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HM presides over ROP Day ceremony

The Royal patronage of the Royal Oman Police Day celebrations caps ROP's remarkable performance in maintaining security and delivering services to citizens and residents

Nizwa - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander, presided over a celebration marking Royal Oman Police Day (January 5) and the passing out of new batches of officers. The event took place at the parade grounds of Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences in Nizwa on Wednesday.

Following the arrival of His Majesty the Sultan in Nizwa, he was accompanied by a fleet of police motorcycles to the gate of Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences where a Guard of Honour performed the military salute to His Majesty the Sultan.

The Royal motorcade then headed to the celebration grounds, flanked by a cavalcade of senior horsemen of the Royal Oman Police (ROP). There, His Majesty the Sultan was received by Lt Gen Hassan Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs.

His Majesty the Sultan mounted the Royal dais and columns of the graduate officers gave the military salute to His Majesty the Sultan. The Royal Anthem, played by the ROP band, followed.

The commandant of the graduates' column stepped forward, requesting His Majesty the Sultan to signal the start of the military parade in slow motion. Passing in front of the Royal dais, the column performed the military salute to His Majesty the Sultan. Top graduates came forward to receive the Honorary Sabre from His Majesty the Sultan, the Supreme Commander.

This was followed by the graduating officers of the 44th batch passing over the colours to the 45th batch of cadet officers.

The column of the graduating batch chanted the ROP anthem 'Humaat al Haqq' and performed the oath of allegiance, proclaiming faith in the Almighty Allah and allegiance to the nation and the Sultan. They pledged to diligently serve Oman and His Majesty the Sultan and to keep vigilance over the security of the country's citizens and residents. The graduates then performed the military salute to His Majesty the Sultan, the Supreme Commander.

This was followed by the ROP band playing the Royal Anthem signaling the conclusion of the parade.

After the ceremony, His Majesty the Sultan accepted a commemorative gift from the ROP. Lt Gen Shraiqi had the honour of presenting the memento to His Majesty the Sultan.

This Royal attention demonstrates the advanced role undertaken by the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences in providing training to police corps. The academy takes keen interest in developing mechanisms of work to develop and expand security tasks, in addition to maintaining a high level of readiness to deal with any situation.

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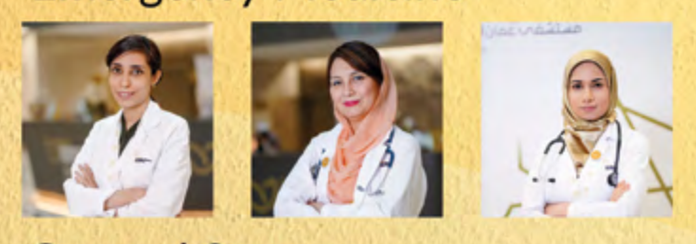
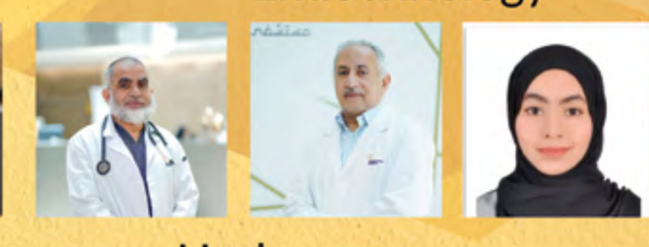


Endocrinology



General Surgery

Urology

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252 new COVID-19 cases; Seeb vaccine centre reopens

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) announced 252 new cases of COVID-19 on Wednesday, taking the total number of positive cases in the sultanate to 306,492. There were no related deaths.

'The total number of COVID-19-related deaths stands at 4,117,' an MoH statement said. It added that 43 new cases of recovery were reported, accounting for a total of 300,602 recoveries.

Meanwhile, a vaccination drive is going on for both citizens and expatriates in the country. Following the announcement of free booster dose shots for expatriates in South Batinah and Muscat governorates, the third jab will now also be given to expats in North Batinah, available at the Rehabilitation Centre in Sohar from Sunday, January 9, till Thursday, January 13.

'The Directorate General of Health Services in North Batinah announces the third dose for expatriates who are 18 years and older and have completed at least three months since the second dose,' a statement said.

(Muscat Daily)

Seeb vaccination centre reopens

The vaccination centre for the booster dose for citizens and expatriates operated in the former airport building in Seeb will resume on Thursday.

According to Dr Nada al Barwani, in-charge of the centre, it suspended services on Tuesday and Wednesday following the rains. "But it will be fully functional starting Thursday and all appointments remain valid. Those who register earlier, needn't do so again.

She informed that the centre is administering the first and second doses to individuals older than 12 years, and the booster for those 18 and older three months after the second dose.

"We are administering the Pfizer vaccine for the booster dose, irrespective of what was taken earlier. People who have taken AstraZeneca, or any other brand of vaccine, as their first and second doses will be administered the booster dose provided they have appointments."

> *People who have taken AstraZeneca, or any other brand of vaccine, as their first and second doses will be administered the booster dose provided they have appointments*
>
> **DR NADA AL BARWANI**

Expatriates who took their first and second doses outside Oman are required to upload their vaccine certificate on Tarassud + to register for appointments for the booster dose.

Explaining the procedure, Mahmood Said al Ghammari, medical record officer in MoH, said, "Those who wish to add the vaccine certificate obtained from outside Oman can text 'Hi' to WhatsApp number 71509360 and follow the instructions. Following that, they can register on Tarassud + with the same mobile number for the booster dose."

RO20mn allocation for governorates to boost development

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Economy has appreciated the Royal Directive of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to increase the financial allocation for each governorate in the Governorates Development Programme to RO20mn.

A statement issued on Wednesday said, 'The Ministry of Economy confirms that the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to increase the amount allocated to the Governorates Development Programme from RO10mn to RO20mn for each governorate during the years of the current Five-Year Plan 2021-2025 will support the implementation of strategic programmes for the priority development of governorates and sustainable cities. It will be a catalyst for the competitive comparative advantages of the governorates and enhance development.

'We are pleased to share with you the strategic priorities of the Development of Governorates and Sustainable Cities Programme within the economy and development themes of the Five-Year Plan 2021-2025.'

Dr Nasser Rashid al Maawali

H E Dr Nasser Rashid al Maawali, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Economy, praised His Majesty the Sultan's Royal Directive to increase the financial allocation for the development of the governorates' economies. The move is also expected to give impetus to the government's strategic decentralisation shift.

"The Governorates Development Programme will contribute to achieving comprehensive and balanced regional development and enhance the utilisation of natural and human resources in each governorate," H E Maawali said.

MUNICIPAL WORKERS IN ACTION

Muscat Municipality deployed teams for much needed clean-up and road repair works across the city on Wednesday following the heavy rains that affected several parts of the sultanate caused by a low-pressure system named Al Azm on Tuesday (Muscat Daily)

MAFWR distributed over 180 heads of indigenous livestock in 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) distributed 183 heads of livestock of indigenous breeds in 2021 to support breeders in the sultanate.

"The ministry launches a programme to distribute improved animal breeds among livestock breeders every year," a ministry official said.

"The programme aims to develop the livestock sector in the sultanate and improve the level of productivity of farm animals scientifically."

Of the 183 heads of livestock distributed, 19 were among breeders in Musandam, 44 in North and South Batinah, eight in Muscat, 51 in North and South Sharqiyah, 11 in Al Wusta, 12 in Buraimi, 18 in Dhahirah, and 20 in Dakhliyah.

Over 3mn heads of livestock were vaccinated in 2020 as part of the National Project for Livestock Immunisation, according to MAFWR.

The ministry's veterinary team visited 250,000 breeders and vaccinated 3.04mn farm animals (goats, sheep, cows and camels) in wilayats throughout the sultanate.

(Supplied photo)

According to MAFWR, 70 veterinary facilities, 41 mobile veterinary clinics and one hospital in Salalah provide the required preventive, curative, diagnostic and advisory services to breeders in the sultanate against various diseases, including poisoning, foot-and-mouth disease and rabies.

MAFWR programmes aim to provide vaccination to the maximum number of livestock possible and protect herds from epidemics, including smallpox and foot-and-mouth disease that cause significant economic losses.

DBBS appeals to donors; urgent need of O - blood

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Department of Blood Bank Services (DBBS) has appealed to individuals with O negative blood type to donate urgently.

In a statement, DBBS said, 'Due to the urgent need of O negative type blood, we ask those who have this blood type to take the initiative to donate blood at the Central Blood Bank in Bausher.'

DBBS added that donors can visit the Central Blood Bank in Bausher from Saturday to Thursday, between 8am and 8pm, and on Friday from 3pm to 8pm.

12km Yanqul Challenge 2022 race to be held on Jan 14

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Yanqul Sports Club, in coordination with Sport Zone, will organise a 12km race on January 14 in Yanqul, Dhahirah governorate. Called Yanqul Challenge 2022, the race is being held to promote tourism and a culture of physical fitness and healthy lifestyle.

Yanqul Sports Club is affiliated to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, while Sport Zone specialises in conducting a wide range of sports events.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Suleiman Said al Alawi of Sport Zone, said, "The race will start at 7am from Yanqul Sports Club. Running over different terrain – flat ground as well as inclined surfaces in mountains - the route passes through several historical sites, castles, picturesque farmland and a wadi."

Known for its natural beauty, heritage buildings and other tourist landmarks, Yanqul is about 240km from Muscat.

The word 'yanqul' translates to 'connection' - the wilayat connects three governorates.

(Supplied photo)

> *Contestants can camp in Yanqul. Yanqul Sports Club will allow participants and their families to use its facilities*
>
> **SULEIMAN AL ALAWI**

Located in the eastern part of Dhahirah governorate, it overlooks Buraimi and North Batinah.

"Contestants can camp in Yanqul. The club will allow participants and their families to use the club's facilities, which are enclosed in a big walled area to provide privacy. There are toilets, showers and the club has very kindly agreed to provide dinner the night before the race," Alawi informed.

Urging Omani youth and residents to participate, he said more than 100 contestants are expected to register.

Registration can be done via www.premieronline.com/event/yanqul_challenge_2022_5653

Madayn signs agreement for RO16mn workforce township

Our correspondent
Muscat

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), represented by Sur Industrial City, has signed a usufruct agreement with Bisham Real Estate Company to establish an integrated workforce township in Sur Industrial City at a value touching RO16mn.

The project, which will be developed on an area exceeding 180,000 sqm, will be divided into three categories, each with its distinctive standards and specifications, according to a press statement issued by Madayn.

In addition to a variety of accommodation options, the project will also include other services such as gyms and a shopping centre. Phase one of the project is expected to be completed within 36 months, and will accommodate 5,600 workers. Moreover, the project will provide 300 direct job opportunities.

(Supplied photo)

Madayn is implementing several vital projects in Sur Industrial City as work is underway in executing infrastructure development project at a total value of more than RO12mn, which will be completed by the beginning of the second half of 2022.

This project aims at providing necessary infrastructure to meet the needs of the current investors and attract new local and foreign investments. The project includes construction of 17km length of water network, 14km of sewage network, 10.6km of road network, 6.8km of water drainage channels, two wastewater storage tanks with a total capacity of 1230 cubic metres, and water tanks.

Additionally, Madayn has floated a tender for pre-qualification of consulting companies, and offers have been received from 18 companies. The analysis and evaluation process of these offers is underway and it is hoped that the project will be completed during the second half of 2022.

The project aims at updating the masterplan of the industrial city including identifying suitable locations for heavy industries, service paths, and locations for infrastructure facilities, in addition to conducting hydrological study for wadi paths, identifying their size and drainage and protection schemes, and creating additional leasable areas.

(ONA)

Agreement inked to provide incentives package to SMEs

Muscat - The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) on Wednesday signed an agreement of cooperation with Oman Investment and Finance Company - OIFC (Khedmah).

The agreement will provide a package of incentives and subsidy for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to press ahead in boosting the national economy.

The agreement was signed by Abdulaziz Said al Raisi, vice chairman of ASMED and Saud Ahmed al Siyabi, CEO of operations in Khedmah.

As per the agreement, Khedmah will allocate free-of-charge spaces in its branches, covering electricity and water expenses, for SMEs to display their products and services. It will also provide marketing outlets for the beneficiaries by advertising their products on Khedmah's media platforms.

Khedmah will also work to enhance the SMEs' abilities by engaging them in technical and specialised development programmes in financial and administrative fields.

ASMED will be responsible for field inspections to supervise the performance of those SMEs and to offer marketing and technical support for entrepreneurs.

Raisi said that this cooperation realises the ASMED strategy in enhancing integration and active partnership with the public and private establishments.

ONA

Al Mazunah Free Zone discusses its future plans with investors

Our correspondent
Muscat

Al Mazunah Free Zone, which is managed and operated by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), held a meeting on Tuesday with the business owners, officials of companies and customs clearance offices in the free zone, and ROP customs officials.

(Supplied photo)

The meeting, which was chaired by Said bin Abdullah al Balushi, director general of Al Mazunah Free Zone, briefed on Madayn's plans for Al Mazunah Free Zone in the coming period with the objective of strengthening joint efforts to achieve an ideal business and investment environment.

Moreover, the meeting highlighted the incentives and services offered to the investors and companies in the free zone, as well as underlined the challenges facing the investors and ways to overcome them.

Al Mazunah Free Zone is located in the Governorate of Dhofar, close to the Yemeni border. The strategic location makes it the Gulf gateway for transit trading to Yemen and the countries of East Africa.

FREE CLASSIFIED LISTING

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ODCs' lending grows 5.4% to hit RO27.8bn

Muscat - The total outstanding credit extended by other depository corporations (ODCs) consisting of conventional and Islamic banks in Oman grew by 5.4 per cent to RO27.8bn as of the end of November 2021, according to the data from the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

The credit granted to the private sector recorded a moderate growth of 2.3 per cent to reach RO23.4bn at the end of November 2021.

The non-financial corporate sector received the highest share of the total private sector credit, over 46.5 per cent, followed by household sector accounted for 45.2 per cent. The share of financial corporations was 4.7 per cent and other sectors received the remaining 3.6 per cent of the total private sector credit as of the end of November 2021.

Total deposits held with ODCs registered an year-on-year growth of 5.7 per cent to reach RO25.4bn as at the end of November 2021. Total private sector deposits increased by 5.3 per cent to RO17.3bn.

In terms of sector-wise composition of private sector deposits, the biggest share was to households' deposits at 51.2 per cent, followed by non-financial corporations at 31.7 per cent, financial corporations at 14.2 per cent and the other sectors at 2.9 per cent.

ONA

MARKET WATCH

MSX30	4,186.64
BSE Sensex	60,223.15

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs	192.96
Pakistani Rs	458.97
Bangladeshi Taka	222.87
Philippine Peso	132.59
Sri Lankan Rs	524.85

*Rates as on January 05
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Sony to launch firm to explore making electric cars

Electronics giant Sony unveiled a new prototype of its Vision-S electric vehicle and announced the founding of a company to explore jumping into the rapidly growing market.

The Japanese firm, better known for its TVs and video game consoles, will create the Sony Mobility subsidiary in spring 2022 as it weighs entering the field.

Sony CEO Kenichiro Yoshida unveiled at the CES tech show in Las Vegas the Vision-S 02, a new version of the firm's first prototype that has begun road testing.

Through this new branch, the electronics giant "intends to explore entry into the EV market," it said.

The Vision-S is packed with internal and external sensors and is used by Sony to test its autonomous driving technologies.

The company is also working on entertainment systems.

The EV sector is still small, accounting for only about three percent of current sales in the United States but it is attracting a lot of interest and investment.

OPEC and its allies agree on another modest output hike

London, UK - Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies decided on Tuesday to maintain their policy of modestly boosting oil output next month as the rapidly spreading Omicron variant has so far not heavily hit demand.

The OPEC+ grouping, including top producers Saudi Arabia and Russia, has resisted US pressure for a wider opening of the taps in response to high energy prices fuelling a surge in inflation across the world.

The 13 members of OPEC and their ten allies drastically slashed output in 2020 as the pandemic wreaked havoc with demand.

Last year they decided to step it up again gradually as prices recovered, while reviewing the situation every month.

After a short videoconference meeting on Tuesday, the group said it had agreed to raise output by 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) in February, the same level as in previous months.

The club's members approved a previous hike at their December meeting despite the emergence of Omicron, which had caused prices to fall as markets fretted over its potential impact on the global economy.

The December decision earned the thanks of the White House, nervous of the effect of rising prices at American petrol stations, but it did not prevent crude prices from recovering considerably from their previous slump.

The price of Brent, Europe's benchmark oil contract, hit US$79.76 at 1325 GMT on Tuesday - 15 per cent higher than before the group's December 2 meeting.

After a short videoconference meeting on Tuesday, the OPEC+ grouping said it had agreed to raise output by 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) in February, the same level as in previous months

OPEC analysts told the group on Monday that Omicron would have a moderate impact on demand and the rise in price is expected to continue in 2022.

While the new COVID variant is spreading like wildfire around the world, it appears to be far less severe than initially feared, raising hopes that the pandemic could be overcome and life return to a little more normality.

'Sense of stability'

In remarks on Monday, OPEC secretary general Mohammed Barkindo emphasised the need to 'remain highly nimble and adaptable to the constantly changing situation'.

He said the group's 'flexible approach has helped provide an added sense of stability, reassurance and continuity to the market and investors'.

OPEC on Monday named Kuwaiti oil executive Haitham al Ghais to succeed Barkindo on August 1. Ghais, who was Kuwait's OPEC governor from 2017 to June 2021, is a deputy managing director of the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC).

Iran exports

While OPEC+ countries have been gradually increasing output again since last year, analysts note some countries, such as Nigeria and Angola, have been struggling to lift production.

"Important here is that Russia did not lift production in December which could be a sign that they are getting closer to their capacity," SEB chief commodities analyst Bjarne Schieldrop said.

Another heavyweight, Iran, has seen its exports limited by US sanctions.

Talks to revive a deal, which curbed Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief, are underway in Vienna.

They have dragged on since last year but negotiators are pushing to conclude the talks to get the 2015 landmark agreement back on track.

It was thrown into disarray in 2018 when the US withdrew from the accord.

AFP

Saudi civil aviation set to contribute SAR280bn to GDP

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al Duailej, president of Saudi Arabia's General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA), said that the contribution of the civil aviation and air transport sector to the kingdom's GDP is expected to increase to more than SAR280bn by 2030, compared to about SAR80bn in 2018.

This came during the main panel discussion at the first virtual employment exhibition of the Public Transport Authority on Monday.

He stressed that the objectives of the civil aviation sector strategy focus on making the civil aviation sector in Saudi Arabia the first in the Middle East by 2030. This is in addition to ranking the fifth globally in air connectivity for travelers by reaching more than 250 international destinations, compared to about 99 destinations in 2019.

Duailej said, "We aim for the number of passengers to reach 330mn annually, compared to 103mn passengers in 2019. The Authority also aims to be ranked first in air freight in the region via increasing the capacity to 4.5mn tonnes, compared to about 800,000 tonnes in 2019.

He highlighted the importance of this vital sector in terms of providing many direct and indirect jobs by 2030.

Duailej referred to the launch of the 10,000 jobs initiative for localisation, which recorded 50 per cent success by the end of 2021. The initiative covered various professions in airport operation and safety, fire and rescue, aviation security and airport operation services. This is in addition to qualifying and classifying 29 professions specialised in the field of air transport.

He went on to draw attention to the 3,200 graduates of the Saudi Academy of Civil Aviation in various diploma programmes at different airports in Saudi. Moreover, it provided more than 38,000 training seats for workers in the civil aviation system during the past five years.

SPA

Toyota overtakes GM to lead US auto sales for 2021

New York, US - Japanese carmaker Toyota led US automobile sales in 2021, according to figures released on Tuesday, overtaking General Motors (GM) for the first time as a shortage of semiconductors roils the car industry.

The shift atop the rankings came after a year in which assembly lines were plagued by scarcity of the crucial computer chips, resulting in steep fourth-quarter sales declines for both companies.

But Toyota still managed to grow annual sales in the United States by 10.4 per cent to 2.3mn, while GM suffered a 12.9 per cent drop to 2.2mn.Toyota, which has been credited with better management of the chip issue compared with some rivals, saw small annual gains for two top-selling sedans, the Camry and the Corolla, and a modest dip in sales of its Rav4 compact SUV. Its full-sized Highlander SUV scored higher sales in 2021.

GM, which relies more heavily on trucks than Toyota, saw an annual 10.8 per cent drop in its Silverado pickup trucks and a 6.4 per cent fall in its GMC truck line.

Vehicles sit on the lot at the Joe Myers Toyota dealership in Houston, Texas on Tuesday (AFP)

GM has held the crown as the number-one company in US auto sales since 1931, when it supplanted Ford, according to trade publication Automotive News.

Charlie Chesbrough, senior economist at Cox Automotive, noted that GMs' de-emphasis of sedans has cost it some market share, and characterised Toyota's ascendance as a 'significant event' given GM's longtime leadership. In a market starved of inventory, Toyota also may have benefited from a smaller dealer network compared with GM, Ford and Stellantis, which owns the Chrysler brands, he said.

"The larger dealer networks of GM/Ford/Stellantis may have faced a greater challenge of keeping the right product in the right market for the right buyer," Chesbrough said in an email. "And, as a result, sales may have been trimmed because buyers couldn't find the product they wanted."

Semiconductor struggle

Cox has projected 2021 US sales of 14.9mn, up 2.5 per cent from the 2020 level but much below the five-year average. The consultancy has pointed to strong demand but anemic inventories, saying 'demand is healthy but... you can't sell what you don't have'.

A shortage in semiconductors has been one of the emblematic supply chain problems of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among other companies reporting sales, Honda scored an 8.9 per cent rise in US sales last year to 1.5mn vehicles, and Hyundai won a 19 per cent increase to 738,081 autos.

While GM has acknowledged that low car inventories are a problem, chief executive Mary Barra and other executives have touted strong vehicle pricing, which has enabled it to remain profitable even as sales sag.

GM's inventories recovered somewhat during the quarter, finishing December at just under 200,000. That is about 55 per cent more than three months earlier, but less than half the level of a year ago."The key constraint for sales continues to be reduced inventory levels as a result of the semiconductor shortage. Those inventory levels are beginning to recover," said GM chief economist Elaine Buckberg.

AFP

Bank Muscat launches 2022 edition of landmark Green Sports programme

Talib Saif al Makhmari

In line with its pioneering role in corporate social responsibility (CSR), Bank Muscat has launched the 2022 edition of its flagship CSR programme, Green Sports, on Wednesday, and invited all local sports teams who would like to apply for the programme to do so well before the deadline which will be on February 2, 2022.

As part of improving the inclusivity and the reach of the programme, the bank will be accepting all applications digitally. For more information and to submit applications, teams should go to: https://www.bankmuscat.com/greensports/ and complete the application form electronically using a computer, a tablet or a mobile phone.

Speaking about the launch of the 2022 edition, Talib Saif al Makhmari, manager, Community and Media Relations, Bank Muscat, said, "As one of the pioneers of corporate social responsibility in Oman, Bank Muscat has always been committed to creating meaningful change for the good of society. Green Sports has been going from strength to strength over the years with the bank supporting the development of 143 Green Sports fields across different governorates in the sultanate. We would like to encourage all teams who would like to apply for support to submit their applications through the specified link ahead of the deadline."

Bank Muscat is proud of the success and achievements of its CSR programmes, which draws from the values of leadership and partnership so as to create a positive impact on Omani society. The Green Sports initiative, which was launched by Bank Muscat in 2012 has supported 143 sports teams across Oman till date.

The scope of Green Sports support for sports teams include greening of football fields with natural or synthetic turf, floodlights or water desalination equipment in areas facing problems of water salinity. Ensuring wider representation, the Green Sports programme extends to develop sustainable sports infrastructure in all parts of the sultanate.

Also, the facilities developed as part of the programme are often used as a venue for other social activities, leading to stronger community bonding and greater positive behaviour among young people. In case of any queries or doubts, teams may email GreenSports@bankmuscat.com.

It must be noted that the bank's CSR and sustainability programmes have been well appreciated and received a number of accolades.

The bank was recently honoured by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry for its efforts in supporting persons with disabilities. Earlier in 2021, the bank also won the Middle East Sustainability Award from EMEA Finance as a recognition of its stellar efforts in the field of sustainability and CSR.

MoH successfully conducts supply chain management workshop

The Ministry of Health's (MoH) General Directorate of Medical Supplies (DGMS) represented by Professional Development and Career Guidance section, in collaboration with Abbvie Biopharmaceuticals, organised a workshop on supply chain management at the Grand Millennium Muscat on Wednesday.

The workshop was managed by a certified regional trainer and consultant from International Training & Consultancy Company. Fifty pharmacists, assistant pharmacists, nurses, and laboratory technicians from the General Directorate of Medical Supplies and from various health units at the MoH participated in the workshop.

The workshop aimed at training the participants to apply modern foundations and principles in the management of medical supplies and materials.

It aimed additionally at strengthening leadership competencies and providing the participant with the knowledge and skills that support them in increasing the efficiency of supply operations in order to ensure the flow of medical supply and satisfying the expectations of hospitals and health care institutions in MoH.

This workshop is part of the professional development programmes for health cadres at the Ministry of Health that tends to qualify and train all personnel working in the health sector particularly those working in the pharmaceutical sector.

It should be noted that the DGMS was a pioneer in obtaining the international standard ISO 9001-2008 in warehouse management since February 2011.

Later, DGMS was upgraded to the new standard ISO 9001-2015 in February 2018 after meeting all the required international standards.

Ooredoo celebrates 20th wave of Springboard graduates

Continuously empowering the women across Oman, Ooredoo has celebrated the 20th wave of graduates from its pioneering Springboard programme, an initiative that falls under its corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme, Ooredoo Goodwill.

The graduation events of 150 participants was held under the sheikhs and respected guests from Al Kamil Al Wafi, Rustaq and Ibri. During the event, the evaluation committee recognised 19 of the amazing projects presented.

Raed Mohamad Dawood, director of Government Relations and Corporate Affairs at Ooredoo, said, "It is truly inspiring to see the participants boost their personal and leadership skills as they use these tools to turn their projects into viable businesses. The Springboard programme continues to equip the women of Oman with the skills and know-how to further enrich their livelihood and become successful in their fields. We are proud to celebrate the graduation of a new batch of entrepreneurs who are now able to contribute to strengthening the national economy."

As part of its commitment to supporting women and future SMEs and SoHos, Ooredoo launched the Springboard programme in 2014 under the umbrella of 'Ooredoo Goodwill'. Today, it has become one of the main pillars of the company's CSR strategy.

Yas Marina Circuit to host 10th Gulf 12 Hours endurance race

Yas Marina Circuit prepares to host the 10th edition of exclusive endurance race, Gulf 12 Hours, for a weekend of motorsport action from today till Saturday 8th January.

Fans, spectators, and families are encouraged to head to Yas Marina Circuit for one of the region's most celebrated and toughest endurance race as they prepare to celebrate the event's 10th edition with memorable moments on the newly reconfigured track at Yas Marina Circuit.

The grid will consist of 15 cars, with 12 GT3 cars and 3 GT4 machines lining up on the start line. The 15 cars are made up of ten teams representing six different manufacturers, including Mercedes, Ferrari, Aston Martin and McLaren.

The traditional 12-hour endurance GT race, split into two parts of six hours, will take place around the new circuit layout at Yas Marina Circuit. Three new sections on the track will look to test drivers and provide more opportunities for overtaking, wheel-to-wheel racing and a faster flowing race.

Gulf 12 Hours was first held at the iconic Abu Dhabi circuit back in January 2012 with nine editions taking place to date, the last event being in December 2019 where Audi scored its first win with the Attempto Racing car driven by Christopher Mies, Dries Vanthoor and Rinat Salikhov.

Saif al Noaimi, chief executive officer of Abu Dhabi Motorsports Management, commented, "We're delighted to have the Gulf 12 Hour endurance race returning to our circuit for an exciting 10th event, with incredible teams, cars and drivers announced to line up on the starting grid. We saw some of the track changes at Yas Marina Circuit create some exciting moments during the 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix and we look forward to seeing how this plays out in an endurance race too, we anticipate many exciting moments to come."

Andrea Ficarelli, director of race promoter Driving Force Events, added, "The starting grid once again demonstrates the world-class teams and drivers that are attracted to the Gulf 12 Hours at Yas Marina Circuit. We look forward to celebrating our 10th edition with a memorable event."

Whilst there is plenty of action happening on the track, there will also be plenty of off-track entertainment for spectators and families to enjoy, including guided pit lane walks, hot laps, and a selection of delicious F&B on offer.

Oman International Hospital official grand opening ceremony today

Oman International Hospital (OIH), Oman's newest multi, super-specialty hospital that soft-opened in May 2021, will be officially launched today under the auspicious of H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health in the presence of H E Abdul Salam Mohammed al Murshidi, executive president of Oman Investment Authority, H E Dr Mohammed Saif Al Hosni, Undersecretary for Health Affairs in the Ministry of Health, H E Asila Bint Salim Al Samsami, Undersecretary for Investment Promotion in the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotions, H H Basma al Said, Sheikha Amal Suhail Bahwan, chairperson of Al Afia Healthcare Development and Investment company and vice chairperson of Suhail Bahwan Group Holding, several ambassadors and distinguished guests.

Oman International Hospital is a joint venture by Suhail Bahwan Group Holding, Oman Brunei Investment Company and IdealMed GHS, Portugal. Conceived to be a healthcare destination that will be a new milestone in the development of the health sector in the Sultanate of Oman, the hospital will be offering world class standard in its treatment, facilities, and services for the people of Oman and the region.

Sheikha Amal, said, "Oman International Hospital project is a major milestone in the development of the health sector in the Sultanate of Oman in order to contribute to the achievement of visions and objectives of our contemporary renaissance under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. With the hospital's official launch, Oman now has more than just a hospital – a full-fledged healthcare destination offering specialised treatments and services at affordable rates. Suhail Bahwan Group, as a shareholder, is very proud to be a part of it."

The sprawling 42,000 sqm hospital is equipped with state-of-the-art equipment and cutting-edge technological solutions from across the world and is the home to five Excellence Centers, a hybrid operation theatre and several other cutting-edge features and facilities.

The expert doctors, nurses and para-medical staff of the hospital are drawn from Oman and across the globe and are highly experienced.

Strategically located in the centre of capital Muscat's Al Ghubra area, just across the road from the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Oman International Hospital is easily accessible from any part of the city.

Fathi al Balushi, vice chairman, board-member of Al Afia Healthcare Development and Investment Company and CEO of Oman Brunei Investment said, "Vision 2040 highlights the importance of the private sector's participation in the economy and the potential opportunities for the public and private sectors to work together to meet the developmental targets and needs of the country. This project is a prime example of a public private partnership, and it also represents a landmark in the omani healthcare sector".

The hospital is managed by IdealMed GHS, Portugal, who have decades of experience in managing hospitals across the globe.

Dr José Alexandre Cunha, board member of Oman International Hospital and chairman of IGHS Group said, "We are very proud to join hands with Suhail Bahwan Group Holding and Oman Brunei Investment Company."

"The opening of OIH in Muscat marks a major milestone as the pandemic has emphasised the necessity of strong healthcare systems and the vital role they play in ensuring the stability and future of the countries. We are focused on providing quality healthcare, finest treatment at our state-of-the-art facilities and international medical expertise to the people of Oman. In other words, we aim to provide world class services and treatments at affordable prices. In addition to that, the Hospital has different partner entities from the academic world and will be implementing clinical and research activity, assuring that the most innovative services are offered," Dr Cunha added.

Sohar International supports people with disabilities

Sohar International has been at the forefront of community service and has collaborated with a significant number of charitable institutions to extend a helping hand to those in need. In a recent endeavour, the bank sponsored the International Day of People with Disabilities 2021 themed under 'Leadership and participation of persons with disabilities toward an inclusive, accessible and sustainable post-COVID-19 world'. The event, which was organised by the Ministry of Social Development was graced by the presence of H H Dr Mona Fahad Mahmoud al Said, assistant vice chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), who was the guest of honor.

Through the years, Sohar International has joined hands with the Oman Association for the Disabled to carry out several critical campaigns aimed at enhancing the well-being of this particular segment of society. Apart from providing financial support, these initiatives have helped raise awareness of the importance of creating a more inclusive society where people with disabilities can enjoy work opportunities, showcase their abilities and lead a more self-reliant life. Sohar International's ongoing support to the association was also recognised by the Ministry of Social Development while earning much appreciation in the community.

Commenting on the event, Ahmed al Musalmi, Chief executive officer of Sohar International said, "This initiative is part of the bank's ongoing CSR activities that focuses on enhancing the well-being of the community, thereby playing a pivotal role in the country's philanthropic roadmap. Sohar International has built a strong relationship with the Oman Association for the Disabled and we will continue to support the various initiatives of the association and help them realize their noble goals. We hope that our commitment to the association, and the esteemed Ministry of Social Development, will help people with disabilities get beyond physical and mental barriers to realise their full potential."

"The values of empathy, service and the zeal to make a difference in the lives of others run through each employee of Sohar International. It gives me immense pride to state that our CSR agenda has encompassed meaningful initiatives that have a long-term sustainable impact on society," he added.

Mazda CX-9: Love the driving experience, appreciate service

Being one of the sleekest, sportiest, and most-stylish 7 seater SUVs in the market, Mazda CX-9 offers a comfortable driving experience worth remembering.

"I love the driving experience and appreciate the service experience," that's what Basim Mohammed al Zadjali, who bought the Mazda CX-9 from Towell Auto Centre; Mazda Salalah Showroom had to say after his three months experience with a Mazda.

"Be ready to turn heads as you take Mazda CX-9 on the road," he said, while expressing his joy driving and getting the spotlight with his new turbocharged Mazda CX-9.

Zadjali, also shared that he had always wanted to own a Mazda CX-9 and is using it daily as a family car.

Mazda CX-9 is a great family 7 seater SUV that offers the pleasure of a great drive, extra space with more wheelbase, extra power from the TurboCharged engine, added safety with Mazda iActivesence safety package and fuel economy without compromising on space or power.

"What I like most about Mazda CX-9 is its style, interior space, safety features, and the

affordable price," said Zadjali

Impressed by its bold look and luxurious interior, Zadjali shared that he also loved the driving experience of CX-9 and that the vehicle has got everything he needs. Also, during the three month's driving experience of his dream car, Zadjali got it serviced at TAC's service centres in Salalah as well as Barka.

According to Zadjali, he had a great experience at TAC's service centres. He says that TAC sales and service teams were extremely professional and super helpful along the way in each and every process and shared all the details and information he required.

In Oman, Towell Auto Centre (TAC) is recognised as a trusted name in customer service and a pioneer in the automobile business since 1972. A group company of the W J Towell Group, TAC takes off from the principle of its parent company and ensures the easy availability of high-quality motor products coupled with the highest standard of service to its esteemed customers.

Mazda has brought quality to the roads of Oman, and TAC has made owning a Mazda an absolute joy, thanks to their excellent after-sales service, availability of genuine parts for all Mazda models, their efficient staff and innovative solutions for a better customer experience.

MHD ACERE Auto Expert showroom opens

MHD ACERE's Auto Expert, an advanced diagnostics auto care and maintenance centre, has opened its first ever showroom.

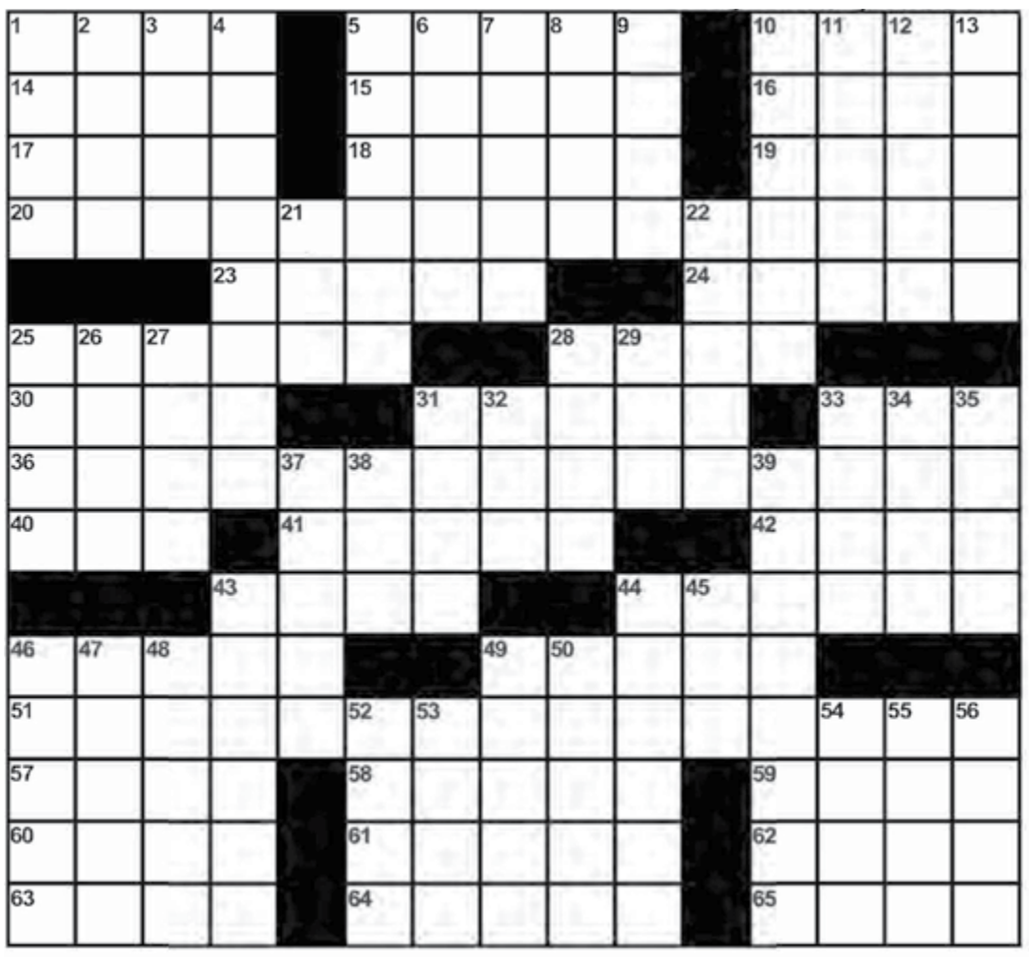
Located in Azaiba, Muscat, the facility has been designed as a one-stop shop for all kinds of repairs and maintenance, body and paint jobs, periodic services of all kinds of automobiles. It is a multi-franchise service centre that will also serve as an outlet for providing 4 x 4 accessories from Ironman such as rooftop tents, canopies, portable freezers, winches, recovery equipment, protective bars, lighting and electrical upgrades; car care treatment products from AutoGlym for complete restoration and many other global brands for Nano Ceramic and Graphene coating. Auto Expert facility will also provide and install world class tires and batteries under its roof.

Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO, MHD ACERE, said, "With the aim of improving esthetics and boosting car power, we will be offering hand-picked array of global products while offering multi-franchise service for all makes and brands, trendy off-roading accessories, car detailing and protection, premium brand tires and batteries. Auto Expert's vehicle expertise extends to on-road performance as well as off-road".

The complete car care services offered at Auto Expert are: scheduled maintenance servicing including engine oil and filter replacement, standard check point service, auto air condition service, A/C performance test, system pressure check, condenser check and checking of radiator cooling fan operation; inspection of all A/C components for wear, leaks and proper operation, evacuate and recharge system; complete cooling system service including checking of all hoses, belts; pressure test system, heater, defroster and cooling fan operation, correct coolant mixture to a 50/50 mixture, checking for leaks and so on.

The facility also provides engine diagnostic service: fuel pressure test, code retrieval and vacuum testing; brake system (front & rear): removal and replacement of pads or shoes, resurface rotors or drums; inspect brake line and components and test parking brake; engine tune up: replacement of plugs, fuel filter, minor adjustment and scope test if needed; transmission flush: hook up flush machine adding flushing cleaner to transmission, completely flush all transmission components, replace all transmission fluid, add transmission conditioner, check for leaks, inspect cable and all linkages; and motor value added services: clean and de-carbon fuel injector, fuel rail, upper intake and intake valves and carbon in combustion chamber, engine oil flushing, power steering flushing etc.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Be of assistance
5) Spherical hairdos
10) Price tag info
14) Type of rug
15) Not even a mouse
16) "Do_ others ... "
17) Treat rudely, in slang
18) Circle, as planets
19) Abel's assassin
20) Fool
23) Cook, as chestnuts
24) Large blood vessel
25) Protect from floods
28) Joan of art
30) Clean, as a pipe
31) "Mac" attachment
33) Informal relative
36) Fool
40) Hog home
41) Can't tolerate
42) Kunis of Hollywood
43) Lens covers
44) Baltimore's Yards
46) Like immature fruit
49) Insect after metamorphosis
51) Fool
57) Masculine
58) Drift from a script
59) Inventor's inspiration
60) "Don't delay"
61) Animal catcher
62) Farm soil
63) Butterfly hazards
64) Big Top performer
65) Airborne fish-eaters

DOWN

1) Pilgrimage, for some
2) Lake, city or canal
3) "Make do" amount
4) Deli offering
5) Polar jacket
6) McHenry and Dix
7) "Lost in Space" figure
8) "Don't count_ ! "
9) Macfarlane of TV and film
10) Bird in a clock
11) Kind of personality
12) Limited work assignment
13) Island kingdom near Fiji
21) Long time, geologically
22) Acquires through work
25) Flubs one
26) Pork, for one
27) New arrival
28) Hardness-measuring scale
29) "Bill me later" note
31) Carpenter, army and fire
32) Highway, for short
33) "You_ a mouthful!"
34) Global speck
35) "The Man" Musial
37) Abu_, UAE
38) "The Raven" author's initials
39) Not going anywhere
43) Heebie-jeebies
44) Curve upward in the middle
45) Pack on the years
46) Pitcher in a suit?
47) Come to an end
48) Acclaim
49) Certain faith
50) Silk fabric with a wavy pattern
52) Humongous in area
53) Krabappel on "The Simpsons"
54) Bad smell
55) Head of a college
56) Thanksgiving side dish

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
Taking action is to be taken seriously. Don't move forward just because you're afraid to stand still right now, especially in romantic situations. Everything must happen in its own time, and you definitely shouldn't rush things. Take advantage of opportunities, but don't push your agenda too strongly today. Waiting for the right moment to act will teach you patience and help you appreciate forward momentum all the more.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
When you're driving your car, you realise that you aren't the only driver on the road. After all, you must be aware of what other people are doing to be as safe as you can be. This awareness should apply to all areas of your life right now. Take note of who is around you and how they're behaving. Be careful of how others may affect your day's scheduled route. Plan a detour, just in case.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
If you feel as though the circumstances of your life aren't under your control right now, you're right, but only to a point. Granted, there are certain things you can't change, and it would be very helpful to resign yourself to the facts. But there are also quite a few malleable points you aren't seeing right now. To open your eyes a little wider, expose yourself to new things. Experiment with unusual activities and different types of entertainment.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
One of the best acts of self-nurturing is to be honest with yourself. This includes being honest about what you really need right now. If your energy level has been waning, you need time to recharge your batteries, so give it to yourself. Or if you've had more energy than you know what to do with, you need to get organised. Prioritise your workload today and use that energy in a more focused, efficient manner.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
You're in desperate need of some stimulating input today, and you should look to one of your especially fiery friends for a great big dose of it! Get out there with them and explore as much of the world as possible. Indulge your growing passion for travel with a road trip way beyond your normal boundaries. The two of you are a star team, capable of charming the grumpiest of strangers and having tons of fun.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
People you want to impress are amazed by your ability to commit, so don't take it for granted. You know what you want right now, so stick with it despite the hecklers in the audience. Everyone has doubts once in a while, but you won't let these little worries make you dodge responsibility. There's too much at stake. The long-term success of your plan requires you to prove yourself right now. Keep your eyes on the prize.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
The time for exploring new ideas has passed. It will come around again soon enough, but today you have to curb your wanderlust and stick close to home. Instead of seeking out new faces and new places, you have to learn to appreciate the known and familiar. Today offers you a wonderful opportunity to communicate your ideas to the people who really understand you. They can help you build something that will last.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
Getting caught up in the moment and acting impulsively is not only okay today, it's highly recommended! Throw all your caution to the wind and watch it fly away. You won't be needing it for a while. You're in a very safe place and surrounded by trustworthy people. Your spontaneous energy will encourage new ideas, keep everything going in the right direction, and help you stay positive when you encounter a couple little bumps.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21
There can be no such thing as too much happiness in your life, although today the amount of jovial and happy energy coming your way could overwhelm you. You're lucky you have problems like this, so be grateful for the embarrassment of riches you currently enjoy. Reaching out to other people is important today, especially since you have positive energy. If you've been trying to turn someone's head, it might happen today.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
There's a threatening gray cloud of pessimism just over the horizon. Its power over your life will increase exponentially with each negative person you encounter today, so try to stick with people who always see the bright side of life and are good at cheering you up. Stay away from naysayers who tell you the things you want to do can't be done. The truth is anything that you can think of can happen if you persevere.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
You have a day full of possibilities because your mind is open and you have a strong desire for new experiences. You're highly susceptible to some of the wacky ideas your friends are always tossing out. So if you're ready for a new adventure, step forward and rally the troops around you. It's been too long since you led the way down a mysterious path, and you're ready to inspire confidence in the people who care about you.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
Your love/hate balancing act with an authority figure is most definitely tipping in the love direction right about now. Even with the current hectic pace of your life, you two can find the time you need to clearly communicate what you expect from each other. Rely on your solid communication skills to ease any potentially rough spots that may appear in the near future. You two are developing an excellent relationship.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The playground of lawn tennis is called

a. court
b. ring
c. arena
d. rink

2. The NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) was established on

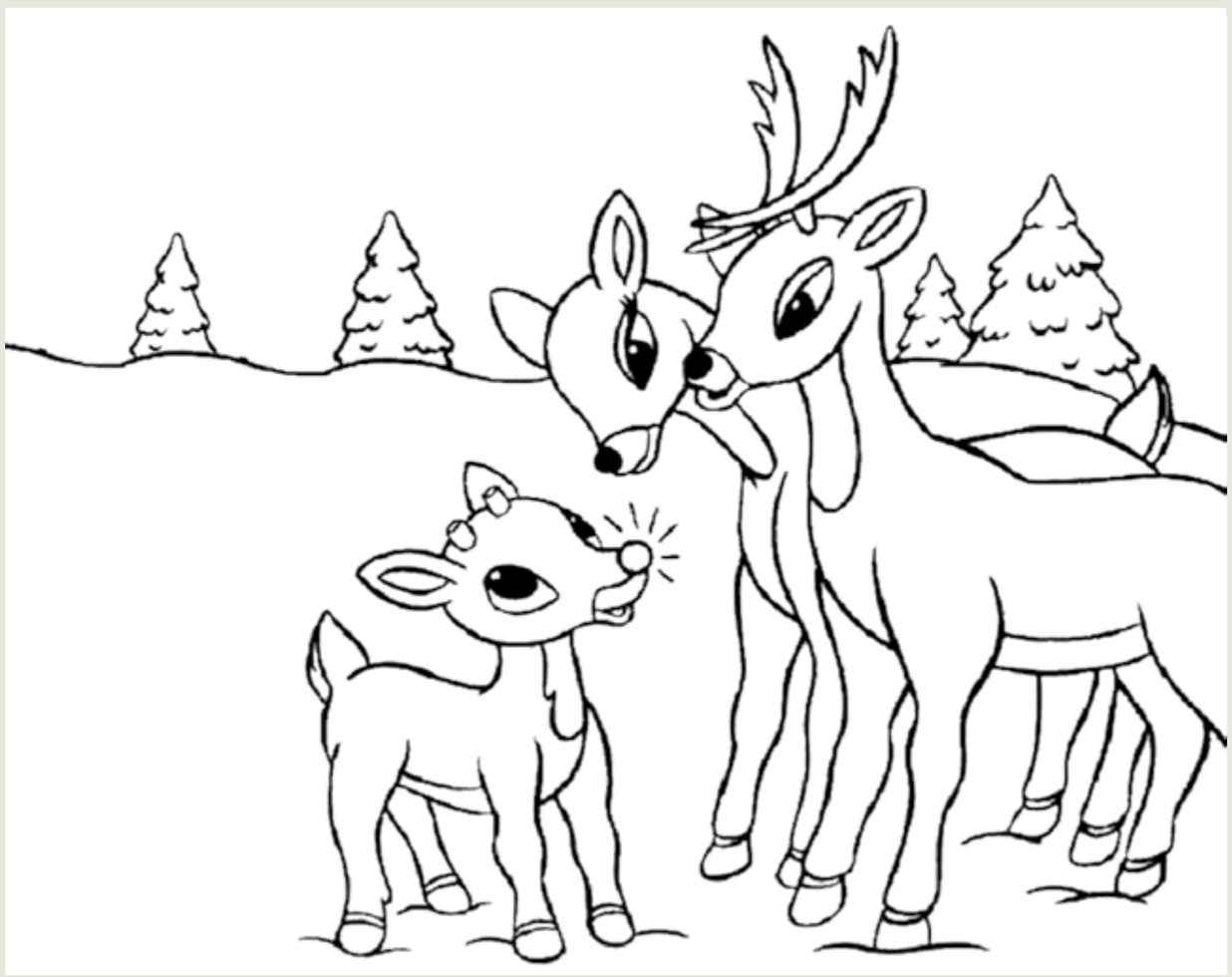
a. April 4, 1949
b. September 1, 1966
c. December 12, 1990
d. January 20, 1950

3. The number of principal organs of the United Nation is

a. 3
b. 4
c. 5
d. 6

Answers: 1. a 2. a 3. d

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

M	U	C	S
N	O	G	D
O	E	S	G
O	U	I	I

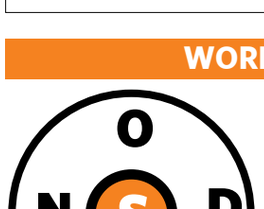
Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.
Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

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

Patients dying as medicines run out in Ethiopia's Tigray: Doctors

Nairobi, Kenya - Doctors in Ethiopia's war-hit Tigray region say patients are needlessly dying of treatable conditions because a de facto blockade is preventing medicines and other life-saving supplies from reaching stricken hospitals.

A dire shortage of oxygen, intravenous fluids and other critical equipment had made surgery and essential procedures almost impossible over the past six months, according to doctors from Tigray's biggest hospital.

"As a result, children who needed shunt surgeries are left to die, those with treatable cancers are denied their rights and those with fractures are forced to wait while being immobilised," said a statement from doctors at Ayder Referral Hospital dated January 4.

"Those who could easily have been saved with hemodialysis are dying. Patients who have had dialysis for years at our hospital are forced to die just because the supplies that could have been brought are not allowed to reach us."

Thousands of people have died in Ethiopia's 14-month-long war and parts of Tigray are experiencing famine conditions.

Access to Tigray is restricted and AFP could not independently verify the doctors' accounts.

The region is also under a communications blackout and what the United Nations has described as a de facto aid blockade, preventing sufficient food and medicine from reaching the northern region of 6mn people.

The doctors at Ayder Referral Hospital painted a picture of desperation as supplies dried up in recent months

> *Children who needed surgeries are left to die, those with treatable cancers are denied their rights and those with fractures are forced to wait while being immobilised*
>
> **THE DOCTORS**

No trucks with aid cargo have reached Tigray since December 12 and others waiting to enter the region had been plundered, the UN humanitarian agency OCHA said in its latest report.

Health outreach has been halted in parts of Tigray because of a shortage of essential drugs, OCHA said.

Desperate need

The doctors at Ayder Referral Hospital painted a picture of desperation as supplies dried up in recent months.

Medics begged businesses in the capital Mekele for donations of soap and detergent, as doctors went to work without gloves, antibiotics or painkillers for women in childbirth.

Blackouts were frequent and oxygen supply irregular 'resulting in the death of patients because of the frequent breaking down of the machines' that could have been repaired if spare parts could have been sent from Addis Ababa.

"Whatever the cause of the war is, it cannot be right or ethical to deny patients lifesaving health care," the doctors said.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray in November 2020 after accusing the region's dissident ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), of attacks on federal army camps.

The Nobel Peace laureate declared victory but rebel fighters hit back, recapturing most of Tigray, and pushing into neighbouring regions. The rebels reportedly reached around 200km outside Addis Ababa by road but in recent weeks pro-government forces have driven them back inside Tigray's borders.

The Ethiopian government and the TPLF have blamed each other for impeding aid into Tigray.

AFP

Tunisian Interior Minister Taoufik Charfeddine addresses a press conference in Tunis on Monday, to explain the arrest of Bhiri (AFP)

Hunger-striking Tunisia politician fighting for life: Supporters

Tunis, Tunisia - Tunisian former justice minister Noureddine Bhiri, who has been refusing food or medication since his arrest last week, is fighting for his life, a support group said on Wednesday.

Bhiri, who was arrested by plainclothes officers on Friday and later accused of possible 'terrorism' offences, suffers from several pre-existing health conditions.

The Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party, of which he is deputy chairman, played a central role in Tunisian politics until a power grab by President Kais Saied last year.

"At the moment, medical sources say he is between life and death," Ennahdha ex-lawmaker Samir Dilou told reporters, adding that his wife and children were on standby.

"Those who ordered his kidnapping must assume their responsibilities," he added, referring to Saied and his interior minister, Taoufik Charfeddine, who ordered Bhiri's arrest.

Another member of Bhiri's support committee, Abderrazek Kilani, said the former minister was suffering from kidney problems, as well as a longstanding heart condition, diabetes and hypertension, but was still refusing food or medicines.

A previous alarm sounded by Ennahdha about Bhiri's health was discounted by Tunisia's independent national body for the prevention of torture (INPT) after it visited him late on Sunday.

But the INPT could not confirm the validity of the latest concerns. Three of its doctors were due to see him later on Wednesday, the INPT's Lotfi Ezzedine told AFP.

Noureddine Bhiri (AFP)

Saied on July 25 sacked the Ennahdha-supported government and suspended parliament, presenting himself as the ultimate interpreter of the constitution.

He later took steps to rule by decree, and in early December vowed to press on with reforms to the political system.

Tunisia was the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring revolts of a decade ago, but civil society groups and Saied's opponents have expressed fear of a slide back to authoritarianism after the 2011 revolution that toppled longtime dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali.

Human Rights Watch warned late last month that Tunisian authorities were using 'repressive' dictatorship-era laws to snuff out criticism of the president.

AFP

S Korea grounds F-35 fighter jets after malfunction forces emergency landing

Seoul, South Korea - South Korea has grounded its entire fleet of advanced F-35 fighter jets, officials said on Wednesday, pending a probe into a dramatic emergency landing.

After the landing gear on a South Korean F-35A stopped working during a major systems malfunction, the pilot chose not to eject and instead landed the jet on its belly - walking away without any injuries.

The heart-stopping incident on Tuesday, at an air force base in the west of the country, has prompted a probe during which South Korean F-35s will be grounded.

"With the investigation under way, the entire (F-35) fleet is suspended from flying," a defence ministry official told AFP.

South Korea ordered 40 F-35A variants from its American maker Lockheed Martin in 2014, receiving the first batch five years later.

Republic of Korea Air Force vice chief of staff Shin Ok-chul shared the dramatic details at a parliamentary hearing on Wednesday.

The F-35A was flying at low altitude when the pilot heard bangs, which prompted him to check aircraft systems, Shin told lawmakers.

"All systems had stopped working except flight controls and the engine," he said, adding that the pilot then chose not to eject and decided to attempt a belly landing.

The military sprayed a special foam on the runway at the air force base to prevent an explosion from the friction caused by the plane making contact with the surface at high speed, Shin said.

He said it was the first time a belly landing was attempted in an F-35.

The supersonic F-35 Lightning II is one of the most potent and agile fighters in the world, featuring stealth technology and advanced communications.

Its three variants are designed for a wide variety of missions.

And while its per-unit cost has come down in recent years, it is considered the most expensive weapons system ever developed by the United States.

The programme has also been plagued by numerous delays, cost overruns and technical setbacks.

Before the South Korean incident, the jet's most recent accident involved a British F-35B plunging into the Mediterranean during takeoff from the *HMS Queen Elizabeth* aircraft carrier in November.

Its pilot ejected safely.

AFP

Ten die in Zanzibar boat capsize

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania - Ten people died when a boat ferrying people to a funeral in the Indian Ocean archipelago of Zanzibar capsized, police said on Wednesday. Another 15 people were rescued after the incident late on Tuesday, and rescuers were still searching for others possibly missing.

"Rescue efforts are ongoing until we are satisfied that all people were removed from the water. There was no manifest in the boat and therefore it's not clear how many people were onboard," local police chief Richard Mchomvu said. The accident happened after the vessel encountered a mechanical problem.

AFP

US snowstorm strands drivers for 24 hours or more

Washington, US - The snow storm is over but the travel misery lingered: drivers on a major highway outside Washington reported on Tuesday they were stuck in their cars in freezing weather for 24 hours or more.

As families tried to return home from the long New Year weekend, I-95 in Virginia was dangerously icy, gas tanks were running low and for hours there was no help in sight, drivers said.

Aerial footage showed seemingly endless lines of cars and trucks, bumper to bumper, that were stranded overnight - on a stretch of highway that is notorious for traffic jams even in good weather.

One of the frustrated travelers was a US senator from Virginia, Tim Kaine, who got marooned driving in his state back to Washington as Interstate 95 clogged with snow and spun-out cars, and eventually shut down because of Monday's monster snowfall.

A truck sits abandoned after sliding off the road in icy conditions in Stafford County, Virginia on Tuesday (AFP)

'I started my normal 2 hour drive to DC at 1pm yesterday. 19 hours later, I'm still not near the Capitol,' Kaine tweeted on Tuesday morning.

'Update: I've been on the road for 27 hours,' he wrote later, adding in a subsequent tweet that he had finally reached the Capitol.

Jim DeFede, a Florida-based journalist with CBS, tweeted that he has been stranded for more than 20 hours. 'I'm not sure but I think I now qualify for Virginia residency,' he wrote.

In a separate live feed DeFede described the highway as an icy parking lot where nothing was moving, and said he had not seen a highway patrol car or tow truck in 12 hours or more. The temperature outside as he spoke was 19 degrees (minus 7°C).

DeFede said he ran his engine for an hour or so to keep warm, then turned it off, then repeated this as the wait dragged on.

"I've got a little over a half a tank of gas left and I have no idea when anyone is coming to get us out of here," he said.

Just after 6.00pm on Tuesday the Virginia department of transport tweeted that there were 'no people stranded still on I-95'.

'Less than 20 vehicles left to be removed from the interstate before plow trains will come through to remove snow and ice from the travel lanes,' the tweet said.

Some social media users pointed out that while traffic was finally moving, it was still only at a crawl.

Monday's storm packed an unexpectedly fierce punch and appeared to have caught much of the capital region off guard, temporarily stranding US President Joe Biden on Air Force One and dumping up to 23cm of snow on Washington - and more in parts of Virginia.

It further snarled transport hit by flight cancellations due to bad weather and airline staffing woes caused by a record surge in COVID-19 cases.

An Instagram user with the handle kyleoland said their family of four with two small children slept in their car, ran out of water and walked 5km in the dead of night to the home of a good Samaritan.

"The last 24 hours have been the longest of our lives," the post said.

Earlier, Virginia's department of transportation said it had never seen such a mess on I-95, although it gave no estimate of how many drivers were affected.

"This is unprecedented, and we continue to steadily move stopped trucks to make progress toward restoring lanes," department engineer Marcie Parker said.

AFP

US coalition foils attacks in Syria

Washington, US - The US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State in Syria said on Tuesday they had foiled an attack in the Deir-Ezzour region in the northeast of the country, a day after the second anniversary of the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani.

After spotting 'several launch sites of indirect fire rockets that posed an imminent threat', coalition forces 'conducted strikes to eliminate the threat', a coalition official said in a statement.

The rockets were aimed at a US base called 'Green Village' in the Euphrates Valley where fighters from the Islamic State group are still active and where US forces continue to cooperate alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces. "Indirect fire attacks pose a serious threat to innocent civilians," the official added.

AFP

Protesters storm Almaty mayor's office; unrest in Kazakhstan spins out of control

Almaty, Kazakhstan - Protesters stormed the mayor's office in Kazakhstan's largest city Almaty on Wednesday as unprecedented unrest in the Central Asian nation spun out of control.

Sparked by a New Year energy price increase, protests swept across Kazakhstan in a rare challenge to the ex-Soviet country's authoritarian government.

After a night of unrest that saw more than 200 people detained, several thousand protesters stormed the headquarters of the Almaty city administration on Wednesday afternoon and appeared to have seized control of the building.

Police fired stun grenades and tear gas at the crowd, some armed with batons and shields seized from police, but were unable to prevent them from entering the building.

Local media reported that parts of the building were on fire and that protesters were targeting other government facilities.

The protests are the biggest threat so far to the regime established by Kazakhstan's founding president Nursultan Nazarbayev, who stepped down in 2019 and ushered loyalist Kassym-Jomart Tokayev into the presidency.

The demonstrations began over a New Year increase in prices for Liquid Petroleum Gas, which is widely used to fuel cars in the west of the country.

This image grab shows protesters near an administrative building during a rally over a hike in energy prices, in Almaty on Wednesday (AFP)

Riot police officers patrol a street as protests spun out of control in Almaty on Wednesday (AFP)

Government resigns

Thousands took to the streets in Almaty and in the western province of Mangystau, saying the price rise was unfair given oil and gas exporter Kazakhstan's vast energy reserves.

Clashes erupted overnight in Almaty, with police firing stun grenades and tear gas into a crowd of more than 5,000 people that marched through central streets shouting anti-government slogans and sometimes attacking vehicles.

The Interior Ministry said 95 police officers were injured, adding protesters 'succumbed to provocations' and 'groups of citizens blocked roads and blocked traffic, disrupting public order'. Tokayev moved quickly to try to head off the unrest, accepting the resignation of the cabinet headed by Prime Minister Askar Mamin.

He also imposed states of emergency in the capital Nur-Sultan, Almaty, and Mangystau province from January 5 until January 19. An overnight curfew will be in place in the areas from 11.00pm to 7.00am, with restrictions on movement in and out.

> *State of emergency was necessary in connection with a serious threat to the safety of citizens. The government will not be felled, but we don't need conflict*
>
> **KASSYM-JOMART TOKAYEV**

Protests in the capital were smaller and sporadic, but an order published on the presidential website said the state of emergency was necessary 'in connection with a serious and immediate threat to the safety of citizens'. Tokayev had called for a return to calm in a video posted on Facebook. "The government will not be felled, but we don't need conflict," Tokayev said in the address.

'Old man out'

The protesters in Almaty yelled 'old man out' - a reference to Tokayev's still-powerful predecessor Nazarbayev - and 'government resign' before police moved in, sparking battles with demonstrators.

Tokayev was handpicked as a successor by Nazarbayev, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

One of five ex-Soviet nations in Central Asia, Kazakhstan is of crucial importance to Russia as an economic partner and home to a large ethnic Russian population.

Its government tolerates little real opposition and has been accused of silencing independent voices and media. Spontaneous, unsanctioned protests are illegal despite a 2020 law that passed easing some restrictions of freedom of assembly.

Limits appeared to have been imposed on the internet on Wednesday, with messenger apps Telegram, Signal and WhatsApp all unavailable. Two independent media websites that reported on the protests also appeared to be blocked.

Smaller rallies had been staged in cities across the republic of 19mn people from Sunday, beginning with the town of Zhanaozen in Mangystau.

Gas price rise outrage

The initial cause of the unrest was a spike in prices for LPG in hydrocarbon-rich Mangystau, but a government move to lower the prices in line with protesters' demands failed to calm them.

Reports by independent media suggested that Tokayev's announcement of a new price of 50 tenge (11 US cents) per litre, down from 120 at the beginning of the year, failed to weaken the rallies in Zhanaozen and Mangystau's capital Aktau as demonstrators aired new demands.

Footage from Aktau shared on social media on Tuesday showed thousands of protesters - who had camped in the city centre overnight - encircled by police. Most had dispersed from the city centre by Wednesday, state broadcaster Khabar reported.

In 2011, at least 14 striking oil workers were killed in Zhanaozen as police crushed a protest over pay and working conditions, the deadliest unrest since the republic gained independence in 1991.

Nazarbayev, who is 81 and had ruled Kazakhstan since 1989, retains control over the country as chairman of the security council and 'Leader of the Nation' - a constitutional role that affords him unique policy-making privileges as well as immunity from prosecution.

AFP

Civil war looms large over Myanmar

Singapore - Myanmar has 'all the ingredients for civil war', Cambodia, chair of Southeast Asia's regional bloc, has warned ahead of a visit by Prime Minister Hun Sen to the crisis-wracked country.

Myanmar has been in chaos since a coup last year, with more than 1,400 people killed in a crackdown on dissent by security forces, according to a local monitoring group.

Hun Sen, whose country this year holds the rotating chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc, will visit Myanmar on Friday and Saturday in an effort to defuse the crisis.

But Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn warned the outlook was dire.

"The political and security crisis in Myanmar is deepening, and has led to (an) economic, health and humanitarian crisis," he said.

"We feel that all the ingredients for civil war are now on the table. There are now two governments, there are several armed forces, people are undergoing what they call the civil disobedience movement and (there is) guerrilla warfare around the country."

He was speaking at a lecture on Monday organised by Singapore-based think-tank the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

The event was held under the Chatham House Rule, which means the speaker must give permission before his comments are reported to facilitate candour.

This file photo shows supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi outside the headquarters of the National League of Democracy (NLD) party - where a portrait of the leader is displayed, in Yangon on November 9, 2015 (AFP)

Cambodia's Foreign Ministry on Tuesday gave permission for AFP to report his comments.

Hun Sen, one of the world's longest-ruling strongmen, on Wednesday called for a ceasefire, saying 'all relevant parties must stop violence'.

"Whether or not we reach a deal in negotiations, I ask for a ceasefire first because it has the benefits to flesh and blood - don't let people die or be injured," he said at a ceremony in Phnom Penh.

In a joint statement, more than 250 anti-coup resistance groups in Myanmar condemned the visit and urged Hun Sen to cancel it.

Visit criticism

Prak Sokhonn rejected criticism that Hun Sen's visit would legitimise the junta, and said the kingdom's 'immediate attention is on improving the situation in Myanmar'. Efforts would remain focused on a peace roadmap and the 'five-point consensus' agreed on by ASEAN leaders last year, he said.

The visit aims 'to pave the way for progress' by 'creating a conducive environment for inclusive dialogue and political trust among all parties concerned'.

Since the coup, there has been little sign of progress.

A visit by an ASEAN special envoy to Myanmar has been delayed after the junta refused to allow him to meet with ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

In response, the bloc excluded Myanmar's junta leader from a high-level October summit, a rare rebuke by a group often criticised for being toothless.

Myanmar's crisis has bad implications for 'regional stability... ASEAN's image, credibility, unity,' Prak Sokhonn added.

Nevertheless, he said Cambodia was making efforts to allow Myanmar's junta chief to resume attending meetings of the bloc again.

AFP

UK vows crackdown on threats against women

London, UK - Britain's justice secretary said on Wednesday he wanted to put the 'fear of God' into those who threaten women and that restoring women's faith in the legal system was his 'top priority' following a string of high-profile murders in London.

Dominic Raab said he was 'shocked and horrified' by the recent killings of several women, including one who was murdered by a serving police officer, calling the scale of violence 'sickening'.

"For many, the fear of being out alone after dark, or that they may be beaten in their own home, is a grim everyday reality," he wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*.

"We must turn that situation around. I want us to give those women back the confidence to live life without having to look anxiously over their shoulder, and instil the fear of God into the minds of anyone who would contemplate threatening a woman or girl."

According to official figures in England and Wales, in the year to March 2020 around 1.6mn women experienced domestic abuse, more than 600,000 were sexually assaulted and almost 900,000 were stalked.

Dominic Raab (AFP)

The government is scrapping the automatic halfway release for serious sexual offences and introducing closer monitoring of how well the police and prosecutors are tackling rape and sexual violence.

Victims of common assault involving domestic abuse will get two years to report the crime - up from a current six-month time limit. Raab, who is also Britain's deputy prime minister, warned there was 'no single silver bullet' to solve the problem and it needed to be tackled 'at every level' of society.

Park killings

Police and prosecutors are working together to prevent the scrutiny of those reporting rape 'eclipsing the proper focus on investigating the suspect', he added.

Victims are also being given the option of pre-recording their evidence when their case goes to trial.

The disappearance of Sarah Everard, a 33-year-old marketing executive, as she walked home in south London in March 2021 sparked renewed anger and concern about women's safety.

A serving Metropolitan Police officer was sentenced to life imprisonment for her kidnap, rape and murder.

Everard's murder came nearly a year after two sisters, Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, were stabbed to death by a man in a Satanic-inspired attack in a northwest London park.

Police were criticised for not initially taking the case seriously and two officers were jailed for taking unauthorised photographs at the crime scene and sharing them with colleagues on WhatsApp.

In September 2021, teacher Sabina Nessa was found dead in another park, in the southwest of the British capital. A man has since been charged with her murder.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

HK bans flights from 8 nations as Omicron surges around globe

Hong Kong, China - Asian financial hub Hong Kong banned flights from eight nations on Wednesday as part of strict new virus curbs, with Omicron outbreaks spiralling out of control from Europe to the United States.

The new coronavirus variant is spreading rapidly across continents, leaving governments rushing to roll out vaccine boosters and bolster healthcare systems as infection numbers reach new highs.

Britain, the United States, France and Australia have all announced record case numbers in recent days, while China has imposed lockdowns in two cities and rolled out mass testing for millions as it doubles down on its 'zero COVID' policy ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said the city was shuttering bars and gyms and cancelling evening restaurant dining after Omicron was detected in the international business hub.

The restrictions are the latest economic blow to a city that has kept cases low but left residents cut off from the rest of the world with tight border controls.

Like mainland China, Hong Kong has maintained some of the world's harshest controls - including weeks-long quarantine periods, targeted lockdowns and mass testing.

Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam addresses a press conference as her government announces strict new anti-coronavirus controls in the city on Wednesday (AFP)

The city had recorded 114 Omicron cases as of Tuesday evening, with a small community outbreak traced to Cathay Pacific airline staff sparking the latest curbs.

Carrie Lam said health officials feared the strain was silently spreading within the community.

Flights from Australia, Canada, France, India, Pakistan, The Philippines, Britain and the United States will be banned for the next two weeks.

Hong Kong also ordered a cruise ship carrying 3,700 people back to port for testing after nine people were found to be close contacts of Omicron patients.

To the north in the Chinese city of Zhengzhou, at least 12 million residents were ordered to take COVID-19 tests on Wednesday after just 11 Omicron cases were detected.

The central city is under a partial lockdown, joining millions more in the nearby cities of Xi'an and Yuzhou also living under stay-at-home orders.

'Under control'

But Xi'an's case numbers fell to their lowest in weeks on Wednesday, with officials saying the outbreak had been 'brought under control'.

"The epidemic is showing a downward trend," said Ma Guanghui, deputy director of the health commission in Shaanxi province. China has stuck to a rigid approach of stamping out COVID-19 cases when they appear, with tight border restrictions and targeted lockdowns since COVID-19 first emerged in the country in 2019.

But with less than a month to go until the Olympics, a series of small outbreaks across the country has put the strategy under pressure.

The 'zero COVID' approach stands in marked contrast to the strategy employed by many Western nations that have chosen to live with the virus rather than return to severe restrictions.

The more relaxed policy has seen an explosion in case numbers in the West, with the United States reporting more than a million daily cases on Monday.

Britain breached 200,000 cases for the first time on Tuesday, Australia posted almost 50,000 and France registered more than 270,000, with all three countries easily topping their previous records.

President Emmanuel Macron warned people in France not yet vaccinated that he planned to make life difficult for them by limiting access to key aspects of life. The government is seeking to push through legislation that will make vaccination compulsory for cultural activities, to use inter-city trains or visit a cafe, sparking a backlash among those opposed to further government edicts.

'Appalling message'

Vaccine policy sparked further anger in Australia, where world number one tennis player Novak Djokovic was given a medical exemption allowing him to play at this month's Australian Open.

Tournament chief Craig Tiley said that the defending champion had been given 'no special favour'.

But Stephen Parnis, a former Australian Medical Association vice-president, said it sent an 'appalling message' to people trying to stop the spread of the virus.

'I don't care how good a tennis player he is. If he's refusing to get vaccinated, he shouldn't be allowed in,' Parnis said on Twitter.

AFP

Israel records highest daily rise

Jerusalem - Israel's health ministry on Wednesday announced nearly 12,000 new coronavirus cases, constituting the largest daily rise in infections since the beginning of the pandemic nearly two years ago.

According to the figures, 11,978 new COVID-19 cases were detected over the course of Tuesday, surpassing 11,344 cases recorded on September 2 last year.

While there were currently nearly 60,000 people with COVID-19 in Israel, the number of serious cases on Wednesday was only 125, according to the health ministry.

Nearly 4.3mn of Israel's 9.4mn inhabitants have received three shots of coronavirus vaccine. In recent days, authorities began administering fourth shots to at-risk groups.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett predicted a continued rise in cases and urged people to get vaccinated.

"The wave now is really increasing and we expect to have tens of thousands of verified cases already in the next few days," he said

AFP

French President Emmanuel Macron (AFP)

Macron warning to France's unvaccinated sparks backlash

Paris, France - President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday faced anger from opponents and chaos in parliament after issuing a provocative warning to people in France not yet vaccinated against COVID-19 that he would pressure them as much as possible by limiting access to key aspects of life.

Macron, who has not yet formally declared his candidacy for re-election in April, came under fire from challengers already in the race, accusing him of overstepping the line with his remarks.

The uproar prompted a new delay in the passing of legislation aimed at tightening France's COVID-19 rules at a time when the country is facing record daily infection rates fuelled by the Omicron strain of the virus.

"As for the non-vaccinated, I really want to piss them off," he told *Le Parisien* newspaper in an interview. This would mean "limiting as much as possible their access to activities in social life," he added.

"We have to tell (the unvaccinated)... you will no longer be able to go to the restaurant. You will no longer be able to go for a coffee, you will no longer be able to go to the theatre. You will no longer be able to go to the cinema," the President said.

"We will continue to do this, to the end. This is the strategy," Macron added.

According to government figures, 91 per cent of French over-18s are fully vaccinated.

The rate surged over the summer after the introduction of a 'health pass' which restricted many activities to those with proof of vaccination, a recent negative test or recovery from coronavirus infection.

But that still leaves millions of people not covered as the Omicron wave breaks over the country.

In response, Macron's government plans to make vaccination the only way to maintain access to much of public life with a so-called 'vaccine pass' introduced from January 15.

Parliamentary debate over the tightening was already acrimonious, with the opposition forcing a delay in debate over the draft law late on Monday.

AFP

China to test 13mn in Zhengzhou to destroy clusters

Beijing, China - The city of Zhengzhou ordered its nearly 13mn residents to take COVID-19 tests on Wednesday after a handful of cases were detected, as China fights to stamp out virus clusters ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics.

Everyone in Zhengzhou, which has been placed under a partial lockdown, must be tested to 'thoroughly uncover infections hidden among the public', the city's government said in a statement on Wednesday.

The city has detected 11 cases in recent days.

The mass-testing order came as case numbers in the locked-down city of Xi'an fell to their lowest in weeks, with officials saying that outbreak had been 'brought under control'.

Xi'an's 13mn residents have been under stay-at-home orders for the last fortnight.

Residents queue up for tests as part of a mass testing programme in Zhengzhou on Wednesday (AFP)

"Although the case number has been high for many days, the rapid rise in COVID-19 spread at community level has been brought under control compared with the early stages of the outbreak," said Ma Guanghui, deputy director of Shaanxi province's health commission, at a press conference.

"The epidemic is showing a downward trend."

China has stuck to a rigid approach of stamping out COVID-19 cases when they appear, with tight border restrictions and targeted lockdowns since the virus first emerged in the country in 2019. But, with less than a month to go until the Winter Olympics in the capital, a series of small outbreaks has put the strategy under pressure.

Although the number of reported cases in China is very low compared with other nations, infections in recent weeks have reached a high not seen in the country since March 2020.

China recorded 91 cases on Wednesday - including 35 in Xi'an, the city's lowest tally since mid-December.

The Zhengzhou outbreak is tiny by comparison, but officials are taking no chances.

State media said about 500 close contacts had been traced from the outbreak's two symptomatic cases, linked through mahjong rooms and family gatherings. Eight residential communities were locked down.

On Monday, one million people in Yuzhou city - in the same province as Zhengzhou - were put under stay-at-home orders after three asymptomatic cases.

Local authorities deemed to have failed in preventing virus outbreaks have been sacked or punished.

AFP

Rio de Janeiro cancels carnival street celebrations

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - Authorities in Rio de Janeiro announced on Tuesday the cancellation of next month's carnival street celebrations due to an increase in COVID-19 cases brought on by the rapidly spreading Omicron variant.

It is the second year running that the coronavirus has forced the Rio street parade, which was due to take place from February 25 to March 1, to be called off.

"The street carnival in the form that took place in 2020, which did not happen in 2021, will not take place in 2022," Mayor Eduardo Paes said in a live broadcast on social media platforms.

The street parade by musical bands called 'blocos' is different to the better known procession by samba schools that takes place in Rio's Sambadrome.

The Sambadrome can hold 70,000 people in a stadium that allows authorities to control those that enter.

Demonstrators set fire to a vaccination card in protest against vaccine passports and mandatory vaccinations for children outside Pan American Health Organization headquarters, in Brasilia on Tuesday (AFP)

Amongst the options available to them are proof of vaccination, a negative COVID-19 test and the wearing of masks for those in attendance.

"The street carnival, given its nature and its democratic aspect, makes any type of control impossible," said Paes.

In 2020, there were an estimated seven million revellers for the days-long street parades, according to the Riotour travel agency. Although previous meetings between Rio authorities and the blocos failed to reach a compromise, new talks are planned for Friday where the musical groups association president Rita Fernandes told AFP they will make 'a more decentralized proposal.'

The arrival of the highly contagious Omicron variant, coupled with an increase in social gatherings over Christmas and the New Year, has seen COVID-19 cases soar in Rio.

New COVID-19 cases jumped from 21 on December 14 to 458 just two weeks later.

So far, though, the rise in cases has not led to a significant increase in hospital admissions or deaths. Four fifths of Rio's population have had at least two vaccine doses while almost a quarter have also been given a booster shot.

Some 67 per cent of Brazil's 213mn population are vaccinated with two doses.

AFP

With shutdown of rights group Memorial, Kremlin looks to control Russia's past

Moscow, Russia - The shutting down of prominent rights group Memorial, critics and historians say, is the clearest sign yet of the Kremlin's desire to control not only Russia's present, but its past as well.

The Supreme Court last week ordered Memorial International - a symbol of Russia's reckoning with Stalinism - to close its doors over alleged violations of a controversial 'foreign agents' law.

The move came at the end of a year that saw an unprecedented crackdown on Russia's opposition, with the jailing of top Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, arrests of his supporters and the shutting down of independent media.

Memorial is more than a rights group. Since its founding in 1989 it has tirelessly chronicled Stalin-era purges, often putting it at odds with President Vladimir Putin's efforts to glorify the Soviet era.

With Memorial out of the way, historians fear the narrative will now firmly be in the hands of those - like Russia's powerful security services - who prefer a less nuanced version of the country's past.

"They are trying to create one single narrative, their own," historian Nikita Sokolov said.

"Memorial is the carrier of this other version of the people's memory."

The group has built a huge archive of those who suffered under Stalin, with almost every Russian family counting victims of 1930s repression among it.

But during the high-profile trial, prosecutors accused Memorial of denigrating the memory of the Soviet Union.

"Why should we, the descendants of victors, be ashamed and repentant instead of being proud of a glorious past?" judge Alexei Zhafyarov said on the day of the ruling.

Memorial International supporters stand outside the Moscow City Court where a hearing over liquidation of Memorial's Human Rights Centre was on, in Moscow last week (AFP)

This file photo shows an employee inspecting archive documents at Memorial office on November 15, 2021 (AFP)

'Victims but no perpetrators'

Young Russians - an entire generation that has grown up under Putin's two-decade rule - have increasingly been fed a version of the past in which Stalin-era crimes are but a minor detail in history textbooks.

"It is a 'light' version of Soviet history, in which the state is not guilty," said political expert Alexei Makarkin.

At the centre of the Kremlin's version of history, Stalin is portrayed as a victor in the Second World War - which Russians call the 'Great Patriotic War' - rather than a dictator who had millions of his own citizens shot or sent to labour camps.

Memorial contradicted this doctrine, and particularly angered authorities with its mission to expose the identities of Stalinist perpetrators.

Its director Yan Rachinsky told AFP that while the government does not deny the repressions, 'it is a question of interpretation'.

The state is trying to show that there were 'individual bad people who did this, it's as if there were victims but no perpetrators', he said.

"We clearly showed that this was state policy and that the Soviet Union was a terrorist state."

The end of 2021 saw several other moves against any kind of criticism of the official version of history.

'Corpse coming to life'

One of Memorial's Gulag historians, Yury Dmitriyev, had his prison sentence increased to 15 years the same week of the Supreme Court ruling.

Supporters of Dmitriyev - who spent years uncovering mass graves in northern Russia - say the child abuse charges against him are unfounded and punishment for his work.

A teenager was also sentenced to four years in prison last month after he posted a picture online of himself urinating on a public sign featuring a portrait of a World War II veteran.

Putin (69) has leaned towards a version of history friendly to his former employer the KGB, but has trodden a fine line and not embraced Stalinists.

In 2017, he unveiled a monument to victims of political repression in Moscow and has recently supported the idea of a statue for Andrei Sakharov - the legendary dissident who helped found Memorial.

His view, experts say, is that repressions should be remembered but not portrayed as the 20th century's main event or blamed on the Soviet state.

With Stalin increasingly glorified in Russian history books and on state television, a poll by the independent Levada Centre last summer found more than half of Russians have a positive view of the dictator.

Rachinsky said that by refusing to admit the horrors of Stalin's rule, Russian authorities risk reviving some of what he stood for.

"As crimes are not called by their names, then this corpse (of Stalin) is coming to life, whether they like it or not."

AFP

Canada agrees to $31bn compensation for Indigenous children

Ottawa, Canada - Canada announced a US$31.5bn agreement on Tuesday to reform its discriminatory child welfare system and compensate Indigenous families who suffered because of it, in what an official called the country's largest settlement.

The agreements-in-principle include C$20bn (US$15.7 approx) for First Nations children who were removed from their families and caregivers and put into state care, typically schools meant to forcibly assimilate them.

The other C$20bn will be earmarked for reforming the child and family services system over the next five years.

"No compensation amount can make up for the trauma people have experienced," said Patty Hajdu, the Minister of Indigenous Services.

"But these Agreements-in-Principle acknowledge to survivors and their families the harm and pain caused by the discrimination in funding and services."

This file photo shows a makeshift memorial outside the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in honour of the 215 children whose remains were found near the facility, in Kamloops on September 1, last year (AFP)

The deal, which stemmed from lawsuits brought by First Nations families against the Canadian government, acknowledges that 'discriminatory underfunding' of child and family services in indigenous communities had inflicted suffering on those involved.

Despite making up less than eight per cent of children under 14, Indigenous children account for more than half of those in Canada's foster care, according to a 2016 census.

Over the past three decades, at least 150,000 Indigenous children were ripped from their homes and placed into one of 139 residential schools.

Thousands died, mostly from malnutrition, disease or neglect, in what a truth and reconciliation committee called 'cultural genocide' in a 2015 report.

Many others were physically or sexually abused.

On the heels of the discovery of more than 1,200 unmarked graves at these schools, Canada is starting to come to terms with the nationwide trauma.

Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Marc Miller called Tuesday's agreement 'the largest settlement in Canadian history' at a videoed news conference.

The amount to be paid to each individual, as well as how and when, will be determined later in consultation with experts and the country's largest Indigenous organisation, the Assembly of First Nations, according to lawyers representing complainants in two class action cases.

"This settlement is historic and hopefully a turning point in this country's work on reconciliation," Robert Kugler, one of the lawyers, said in a statement.

The amount, he added, "underscores the severity of the harm suffered, and will provide financial support to enable victims to better their lives going forward."

The Canadian government has previously fought orders to compensate Indigenous families over systems it has admitted were discriminatory, including in an appeal filed last year seeking to overturn a landmark decision awarding billions to indigenous children.

Canada has said it believes the payments are necessary, but would rather iron out the details in talks.

Tuesday's agreements-in-principle are expected to be finalised in the coming months.

AFP

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BIRTHDAY WISHES

AMAL AJITH
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May the year ahead be filled with smiles, sunshine, good health, love and laughter.
Happy Birthday Amal!

HEALTH IN CRISIS

Years after war, health sector in Iraq's Mosul is ailing

Months after a minor motorbike accident, Amer Shaker is still suffering from poor treatment at a hospital in Iraq's Mosul, forcing him like many others to seek help elsewhere.

"At public hospitals, we have to pay for everything," said Shaker. "As soon as we arrived, we paid for the medicine, bandages, the anaesthesia."

But for the past seven months, he has been treated free of charge at Al-Wahda hospital, opened by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in Mosul in 2018.

Having spent a small fortune in current Iraqi terms - about US$8,000 - on medical care after an initial surgery by a Mosul doctor who failed to heal his leg, which had been fractured in three places, Al-Wahda was a godsend for the construction worker.

"The doctor had inserted a platinum plate, but it was not done right. I tried to find another doctor, but none of them were any good," said the 21-year-old.

On his left leg, MSF doctors have attached an external fixator, an impressive frame of pins and screws - nearly impossible to find elsewhere in Mosul, he said.

His case is symptomatic of the wider affliction that ails Iraq's health sector, which like other public services has suffered from dilapidated infrastructure and the effects of successive conflicts.

The former stronghold of the Islamic State group, Mosul was devastated by the battle to oust the extremists that ended in summer 2017.

More than four years on, the northern metropolis remains a patchwork of gutted concrete carcasses interspersed between buildings under construction.

Five hospitals are being refurbished or reconstructed in the city, according to a public official, and nine health institutions are functioning - leaving a total of 1,800 beds for a population of 1.5mn.

'Lack of hospital beds'

In the coming weeks, Shaker will need to undergo a sixth operation to remove 13cm of dead bone.

At Al-Wahda hospital, patients vary in profile, from Khawla Younes, the 60-year-old housewife who broke her leg in a fall, to Mahmud al Meemari, undergoing his '16th or 17th surgery' for an injury from a 2017 bomb blast.

Majid Ahmed, an official in the public health authority of Nineveh province - of which Mosul is the capital - acknowledges 'a lack of hospital beds and care units'.

> At public hospitals, we have to pay for everything... as soon as we arrived, we paid for the medicine, bandages, the anaesthesia
>
> SHAKER

The destruction 'has affected 70 per cent of our health facilities', he said.

Before the rise of IS in 2014, Nineveh had 3,900 hospital beds, compared to 600 in 2017 after the government wrested back control of Mosul, Ahmed explained.

Today, the province has about 2,650 beds.

"The destruction that has struck health institutions in the province requires a significant budget," Ahmed added.

After the conflict, the medical sector was at ground zero, according to orthopaedic surgeon Hisham Abdel Rahman, who works with MSF alongside his job in the public health sector.

"With time, we see improvement, but it's very slow," he said.

At Al-Wahda hospital 'we offer services that will not be available in other facilities in Mosul for many years', he continued.

He said Mosul needs new hospitals, medical equipment and medicine, especially for cancer treatment.

'Filling a gap'

MSF also runs the Nablus hospital and maternity ward in Mosul, where nearly 900 infants are delivered on average every month.

"This hospital has been filling a gap," said Kyi Par Soe, MSF's medical activity manager at the hospital, adding that the two other maternity hospitals in Mosul are 'overloaded'.

On a positive note, the public health authority's Ahmed said the number of COVID-19 cases officially recorded in Mosul was 'very low', with 30 per cent of capacity in public hospitals reserved for patients with serious infections.

Apart from the hospitals, the rest of Mosul is also struggling to regain a sense of normalcy.

Residents crowd into cafes and restaurants, many of which have opened under buildings left in a suspended state of construction, their top floors scarred by gaping holes.

Less than 15 per cent of residents of eastern Mosul, where fighting for the city ended, have 'enough water to meet their daily needs', according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

In western Mosul, that figure is 35 per cent.

And despite the restoration of certain historic sites, entire swathes of the Old City in central Mosul remain a pile of debris.

Reconstruction efforts have rumbled on at such a slow pace that it is not unusual to uncover bodies under the rubble to this day.

In December, civil defence teams found more than a dozen corpses from the battle for Mosul.

AFP

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FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

COVID-19 forces postponement of Liverpool-Arsenal League Cup semi

Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah (third from left) is mobbed by teammates after he scored a goal in a match against Chelsea (AFP)

London, UK - Liverpool's League Cup semi-final first-leg match against Arsenal on Thursday has been postponed due to a 'severe outbreak' of coronavirus cases at the Anfield club.

Liverpool asked on Tuesday for the match to be rearranged and since then there have been more positive tests, forcing the closure of their training ground.

Manager Jurgen Klopp and three players - Alisson Becker, Joel Matip and Roberto Firmino - were already isolating before the latest wave of infections, which includes a positive test for assistant boss Pep Lijnders.

The English Football League said it had accepted Liverpool's request for a postponement.

'The first leg of the Carabao (League) Cup semi-final between Arsenal and Liverpool scheduled for Thursday 6 January 2022 has been postponed following a formal request by Liverpool due to a severe outbreak of COVID-19 infections amongst their management and playing staff,' the EFL said in a statement.

Liverpool said the rise in cases had left them short of numbers.

'The latest round of testing on Tuesday returned a significant number of positives, including Pepijn Lijnders, who was due to take charge of the Reds at Emirates Stadium,' they said.

'The outbreak has left Liverpool without a sufficient number of players and staff to fulfil the contest as originally scheduled.'

The club are also missing a number of players through injury including Thiago Alcantara, Takumi Minamino and Divock Origi, while Mohamed Salah, Sadio Mane and Naby Keita are on Africa Cup of Nations duty.

Liverpool will now host the first leg of the League Cup tie at Anfield on January 13, with the return leg at the Emirates Stadium the following week.

Chelsea are hosting Tottenham in the other League Cup semi-final later on Wednesday.

Liverpool's next match is due to be the FA Cup third-round tie at home to Shrewsbury on Sunday, which could also now be in doubt.

AFP

Wolves sign Japan's Hayao Kawabe

Hayao Kawabe

London, UK - Premier League side Wolves on Wednesday announced the signing of Japan international Hayao Kawabe from Swiss Super League side Grasshoppers.

The midfielder, who signed a three-and-a-half-year deal, is expected to return to Switzerland to complete the season on loan after spending January at Molineux.

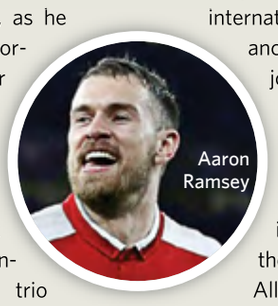
The 26-year-old, who has four caps, joined Grasshoppers from Sanfrecce Hiroshima in July and has made 18 appearances, scoring four goals.

"Hayao is a player we've watched a lot and he's done really well this season," said Wolves technical director Scott Sellars.

"He's an attacking midfield player, very energetic, very busy, and has good quality. He's really shone at Grasshoppers this year, and he's one of the main reasons they're doing so well."

He added, "Hayao will spend January with Bruno's (Lage the Wolves manager) group while the Swiss Super League is on a winter break, then he'll likely return to Grasshoppers to finish the season there, as he has been an important player for them so far this season."

Scottish Premiership club Celtic last week announced the signing of Japanese trio Yosuke Ideguchi, Daizen Maeda and Reo Hatate.



Aaron Ramsey

Ramsey set to leave Juventus, says Massimiliano Allegri

Milan, Italy - Wales midfielder Aaron Ramsey is an 'outgoing player' and could leave Juventus this month, the Turin giants' coach Massimiliano Allegri said on Wednesday.

Former Arsenal star Ramsey has fallen out of favour at Juve, featuring for less than 100 minutes in Serie A this season.

The 31-year-old has been linked with a possible return to the Gunners and moves to Premier League sides Everton and Saudi-backed Newcastle.

UK media reports on Tuesday also said that Burnley had seen an approach turned down by Ramsey.

"Aaron Ramsey returned today after his leave to work in England, but he is an outgoing player," Allegri said ahead of Juventus' Serie A game against Napoli on Thursday.

Ramsey, who has made 71 international appearances for Wales, joined Juve from Arsenal on a free transfer in 2019.

He has scored six goals in 69 games for the club.

Allegri also dismissed reports that Spain striker Alvaro Morata could depart for struggling Barcelona.

"I told Alvaro that he is staying here, he is not leaving Juventus, end of story," Allegri said.

Morata has netted seven times this season in all competitions.

AFP

S Africa's Elgar defies Indian bowlers in tough chase

Johannesburg, South Africa - South African captain Dean Elgar defied a hostile Indian bowling attack on a difficult pitch to lead his team's quest for a series-levelling win on the third day of the second Test at the Wanderers Stadium on Wednesday.

Set to make 240 to win, South Africa were 118 for two at the close, with Elgar unbeaten on 46 after facing 121 balls in a three-hour examination of his skills and resolve.

The left-handed Elgar was struck on the neck by a ball from Jasprit Bumrah and on the right hand by Shardul Thakur, with both injuries requiring treatment on the field.

South Africa made a bright start, with Aiden Markram stroking 31 off 38 balls in an opening stand of 47 with Elgar.

But Markram fell leg before wicket to first innings bowling hero Thakur, who won a verdict from umpire Marais Erasmus after two earlier unsuccessful appeals in the same over.

Run-scoring became increasingly difficult, with uneven bounce becoming more of a factor as the sun beat down on a pitch which has given help to the fast bowlers throughout the match.

Dean Elgar plays a shot as India's wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant looks on, during the second Test, in Johannesburg on Wednesday (AFP)

But it was off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin who made the second breakthrough when he trapped Keegan Petersen in front of his stumps for 28 with the total on 93.

After losing the first Test in Centurion, South Africa need to win to keep the series alive ahead of next week's third and final Test in Cape Town.

With only six recognised batsmen in their line-up, a tense finish is in prospect for Thursday.

Rabada burst

India's second innings total of 266 owed much to Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane, who put on 111 for the third wicket.

Fast bowler Kagiso Rabada brought South Africa back into the match with a burst of three wickets after Pujara and Rahane added 66 runs in 14 overs to the overnight total of 85 for two with the most fluent batting of the match.

The two veterans, criticised recently after a string of low scores, both went to rapid half-centuries as they took advantage of inconsistent bowling by South Africa on a pitch still offering plenty of help to fast bowlers.

Rabada struck in the first over after the mid-morning drinks break when Rahane was caught behind for 58, scored off 78 balls with eight fours and a six.

In his next over Rabada trapped Pujara leg before wicket for 53. Pujara reached his half-century off 62 balls with 10 fours but only added another three from 24 deliveries before his dismissal.

Rishabh Pant was struck on the shoulder by a Rabada bouncer and then charged at the next ball and edged a catch to wicketkeeper Kyle Verreynne to depart for nought.

Hanuma Vihari made 40 not out and there was aggressive batting from Ravichandran Ashwin (16) and Shardul Thakur (28) as India added 99 runs for the loss of their last five wickets.

Rabada, Lungi Ngidi and Marco Jansen took three wickets apiece.

AFP

SCOREBOARD

India 1st Innings 202
South Africa 1st Innings 229

INDIA 2ND INNINGS		
KL Rahul	c Markram b Jansen	8
M Agarwal	lbw b Olivier	23
C Pujara	lbw b Rabada	53
A Rahane	c Verreynne b Rabada	58
H Vihari	not out	40
R Pant	c Verreynne b Rabada	0
R Ashwin	c Verreynne b Ngidi	16
S Thakur	c Maharaj b Jansen	28
M Shami	c Verreynne b Jansen	0
J Bumrah	c Jansen b Ngidi	7
M Siraj	b Ngidi	0
Extras:	(b 16, lb 4, nb 8, w 5)	33
TOTAL:	266 in 60.1 overs	

Fall of wickets: 1-24, 2-44, 3-155, 4-163, 5-167, 6-184, 7-225, 8-228, 9-245, 10-266

Bowling: K Rabada 20-3-77-3, D Olivier 12-1-51-1, L Ngidi 10.1-2-43-3, M Jansen 17-4-67-3, K Maharaj 1-0-8-0

SOUTH AFRICA 2ND INNINGS		
A Markram	lbw b Thakur	31
Dean Elgar	not out	46
K Petersen	lbw b Ashwin	28
R van der Dussen	not out	11
Extras:	(lb 2)	2
TOTAL:	(40 Ov, RR: 2.95)	118/2

Fall of wickets: 1-47, 2-93

Bowling: J Bumrah 10-1-42-0, M Shami 9-2-22-0, S Thakur 9-1-24-1, M Siraj 4-0-14-0, R Ashwin 8-1-14-1

Toyota's Qatari driver Nasser al Attiyah and French co-driver Mathieu Baumel compete during Stage 4 of the Dakar Rally on Wednesday (AFP)

Attiyah wins Dakar's longest stage after Saudi driver pain

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Dakar Rally leader Nasser al Attiyah took Wednesday's fourth stage in Riyadh after Saudi driver Yazeed al Rajhi was caught out by a speeding penalty.

The home hope led the timings after the 465km trek across the desert from Qaisumah.

But a two minute sanction dropped him down to fifth, with Attiyah handed the stage to add to his success in the prologue and first stage.

Attiyah explained the inherited win had come at a price.

"We tried to set a high pace, but our plan was not having to open tomorrow (Thursday) because there will be no bikes and, therefore, no tracks," he said.

"But, even if we falter a bit tomorrow in these conditions, it will put us in a favourable position for the next day," Attiyah added.

The Qatari, seeking a fourth Dakar title behind the wheel of a Toyota, pulled a further 25seconds clear of Sebastien Loeb in the overall car rankings to lead the French rally star by 38mins 05sec.

AFP

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Spain, Poland power into ATP Cup semis

Sydney, Australia - Roberto Bautista Agut swept past Serbia's Dusan Lajovic to steer Spain into the ATP Cup semi-finals on Wednesday, where they will meet Poland after world number nine Hubert Hurkacz overwhelmed Argentina's in-form Diego Schwartzman.

The winner between Daniil Medvedev's defending champions Russia or the Matteo Berrettini-led Italy, last year's finalists, will also book a last-four berth when they meet in Sydney on Thursday.

The outcome of Group C is more complicated with all four teams - Britain, Canada, Germany and the United States - still in contention. They also play on Thursday.

After Chile beat Norway earlier in the day, Spain only needed one win in their final Group A tie against 2020 champions Serbia to progress, and that came from the consistent Pablo Carreno Busta.

The world number 20 toppled Filip Krajinovic 6-3, 6-4 for his third consecutive win of the season before Bautista Agut, ranked one place above his teammate, rubbed salt in Serbia's wounds by cruising past Lajovic 6-1, 6-4.

"I'm very happy to have won the match in two sets, the humidity was tough, but we need these matches coming from Europe and the winter," said Bautista Agut, who played consistently from the baseline.

"I haven't played three matches in a row for three or four months and it's really good to start the season with rhythm, with minutes on the court and I couldn't be more pleased."

Roberto Bautista of Spain hits a return from Dusan Lajovic of Serbia at the ATP Cup, in Sydney on Wednesday (AFP)

Despite missing Rafael Nadal, who is playing an ATP tournament in Melbourne, Spain have dropped just one set at the 16-team event as Carreno Busta and Bautista Agut warm up for the Australian Open which starts on January 17. Hurkacz has also been in fine touch, battling past 13th-ranked Schwartzman 6-1, 6-4 in 81 minutes.

Both Poland and Argentina went into the tie unbeaten in Group D, winning previous clashes with Greece and Georgia, to make their showdown a winner-takes-all battle.

'Super proud'

Poland's world number 117 Kamil Majchrzak set up his team for victory with a gutsy 6-3, 7-6 (7/3) win against Federico Delbonis, who is ranked 73 places higher, leaving 2021 Miami Open champion Hurkacz to seal the tie.

"So happy for Team Poland, we are in the semis and super proud of that achievement," said Hurkacz, who sent down 12 aces and won 85 per cent of his first-serve points.

"We are a great team, have great team spirit and support each other and I think the atmosphere that we bring helps us play better."

It was another solid win for Hurkacz after a career-best 2021 garnered three ATP Tour titles. Schwartzman was coming off an upset win over world number four Stefanos Tsitsipas on Monday.

AFP

Ashleigh Barty of Australia hits a return to USA's Coco Gauff during their singles match at the Adelaide International on Wednesday (AFP)

Barty comes from set down to beat Gauff in Adelaide International

Adelaide, Australia - World number one Ashleigh Barty came from a set and a break down to defeat American teenager Coco Gauff in the second round of the Adelaide International on Wednesday.

Barty, playing her first singles match since the US Open in September, gave herself some perfect match practice ahead of the Australian Open with the bruising 4-6, 7-5, 6-1 win over the 17-year-old.

In a match of real quality from both players, Barty struggled to find her rhythm in the early stages as Gauff fired winner after winner, claiming a tight first set in 48 minutes.

Gauff then broke the Australian in the fifth game of the second and appeared on course for an upset.

But Barty gradually found her range and broke back at 3-4 to level proceedings, then broke again at 6-5 to get back on terms. She ran away with the third against an increasingly dejected Gauff, wrapping up the match in two hours, 12 minutes.

"I feel like I played a pretty good-quality match considering it was my first match in a few months," Barty, who ended her season after the US Open because of the pandemic, said.

"I felt like I got better and better as the match went on."

Earlier, Aryna Sabalenka's Open preparations took a hit when the world number two exited in the second round.

The Belarusian, who is yet to win a Grand Slam, self-destructed on her serve as 100th-ranked Kaja Juvan notched the biggest win of her career, 7-6 (8/6), 6-1.

After a close first set, Sabalenka's service action deserted her in the second, virtually handing the match to her Slovenian opponent.

Sabalenka served 18 double-faults in the match - 11 in the second set - with many of her second serves either hitting the base of the net or missing the court completely.

She won only four points on serve in the second set and at one stage raised her arms in triumph when she landed a second serve.

AFP

Djokovic COVID-jab exemption sparks backlash

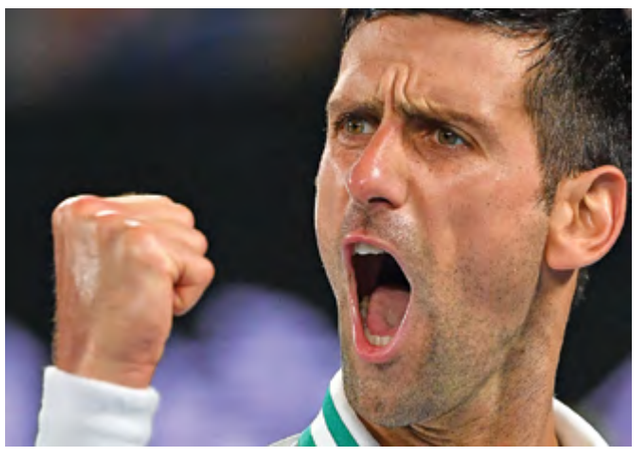
Melbourne, Australia - Australians reacted with fury on Wednesday after world number one Novak Djokovic received a medical exemption from having a COVID-19 vaccine in order to play at this month's Australian Open.

Tournament chief Craig Tiley said that the defending champion had been given 'no special favour' but urged the Serb to reveal why he got the exemption to soothe public anger.

All participants at the first Grand Slam of 2022, which starts on January 17, must be vaccinated against COVID-19 or have a medical exemption, which is granted only after assessment by two panels of independent experts.

The nine-time Australian Open champion announced late on Tuesday he was en route to Melbourne with 'an exemption permission', ending the drawn-out saga over whether he would defend his title.

But Stephen Parnis, a former Australian Medical Association vice-president, said it sent an 'appalling message' to people trying to stop the spread of COVID-19.


A file photo of Serbia's Novak Djokovic (AFP)

'I don't care how good a tennis player he is. If he's refusing to get vaccinated, he shouldn't be allowed in,' Parnis said on Twitter.

Australian Prime Minster Scott Morrison said that if the reasons for Djokovic's exemption were 'insufficient' then the Serb would be 'on the next plane home'. "We await his presentation and what evidence he provides us to support (his exemption)," Morrison said.

"If that evidence is insufficient, then he won't be treated any different to anyone else and will be on the next plane home. There should be no special rules for Novak Djokovic at all. None whatsoever."

> *I don't care how good a tennis player he is. If he's refusing to get vaccinated, he shouldn't be allowed in*
>
> STEPHEN PARNIS

Former Australian ATP Tour player Sam Groth, now a television commentator, said it was 'a decision that spits in the face of every Victorian and Australian' in a column in Melbourne's *Herald Sun* newspaper.

There was also outrage on the streets of Melbourne.

"I think it's disgusting. I think he should have made his mind up before now and it shouldn't be a last-minute decision to get him in," resident Ron Wilson said.

Other residents of the Victoria state city were more sympathetic, with Morteza Yari saying: "I think as long as the exemption is valid and they have valid reasons I don't see a problem with that."

Among the conditions allowing entry without a vaccine is if a person has had COVID-19 in the past six months. It has not been revealed if that was the case with Djokovic.

'Sick hypocrisy'

Tiley said the two panels assessed each exemption without knowing the identity of the applicant and he did not know under what grounds Djokovic got the green light, which is confidential.

"It will certainly be helpful if Novak was to explain the conditions in which he sought and was granted an exemption," Tiley told reporters, acknowledging the backlash. "I would encourage him to talk to the community about it... we have been through a very tough period over the last two years and would appreciate some answers to that."

Groth agreed that Djokovic should reveal why he has been allowed in.

'You're willing to say you have an exemption but not willing to say why? It's sick hypocrisy. I don't like it at all,' Groth wrote.

However, Tiley defended the integrity of the exemption application process, which is overseen by national and Victorian state governments.

He revealed that only 26 of the approximately 3,000 players and support staff travelling to Australia for the tournament had applied for a vaccine exemption.

AFP

Bangladesh crush New Zealand to register historic Test win

Taskin Ahmed (left) celebrates the wicket of New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra on the last day of the Test match at the Bay Oval, in Mount Maunganui on Wednesday (AFP)

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand - Bangladesh pulled off a crushing eight-wicket victory over world champions New Zealand at Mount Maunganui on Wednesday.

The tourists needed only 40 runs in their second innings for the historic win, their first ever in New Zealand and only their sixth in 61 away Tests.

The match was wrapped up in one session on the final day as Ebadot Hossain took a career best six for 46 and New Zealand were rolled in their second innings for 169.

It was a 'David and Goliath' result, with Bangladesh ranked ninth in the world while world Test champions New Zealand are second.

It was also New Zealand's first loss in 16 home Tests over the past four years.

Bangladesh have previously lost all 32 matches played in New Zealand across all formats, including nine Tests, and they arrived to start this tour following back-to-back losses at home to Pakistan.

But they attacked this Test with confidence and apart from a 138-run second-wicket stand by Devon Conway and Will Young in New Zealand's first innings, the tourists have largely been in control.

After New Zealand were dismissed for 328 in their first innings, Mominul Haque (88) led Bangladesh to 478, a 130-run lead on a pitch which stayed true and did not have the usual bias towards fast bowlers regularly seen on New Zealand wickets.

Then, thanks to a canny reading of the game by bowling coach Ottis Gibson, Bangladesh only needed 73.4 overs to knock over New Zealand in their second innings. Gibson had noted the Bay Oval wicket was not delivering slip catches, which are common in New Zealand conditions, and he called for wicket-to-wicket bowling.

> *Maybe the New Zealand batters underestimated us. The discipline we've shown is fantastic. We went for wicket-to-wicket bowling, they (New Zealand) went short*
>
> OTTIS GIBSON

"It's different to how New Zealand bowl, they didn't bowl to length, they went short. That's their tactic, it works for them.

"(Neil) Wagner's very good at it, but we're different, we try to bowl at the stumps a lot more and it's really pleasing to see that it worked for us," he said. "Maybe the New Zealand batters underestimated us. The discipline we've shown is fantastic."

Ebadot relished the instruction and produced by far his best bowling figures. He removed first innings centurion Devon Conway for 13, and in a quick burst claimed Will Young (69) along with Henry Nicholls and Tom Blundell without scoring.

On Wednesday morning he accounted for Ross Taylor (40) and Kyle Jamieson (0), while Taskin Ahmed and Mehidy Hasan mopped up the tail.

AFP

SCOREBOARD

New Zealand 1st Innings 328
Bangladesh 1st Innings 458

NEW ZEALAND 2ND INNINGS		
Tom Latham	b Taskin Ahmed	14
Will Young	b Ebadot Hossain	69
D Conway	c S Islam b E Hossain	13
R Taylor	b Ebadot Hossain	40
H Nicholls	b Ebadot Hossain	0
Tom Blundell	lbw b Ebadot Hossain	0
R Ravindra	c Liton Das b T Ahmed	16
K Jamieson	c S Islam b E Hossain	0
T Southee	b Taskin Ahmed	0
Neil Wagner	not out	0
Trent Boult	c sub b M Hasan Miraz	8
Extras:	(b 2, lb 5, nb 1, w 1)	9
TOTAL:	169 in 73.4 overs	

Fall of wickets: 1-29, 2-63, 3-136, 4-136, 5-136, 6-154, 7-160, 8-160, 9-161, 10-169

Bowling: T Ahmed 14-3-36-3, Shoriful Islam 12-2-30-0, M H Miraz 22.4-5-43-1, E Hossain 21-6-46-6, M Haque 4-0-7-0

BANGLADESH 2ND INNINGS		
S Islam	c Blundell b Southee	3
N H Shanto	c Taylor b Jamieson	17
M Haque	not out	13
M Rahim	not out	5
Extras:	(lb 1, nb 1, w 2)	4
TOTAL:	42/2 in 16.5 overs	

Fall of wickets: 1-3, 2-34

Bowling: Trent Boult 5-3-4-0, T Southee 5-2-21-1, K Jamieson 3.5-1-12-1, N Wagner 3-1-4-0

Mominul Haque (centre left) embraces Mushfiqur Rahim after their victory at the Bay Oval on Wednesday (AFP)

Bangladesh's Mominul hails 'unbelievable' Test win in New Zealand

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand - An ecstatic Bangladesh captain Mominul Haque was lost for words at his side's shock eight-wicket win over world champions New Zealand at Mount Maunganui on Wednesday.

It is the first time Bangladesh have won in New Zealand, and Mominul could not contain his emotion when Mushfiqur Rahim clouted a boundary off Kyle Jamieson to seal the famous victory by eight wickets.

"I can't describe it. It's an unbelievable thing," Mominul, who was not out 13, said after hugging Mushfiqur and waving to the Bangladesh team and support staff.

It was not only a boost for Bangladesh cricket but it also severely dented New Zealand's hopes of retaining their world Test crown.

In one of cricket's biggest upsets, Bangladesh arrived in New Zealand on the back of a 2-0 home series loss to Pakistan and less than seven months since New Zealand had won the World Test Championship by beating India in the final in England.

New Zealand, 130 behind after the first innings, were only 17 runs in front at stumps on day four with five wickets remaining, but Mominul said he refused to contemplate victory until it happened.

"Honestly, I couldn't sleep yesterday because of the pressure and I didn't know what will happen today," he said, adding that after poor preparation for the tour, Bangladesh had deliberately not focused on winning, or on New Zealand, but on executing their own plans. It was very important to win the Test match, everyone knows we have to improve our Test cricket, (but) we didn't focus on the result, we focused on the process," he said.

> *I can't describe it. It's an unbelievable thing*
>
> MOMINUL HAQUE

"If you think it's going to be tough it will be tough."

New Zealand captain Tom Latham rejected suggestions the Black Caps may have underestimated Bangladesh.

He said his team prepared as for any Test but 'they certainly outplayed us through the five days'. "We know we've got to turn up... unfortunately we couldn't quite do that for five days here."

AFP

Earn Trust achieve big win; OCA rout PSM U-19, Muscat Women win too

LOCAL CRICKET ROUNDUP

Muscat - Splendid 100 by Arif Hussain and Shameer Mohamed's 5 for 7 powered Earn Trust CT to a massive 147-run win over OCT Al Nahdha in an T20 F Division game of Oman Cricket League at OAC 3 ground in Seeb.

Opener Arif's 58-ball century was the highlight of Earn Trust's total of 196 for 3 that also saw 43 off 26 from his opening partner Manas Kapoor. OCT Al Nahdha was shot out for a meagre 49 in 13.1 overs as leg-spinner Shameer Mohammed was literally unplayable in his 3.1 overs, taking five wickets. Moazzam Shah and Manas bowled equally well, taking two wickets each.

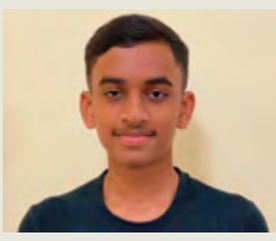
BRIEF SCORES

Earn Trust CT 196 for 3 in 20 overs (Arif Hussain 100, Maanas Kapoor 43) **trounced OCT Al Nahdha 49 all out in 13.1 overs** (Sharif al Balushi 10, Shameer Mohamed 5-7, Moazzam Shah 2-16, Maanas Kapoor 2-12) **by 147 runs**.

Lakshmi stars in big victory for OCA

Lakshmi Narayana's superb 105 laid the foundation for Oman Cricket Academy's (OCA) massive 308-run victory against Pakistan School Muscat in a 50-over Junior League Under-19 match at OC Turf 2 in Amerat on Saturday.

Apart from Lakshmi's 83-ball ton, Rishabh Gupta struck 63 off 73 while Saumya Bhavin contributed 54 off 57 to lift OCA to a monumental 369 for 8 in a 48-over game due to late start. Muhammed Anas bagged 2 for 41.



Lakshmi Narayana

PSM folded up for a dismal 61 in 22.1 overs, with Azam Ali picking up 3 for 22.

BRIEF SCORES

(Junior League Under-19): **OCA 369 for 8 in 48 overs** (Lakshmi Narayana 105, Rishabh Gupta 63, Soumya Bhavin 54. Muhammed Anas 2-41) **thrashed PSM 61 all out in 22.1 overs** (Abubaker Iftikhar 19. Azam Ali 3-22, Saumya Bhavin 2-01, Amanpreet Singh 2-13) **by 308 runs.**

Bhakti leads Muscat Women to victory

Bhakti Shetty's outstanding all-round show led Muscat Women to a 5-wicket win over Pakistan Women in a Women's League game at OC Turf 2 in Amerat on Monday.

Oman star Fiza Javed top-scored with a fluent 52 off 45 whereas Sameera Khan contributed a run-a-ball 27 as Pakistan Women posted 126 on the board. Bhakti's new ball spell was the major reason they could not compile a bigger total. Bhakti excelled with the bat too, striking an elegant 40 off 46.

Anderson, Wood strike late for England in rain-hit 4th Ashes Test

Sydney, Australia - James Anderson and Mark Wood hit back late on a rain-marred opening day to give beleaguered England some hope in the fourth Ashes Test at Sydney Cricket Ground on Wednesday.

Australia, holding an unassailable 3-0 series lead, looked in a strong position at 111 for one before pacemen Anderson and Wood struck in the space of seven balls.

At the close, after only 46.5 overs were possible following four rain interruptions, Australia were 126 for three with Steve Smith on six and Usman Khawaja, playing in his first Test since 2019, not-out four.

Marcus Harris, coming off his 76 in Melbourne, batted obdurately for his 38 off 109 balls before he was stuck on the crease and nicked Anderson to Joe Root at slip. In the next over Wood, charging in, got the prized wicket of Marnus Labuschagne for 28, leaving Australia at 117-3.

Wood angled one back off a length and Labuschagne, looking to defend from the crease, edged to Jos Buttler in a crucial double breakthrough for England - and put Australia under pressure.

England's paceman Mark Wood celebrates his wicket of Marnus Labuschagne on day one of the Test in Sydney on Wednesday (AFP)

"Two massive wickets. You want to try and test yourself against the best players," Wood said. "I feel like I have bowled well but haven't got the wickets I would have liked.

"A bit of good luck and important to make them play as much as possible. Thankfully, I made Marnus play at that ball and found the edge."

Earlier, the recalled Stuart Broad again proved David Warner's nemesis, enticing a thick edge to Zak Crawley at second slip for 30.

It was the 13th time in Ashes Tests Broad had snared his 'bunny' Warner after tempting him to drive at a shorter delivery.

"He's very consistent, holds his length well and tries to create that false shot," Warner said of his battle with Broad.

SCOREBOARD

AUSTRALIA 1ST INNINGS		
D Warner	c Crawley b Broad	30
M Harris	c Root b Anderson	38
M Labuschagne	c Buttler b Wood	28
Steven Smith	not out	6
U Khawaja	not out	4
Extras:	(lb 4, nb 4, w 12)	20
TOTAL:	126/3 in 46.5 overs	

Fall of wickets: 1-29, 2-63, 3-136, 4-136, 5-136, 6-154, 7-160, 8-160, 9-161, 10-169

Bowling: J Anderson 13-4-24-1, S Broad 11.5-3-34-1, B Stokes 10-3-30-0, M Wood 10-3-31-1, J Leach 2-0-3-0

"Today I tried to drive the ball too straight, where the other ones I drove through the covers were a bit squarer.

"But it is awesome just to see Broady back out there. You want to face a world-class bowler and to have him and Jimmy Anderson bowling at us is great."

The Sydney Test is a milestone for Root, leading England for a record 60th Test - passing Alastair Cook's captaincy mark of 59 games in charge. "I want us to keep working really hard," he said.

AFP