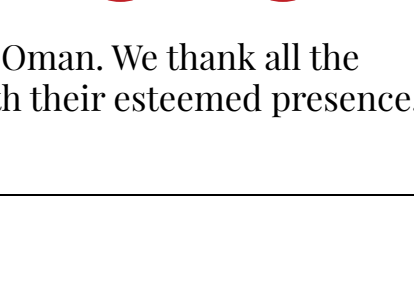
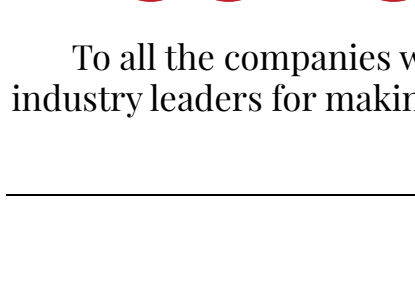
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