



METAPHORS AND MOTIFS

Farideh Zariv's exhibition 'Word in Art' at Cure8 Art Gallery showcased the aesthetics of Arabic and Persian letters through verses and poem

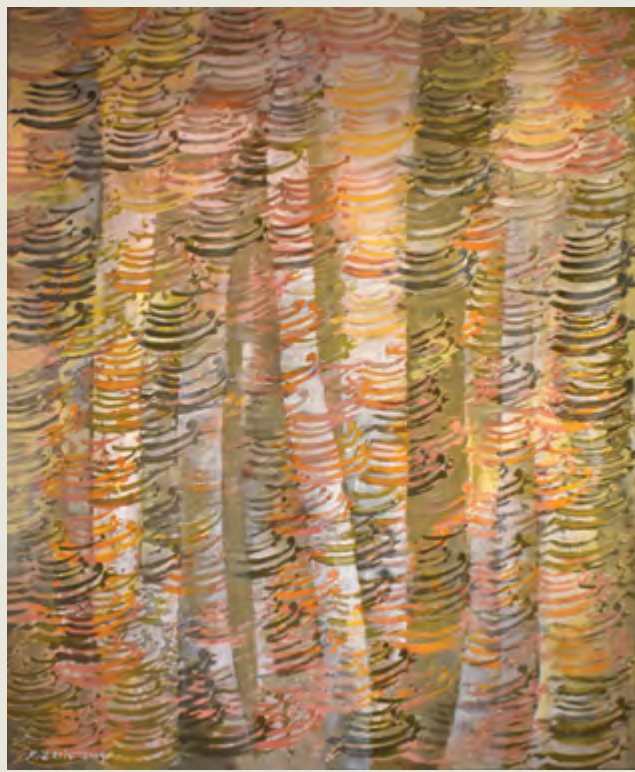


Text and photos by Tridwip K Das
Muscat

The shape of letters, of the Arabic and Persian alphabet in particular, has inspired art since time immemorial. Calligraphy is highly regarded and is the most fundamental element of Islamic art, used in astonishingly varied and imaginative ways. The written word appears not just on paper and canvases, but across all art forms and materials resulting in works of great beauty.

An exhibition at Cure8 Art Gallery in Grand Hyatt Muscat showcased the aesthetics of Arabic and Persian letters through Arabic words and Persian poem. Farideh Zariv's show - titled 'Word in Art' - had paintings featuring letters of the two languages on the same canvas. Arabic words, including Alhamdulillah (Thanks be to God), Noon waal qalam (God swears by the pen) and Inallah were the central theme surrounded by Persian letters. Verses from the classic tragic romance of Shirin and Farhad, the word 'umbr' (life) and the phrase 'there is no word better than love' in Persian appeared as motifs around the Arabic calligraphy with interesting results.

Among the 20 exhibits in 'Word in Art' was one in a pastel palette of what Farideh described as trees - a metaphor for life - with the word 'umbr' inscribed as a motif. Another had calligraphy of Rumi's 'I am drunk and you are insane, who will lead us home' - a striking composition with bold strokes that could be interpreted by those who can't read the letters as light cutting down from the sky piercing Earth below.



Explaining the concept behind the exhibition, Farideh noted that the world today needs spirituality. "I see emptiness in people around me. They must look within for fulfillment. Perhaps the task of today's artist is to recreate spirituality by rediscovering the spirituality in ancient art and reusing it in the modern world."

She described the Indian yoga guru and proponent of spirituality Jagadish 'Jaggi' Vasudev, popularly known as Sadhguru, as being 'a Rumi of our times'. "He talks about looking within and living in the present. The past is gone and future is yet to come. So focus on the present."

Farideh chooses not to assign titles to her art; so the exhibition had a name but not the individual exhibits. Names and titles, she believes, limit viewers' imagination. "They must be free to interpret art how they wish. Putting names sets limitations to viewers' thoughts," she explained.

Not all the pieces, however, have letters and words with meanings. These compositions simply showcase the aesthetic power of letters in bright and contrasting colour schemes.

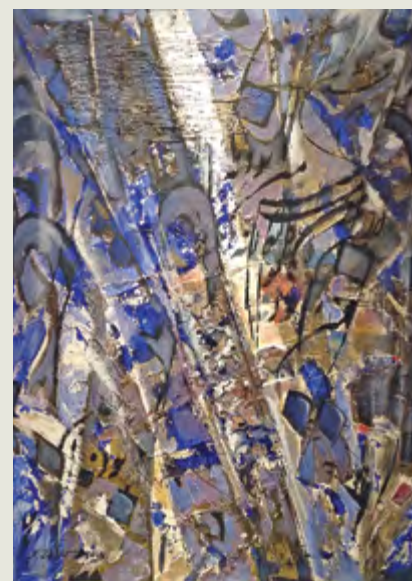
An Australian-Iranian artist, based in



(Supplied photo)

If you are going to display your art, you must have something new to say. You can't go from one joint show today to another tomorrow and hang the same art

FARIDEH ZARIV



work in Expo 2020 Dubai representing Australia.

The same month, she was invited to the Tashkent International Art Biennale. She described these events as opportunities of exposure to learn about other artists and styles. "These are great interactions between artists from so many different countries."

Farideh has exhibited in six of the seven continents and her artworks are held in private and public collections in several countries.

Despite her tenacious creativity, she believes artists must take time to conceive art. "If you are going to display your art, you must have something new to say. You can't go from one joint show today to another tomorrow and hang the same art." She took five years to conceptualise, conceive and create the pieces for 'Word in Art'.

Commenting on Oman's art scene, she observed, "Yes, it needs more galleries; but more importantly, more galleries with good direction."

About 'Word in Art', Muna Ritchie, co-founder of Omani Heritage Gallery, said, "Art is all around us - oral, visual and audio. Farideh takes the words of poets and turns them into visual art. Her canvases marry the two mediums into a harmonious symphony which the audience can both see and hear in their minds."

In a reflection of the success of the show, 12 of the 20 pieces were sold out before closing on Saturday.

'Word in Art' was opened by H H Afra Talal al Said on December 26, 2021. Cure8 Art Gallery was founded and is directed by artist, art curator and photographer Sarah al Aulaqi.

Muscat for the last four years, Farideh used acrylic on canvas with gold relief in the artworks in the exhibition. Director of two art galleries in Iran and curator of Cure8 Art Gallery, she also collects iconic cultural items, including Hamsa (Hand of Fatima), Iranian miniature art and wooden printing blocks.

"I am inspired by my culture. Artists can talk about their own culture better than others." Among her human inspirations is Frida Kahlo; Farideh has made a pilgrimage to the surrealist artist's Blue House museum in Mexico City.

Farideh held her first solo show in Oman, titled 'Spirit of Horses', in 2017 in Bait al Zubair Museum. Earlier in 2005, an exhibition titled 'Hand of Fatima', funded by the Australian government, was held at the Canberra Museum & Gallery. A year later, 'Hand of Fatima' was invited by the Iziko Bo-Kaap Museum in Cape Town, South Africa.

More recently - in November 2021 - Farideh and her husband Dr Nasser Palangi, associate professor in the Fine Art Department at Scientific College of Design, Muscat, had the privilege of being among 400 artists from 170 countries to show their

Agreement inked for Phase 1 of Yiti integrated tourism masterplan

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its ongoing efforts to expand tourism investments through strategic alliances, Oman Tourism Development Company (Omran Group) has entered into a development partnership agreement with Diamond Developers, a major real estate development company.

The agreement entails the development of the first phase of Yiti Tourism masterplan with an investment value of approximately US\$1bn. In conjunction with this partnership, a joint venture called Sustainable Development and Investment Company (SDIC) has been established to carry out the execution of this phase.

Hashil Obaid al Mahrouqi, CEO of Omran Group, said, "Omran Group's partnership with Diamond Developers marks a major milestone in Yiti Development as we together begin the first phase of this integrated urban destination in Muscat."

"The signing further attests to Omran Group's strategic vision in expanding the nation's tourism sector and continuing to play a pivotal role as a catalyst and enabler of multi-fold, lucrative investment opportunities in the



Omran's partnership with Diamond Developers marks a major milestone in Yiti Development as we together begin the first phase of this integrated urban destination in Muscat

HASHIL AL MAHROUQI

country in line with Oman Investment Authority's directions in realising the ambitious goals of Oman Vision 2040 and supporting the delivery of the National Tourism Strategy."

He further added, "We are delighted to collaborate with Dia-

mond developers as they are one of the leading and reputable companies in building sustainable cities in the region. Their approach is in line with our vision of adopting the foundations of place making and harnessing sustainability in all aspects of the

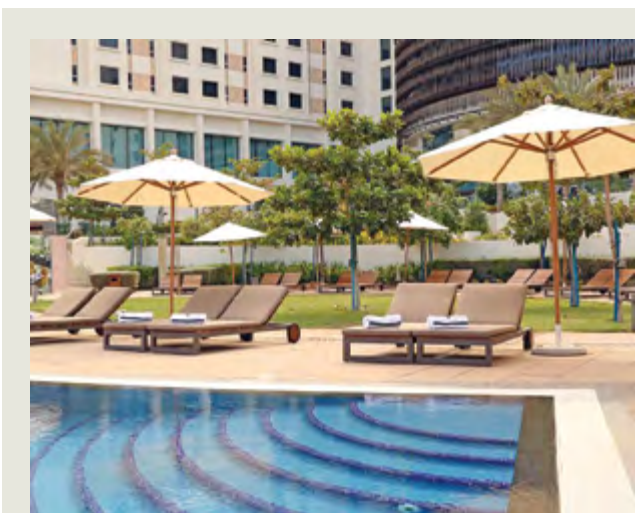
development."

The first phase of the Yiti project, which covers 900,000sqm, will focus on constructing a fully sustainable mixed-use project, the sultanate's first-of-its-kind community that promotes sustainable living. The first phase will include green public spaces, residences, tourism, commercial, and educational facilities, all with well-balanced and integrated components. Visitors and residents alike will enjoy a variety of unique lifestyle experiences, including restaurants, cafés, shops, and an equestrian centre, as well

as a farm along with other distinctive components that create a meaningful green-living environment.

The two sides announced that full details of the project will be revealed at the official launch ceremony later this year.

Commenting on the occasion, Faris Said, chairman of Diamond Developers, said, "We are very excited to join hands with Omran to execute our first project in Oman, and to work together on preserving the sultanate's rich natural environmental resources in accordance with the best global green practices."



Hotel occupancy rose 40% in 2021 Jan-Nov period

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Occupancy rate in three to five-star hotels in Oman rose by 40.7 per cent in 2021 until the end of November, according to data provided by National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Hotel revenues also increased in 2021 by 6.7 per cent until the end of November. The total number of hotel guests in three to five-star properties was 1,790,847, an increase of 40.7 per cent compared to the same period in 2020.

The hotel revenues amounted to RO83,476,000

an increase of 6.7 per cent compared to the same period in 2020.

NCSI statistics showed that Omanis constituted the largest proportion of guests until the end of last November, accounting for an increase of 79.2 per cent, reaching 756,662 guests, compared to 422,310 in November 2020, while Asian guests came in second place with about 124,674 guests, compared to 64,853 Asian guests as of November 2020 - an increase of 92 per cent, followed by European guests with 69,036, 42,495 from other non-Gulf Arab countries and 27,984 from Gulf countries.

Expats hail free booster dose

Muscat - The free booster dose being administered is being hailed by expatriates from all walks of life. Since January 3, the Ministry of Health (MoH) has been administering the booster dose of COVID-19 vaccine to expatriates free of charge in the former airport building in Seeb.

Muscat Daily reported earlier that affordability impacted the uptake of the booster dose among low-wage earning expatriates. A private sector employee, who works as a truck driver, said on the condition of anonymity, "This free booster dose is a big help for me. My salary was RO230 but my company reduced it by RO 25 due to a slowdown in business. An expense of RO23 for the Pfizer booster shot would have upset my monthly budget."

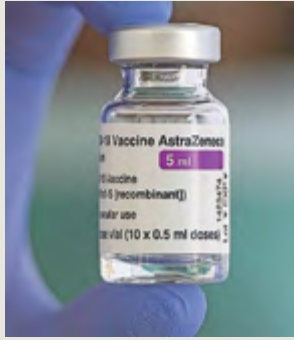
Noor ul Islam, a welder, thanked the authorities for the free booster dose. "Since last year, due to the pandemic, business is quite slow. This free booster dose is a blessing."

Businessman Ramesh Patel described the free booster shot as a "reward for the contribution I am making to the economy through the business I am running and the taxes I am paying".

Patel said the vaccination centre is operated professionally, despite a large number of people turning up without appointments. "It took me around 6-8 minutes in all to get vaccinated. MoH staff and volunteers are doing a commendable job."



AstraZeneca vaccine allowed as booster



Muscat - The Ministry of Health (MoH) has approved a third dose of AstraZeneca vaccine to be administered to those who received the first and second doses of the same vaccine.

"It is now allowed to give the third/booster dose of AstraZeneca vaccine to anyone who wishes to take it, provided

that the person has previously received two doses of the same vaccine," MoH stated.

It said that the move is to ensure community prevention and maintain the stability of the epidemiological situation and called on everyone to take the booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible.

Muscat Daily witnessed several individuals turning up without appointments which distracted nursing staff and volunteers. Dr Nada al Barwani, head of the vaccine centre in Seeb, urged those keen on the booster dose to make prior appointments on Tarassud +. "The centre is flexible with people aged 60 years and

older. Others are only accepted on a prior appointment base."

According to Dr Nada, currently, due to high demand, "as soon as we open appointments we get booked for a week within minutes. But there is no need to worry as large numbers of appointments are available during the week and soon we are hoping

all will be vaccinated".

She advised all to book appointments on Tarassud +. "If you do not get an appointment this week, try next week or the week after. Don't forget till then to keep safe and practise social distancing, wear a mask and keep washing your hands."

(Text and photo by Syed Fasiuddin)

Rare stone slab dating back to 3rd millennium BC found

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A rare stone slab dating back to the 3rd millennium BC has been found in the Qumaira site in the wilayat of Dhank, Dhahirah governorate

"The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, in cooperation with an archaeological mission from the University of Warsaw in Poland, discovered a rare stone slab for the first time in the sultanate," said an official in the ministry.

He explained, "The stone board is similar to chess or as it is known locally 'Hawalis'. The archaeological site of Qumaira is one of the most important sites from the Bronze Age associated with the copper trade of the Majan civilisation with Dilmun and Mesopotamia."

In December 2021, the ministry in cooperation with the ar-



chaeological mission from Warsaw University started the sixth season of surveys at the archaeological site, which dates back to the 3rd and 1st millennium BC. Excavation works at Qumaira have once again started after a break due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ministry official said, "The site includes huge towers, a settlement and workshops for smelting copper ore from the 3rd millennium BC, in addition to a fortress and a temple dating back to the 1st millennium BC."

Agreement signed to implement and develop Oman Research Repository

Muscat - The Ministry of Social Development signed an agreement of cooperation with the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and Sultan Qaboos University to implement and develop the Oman Research Repository, codenamed 'Shuaa', on Thursday.

The repository contains research, historical documents, articles, periodicals and synopsis, as well as advanced statistics compiled in Oman. Shuaa provides content in a database where it is stored and organised based on modern systems to ease accessibility for researchers and interested people.

The agreement was signed by Shamsa Ahmed al Hosni, director general for Planning and Studies in the Ministry of Social Development, and Dr Nabhan Harith al Harasi, Dean of College of Arts and Social Sciences at SQU and chairman of the Executive Committee of Shuaa.

WEATHER WATCH		
	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	26	19
Doha	23	16
Kuwait City	18	12
Manama	22	15
Muscat	26	18
Riyadh	21	9
PRAYER TIMINGS		
Fajr	5.32am	
Sunrise	6.51am	
Duhr	12.21pm	
Asr	3.26pm	
Maghrib	5.47pm	
Isha	7.01pm	

Bilarab bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design launched

Continued from Page 01

The architectural style in plains and coast differ, and perhaps designers have sought throughout the previous years to imitate those styles. Traditional projects and facilities based on old urban styles appeared in their design, and there are few who sought to develop them, or modernise these to make them urbanised while keeping pace with the times.

The award is keen that pre-

sented proposals, perceptions and participations in its competition are innovative, contemporary, and sustainable at the same time, Sayyid Bilarab noted.

He further explained that the award is keen to address the Omani youth of both genders. "Young Omani who are specialised in the fields of architecture, design and urban planning can participate in the announced competition, and we are keen not to extend the age group too

much, and to regulate the age of the participants to no more than 35 years of age. We included jobseekers and students, with the aim of providing a greater opportunity for young people, avoiding competition with older age groups who may have more experience in this field," he said.

This award is an opportunity for young people to be creative, and allows young people to participate individually or teams of no more than three people who

Participation conditions are simple in order to involve the largest possible number of young people

SAYYID BILARAB

can collectively submit their proposal bearing their names, taking into account the commitment to

the conditions of the competition.

"Since the beginning of the thought of launching this award, we had a vision to be different from other competitions. Therefore, the idea was to focus on what happens after the announcement of the winner of the award, and particularly on the outcome of the winning project. We were keen that the idea was to utilise the project, implement it and follow it up, whether through investments, or through

the relevant government agencies, where the award worked in coordination with these bodies. We will make sure the winning project sees the light of day in any location in the sultanate.

"We have made sure that the participation conditions are simple in order to involve the largest possible number of young people in the competition, in addition to the main condition that participation is limited to Omani youth."

Bank Muscat's 2021 profits rise 16.1% to RO189.63mn

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Bank Muscat, the flagship financial institution in the sultanate, reported a 16.1 per cent year-on-year increase in its profit for the full year 2021, mainly due to higher operating income and lower impairment charges. The bank posted a net profit of RO189.63mn for the year ended December 31, 2021 compared to RO163.36mn reported during the same period in 2020.

Bank Muscat announced its full year preliminary unaudited financial results on Thursday in a press statement. It said the financial results are subject to external audit and approval of the board of directors, Central Bank of Oman and shareholders of the bank.

The bank's net interest income from conventional banking and net income from Islamic fi-



ancing grew by 4.2 per cent to RO335.54mn in 2021 compared to RO322.13mn a year ago.

Non-interest income increased by 4.1 per cent to RO139.95mn for the year ended December 31, 2021 as compared to RO134.41mn for the same period in 2020.

Bank Muscat's operating expenses for the full year was RO191.46mn compared to RO179.85mn for the same period in 2020, an increase of 6.5 per cent.

Net impairment for credit and other losses for the year 2021 was RO60.22mn as against

RO81.04mn for the same period in 2020. 'The decrease is mainly attributed to the precautionary and collective provisions created by the bank during the first half of 2020, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the historic decline seen in global crude oil prices. The bank re-

mains vigilant of the continuing stress in the macro-economic and business conditions and its potential impacts,' Bank Muscat said.

The bank's net loans and advances including Islamic financing receivables increased by 2.3 per cent to RO9.187mn as against RO8.983mn as of December 31, 2020.

Bank Muscat's customer deposits including Islamic Customer deposits increased by 3.7 per cent to RO8.775mn at the end of 2021 as against RO8.459mn as of December 31, 2020.

'The full results for the year ended December 31, 2021 along with the complete set of unaudited financial statements will be released following the approval of the board of directors of the bank at its meeting scheduled later during January 2022,' Bank Muscat said.



World risks more years of high energy prices, emissions: IEA

Paris, France - The world faces more years of high energy prices and emissions unless the electricity sector changes faster after demand hit a record last year, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said on Friday.

The economic recovery from the COVID pandemic, combined with unusual weather conditions, caused electricity demand to jump by more than 6 per cent in 2021, the largest increase since 2010, the IEA said.

In absolute terms, the increase of more than 1,500 terawatt-hours was the largest ever, the Paris-based agency said in its semi-annual Electricity Market Report.

This pushed prices to unprecedented levels while emissions from the electricity sector rose by 7 per cent in 2021 - an all-time high after having decreased the previous two years, the IEA said.

While renewable power experienced 'impressive growth', electricity generation from coal and natural gas hit record levels, the report found.

'In the absence of faster structural change in the sector, rising demand over the next three years could result in additional market volatility and continued

high emissions,' the IEA said. IEA executive director Fatih Birol said emissions from electricity must fall by 55 per cent by 2030 if the world is to meet a target of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

"But in the absence of major policy action from governments, those emissions are set to remain around the same level for the next three years," Birol said in a statement.

"Not only does this highlight how far off track we currently are from a pathway to net zero emissions by 2050, but it also underscores the massive changes needed for the electricity sector to fulfil its critical role in decarbonising the broader energy system."

Birol also warned that high electricity prices 'have been causing hardship for many households and businesses around the world and risk becoming a driver of social and political tensions'.

China accounted for around half of the global growth in electricity demand last year. The country experienced power cuts due to coal shortages - a problem also encountered by India.

AFP

Conference held on hydraulic fracturing

Muscat - The second edition of the SPE International Hydraulic Fracturing Technology Conference and Exhibition was held in Muscat, recently with the participation of more than 395 oil and gas professionals from 90 companies and 28 countries.

The conference took place from January 11-13 at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Center under the auspices of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, with Petroleum Development Oman as the exclusive host, according to a press release.

The opening ceremony commenced on an inspiring note with Sultan al Shidhani, conference chair, Petroleum Engineering Function director, PDO, saying, "This conference is truly an inter-



national event with participants joining from every corner of the globe and the key players in the oil and gas industry. The conference signifies two developments - one, the resilience in the pursuit of knowledge and knowledge-sharing, technology advancements, and overcoming all the

challenges that we've been facing as an industry. So, having this conference with this magnificent participation is very significant."

H E Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Undersecretary of Ministry of Energy and Minerals, addressed the audience with a keynote speech.

Commenting on some key points on hydraulic fracturing technology and the relevance of the conference, H E Aufi said, "Nothing comes close to hydraulic fracturing, at least in my mind-it's because of the way it changed the fundamentals of oil and gas, whether it's the oil side,

the shale oil revolution that happened in the US, and of gas, again the shale gas. It was a major game-changer that allowed us and enabled us to go back to reservoirs we have pretty much written off on the books. I am happy to see that the second edition of the event is attracting audiences despite the fact we are still not out of COVID but we are still able to get together."

H E Aufi inaugurated the exhibition, where over 25 exhibitors showcased a wide range of current and upcoming technologies with product demos and interactive displays offering visitors an engaging experience of discovering technologies and growing their network.

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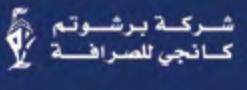
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Please email your listing to dailyclassifieds@apexmedia.co.om or call 99104346

UAE to ramp up trade with Turkey

Dubai, UAE - The UAE is 'betting on Turkey' by seeking to boost bilateral trade, the Gulf nation's trade minister said, in the latest sign of improving ties.

The UAE hopes to double or triple trade volumes with Turkey, which it sees as a route to new markets thanks to its logistical network, Minister of State for Foreign Trade Thani al Zeyoudi told Bloomberg in an interview published on Thursday. The Emirates are 'betting on Turkey as a country which is going to open up for us new markets through their logistics and through their supply chain', Zeyoudi said.

The comments come after Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed announced a US\$10bn fund for investments in Turkey in November, during the UAE's first high-level visit there since 2012.

Relations between the two countries were heavily strained after a Saudi Arabia-led blockade on Qatar by Arab nations including the UAE that lasted from mid-2017 to early last year. Doha is one of Ankara's closest allies.

The UAE and Turkey backed opposing sides in the Libyan conflict, where a fragile ceasefire has been in place since October 2020.

AFP

MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

Muscat Stock Exchange closes higher on earning optimism

MSX30 index ended the week up by 1.88 per cent. All Sectors ended positively. The Financial index ended the highest and was up by 2.02 per cent. Services index was higher by 1.71 per cent while Industrial index closed up by 0.04 per cent. The MSX Shariah index closed down by 0.16 per cent.

Local news

►Barka Desalination Company (BDC), owner of Oman's largest operating water desalination plant (Barka IWP), announced its intention to launch an initial public offering (IPO). The company will offer 40 per cent of its share capital to the public through an IPO. Accordingly, BDC will offer 30.2mn shares to the public through listing on Muscat Stock Exchange. BDC plans to offer the shares in the IPO on the book-building basis in a price range of 115bz to 145bz. As anchor investors in the IPO, National Power & Water Co and Bank Muscat have committed to invest up to 10 per cent of the IPO at 145bz per share i.e. the highest end of the IPO price range.

►H E Sultan Salim Said al Habsi, Minister of Finance and chairman of the board of directors of the Capital Market Authority issued Decision No 171/2021 establishing the Supreme Sharia'a Supervisory Board (SSSB) in the Capital Market Authority and issued its Articles of Association pursuant to Article 5 of the Takaful Insurance Law promulgated by Royal Decree 11/2016. SSSB was established to enhance the legislative and regulatory processes for the companies operating in the Takaful insurance business based on best international practices. The SSSB will put in place the general policies regulating such types of companies and advise the CMA on the Sharia'a aspects related to Takaful insurance and contribute to developing the legislation related to the Sharia'a beside advice on the compatibility of the products, services and contracts of the Takaful insurance companies and deciding on issues of fiqh



disputes among the members of Sharia'a supervisory committees in Takaful insurance companies.

►Anwar Asia Investment Company, an Omani company and Pakistan Railways, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to provide financing for the construction of a part of a railway project linking a number of regions in Pakistan. The MoU was signed during the visit of the Omani business delegation led by Eng Redha Juma al Saleh, the chairman of the board of directors of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) where he met various Pakistani officials.

►OQ announced that it will formally inaugurate its state-of-the-art Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) plant worth RO318mn in Salalah on January 16, 2022. This vital project works on processing natural gas liquids (NGLs) extracted from gas networks into LPG. The plant is designed and built to the highest technical and safety standards. It consists of a number of components, notably a facility for the extraction of rich gas elements such as propane, butane and condensates from natural gas, as well as a fractionation plant, storage tanks, shipping facilities, and an interconnection pipeline system.

►Oman telecom sector data for year-to-date until November 2021, reveals that fixed line subscribers are down 2.8 per cent while mobile subscribers are down 4.0 per cent.

Within mobile, prepaid subscribers are down 9.1 per cent while postpaid subscribers are higher by 22.4 per cent. Active Mobile broadband subscribers are down 6.6 per cent. Penetration levels are lower at the end of November 2021 as compared to December 2020.

►The total number of vehicles registered in the sultanate were at 1.551mn in November 2021, representing a small increase over October 2021 registered vehicles at 1.549mn, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information. Private vehicles topped the list of vehicles registered at 1.230mn, followed by 0.232mn commercial vehicles and 28,615 taxis.

The number of vehicles with temporary registration declined to 9,427 in November 2021 compared to 10,781 vehicles in October 2021.

►Value of traded property in Oman went up by 17.5 per cent in the first 11 months of 2021 to RO2,569mn compared to RO2,185mn in the same period a year ago. Traded value of mortgage contracts during the same period went up by 4.1 per cent to RO1,354mn compared

to RO1,301mn in same period last year. Traded value of sale contracts rose by 46.7 per cent to RO1,198mn compared to RO816.6mn in the first 11 months of 2020. Number of properties issued during the first 11 months of 2021 also rose by 30.9 per cent to 231,504 compared to 176,816 in a year ago.

GCC markets

S&P Global Ratings issued report on GCC banks. They said that GCC banks are set to benefit from a regional economic recovery this year amid higher oil prices, still supportive government spending, and normalising non-oil activity.

They expect banks' asset quality indicators to deteriorate only slightly as regulatory forbearance measures have helped the corporate sector to deal with the negative effects of the pandemic. In their view, the nonperforming loan ratio will rise in the next 12-24 months without exceeding 5 per cent, compared with 3.7 per cent at September 30, 2021. Furthermore, GCC banks should benefit from policy rate hikes in 2022 by the US Federal Reserve, which will prompt a similar reaction from GCC central banks given their currency pegs. Lower global liquidity is likely to have a limited impact

on GCC banks thanks to their strong net external asset positions or limited net external debt positions. Qatar is more vulnerable than other countries due to its large and expanding net external debt position but there are some mitigants. S&P expects the Brent oil price to average US\$65 per barrel in 2022.

The annual inflation rate in the US accelerated to 7 per cent in the last month of 2021 compared to 6.8 per cent in November. Energy was the biggest contributor to the gain but the rise was smaller than in November (29.3 per cent vs 33.3 per cent), with gasoline prices surging 49.6 per cent vs 58.1 per cent.

Inflation spiked in 2021 due to pandemic-induced supply constraints, soaring energy costs, labour shortages, increasing demand and a low base effect from 2020. Inflationary pressures are likely to last well into the middle of 2022 and Fed chair Powell recently pledged to do what's necessary to contain an inflation surge including increasing interest rates.

Recommendation

Global markets turned positive after US inflation expectations fell in line as compared to the estimates. Growth as well as value stocks rebounded and the rally continued.

Oil had a positive run for the week too as inventories in US markets fell. Oil (Brent) is now trading close to the high of US\$86.4/bbl. now and is on track to go higher in coming period.

Regionally, market performance remained well buoyed by high oil prices. Petrochemicals as well as banking stocks remained in the limelight during the week.

Oman market continued to see result announcements. Stocks which beat earning estimates were mostly sought by investors. The earnings will continue this week as well. We advise investors to carefully vet the results and invest accordingly.



Travellers walk through the transit hall of Changi International Airport in Singapore on Wednesday (AFP)

Omicron causes sharp drop in airline ticket sales: IATA

Paris, France - Airline ticket sales fell sharply at the end of 2021, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said, blaming governments for having 'over-reacted' to the Omicron COVID variant by closing borders.

The IATA, which groups over 290 airlines, said international air travel had been slowly but steadily recovering from the mass shutdowns of 2020 and early 2021 before the fast-spreading Omicron strain was discovered at the end of November.

Ticket sales in November were 60.5 per cent below their pre-pandemic November 2019 level, marking an improvement on the 64.8 per cent decline recorded a month earlier.

"Unfortunately, governments over-reacted to the emergence of the Omicron variant at the close of the month and resorted to the tried-and-failed methods of border closures, excessive testing of travellers and quarantine to slow the spread," IATA president Willie Walsh accused.

"Not surprisingly, international ticket sales made in December and early January fell sharply compared to 2019, suggesting a more difficult first quarter than had been expected," he added.

IATA members account for 83 per cent of global air traffic.

In October, the association forecast cumulative industry losses of US\$11.6bn in 2022, down from an estimated US\$51.8bn in 2021 and US\$137.7bn in 2020.

The International Civil Aviation Organization said separately on Wednesday that preliminary data shows the number air passengers was down by 49 per cent last year from pre-pandemic levels in 2019.

That was an improvement from the 60 per cent drop in 2020.

The ICAO, a UN body, said airlines lost out on US\$324bn in revenue last year due to the drop in traffic, which was less than US\$372bn in lost revenue in 2020.

It forecast an improvement in 2022 to a drop in passengers of between 26 and 31 per cent, and lost revenue between US\$186 and US\$217bn, with the international segment to continue to be the worst hit.

The IATA said it expected US airlines to turn profits again this year but that European carriers, which operate more long-haul flights and are therefore more exposed to border closures, would remain in the red.

AFP



Tender Announcement

The Egyptian School in Muscat is honoured to announce for a public tender to establish a language lab in it in which will be operating for the coming scholastic year 2022/2023.

Offers and presentations will be delivered **in a week from the advert publishment.**

Note:

Terms and conditions form will be withdrawn from the school itself in Al Ansab.

Telephone number: 99365977

'Challenges with government' delaying Tesla India launch: Musk

Mumbai, India - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said Thursday electric car pioneer Tesla was 'working through' a lot of challenges with the Indian government ahead of long-awaited plans to launch in the country.

Tesla's hopes to sell its vehicles in one of the world's biggest markets have been stalled by ef-

forts to negotiate lower import duties, which can be as high as 100 per cent.

In response to a tweet asking him about a potential India launch date, Musk said his California-based company was 'still working through a lot of challenges with the government', without giving further details.

Musk had tweeted last July

that Tesla wanted to enter India, home to 1.3bn people, 'but import duties are the highest in the world by far of any large country'.

He added that the firm was hoping for temporary tariff relief.

India imposes a 100 per cent tax on imported electric vehicles worth more than US\$40,000,

and 60 per cent for those costing US\$40,000 or less.

Tesla fears the steep duties will price them out of the cost-sensitive Indian market.

New Delhi has introduced incentives for foreign carmakers to manufacture their vehicles locally but Musk has said he wants to gauge demand with imports first.

Electric cars accounted for only 1.3 per cent of all vehicles sold in the country in 2020-21, according to research by digital consultancy Techarc.

The government's target is for 30 per cent of private cars to be electric by 2030 as part of a wider push to decarbonise the transport sector.

AFP

Indomie
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Oman International Hospital accredited with prestigious EFQM certification

Oman International Hospital (OIH), the multi-super specialty hospital in Oman, made history by becoming the first recipient of the prestigious European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) certification in the region.

EFQM certification is awarded to distinguish organisations that follow an assessment framework based on 'Excellence Model' and have met their established objectives.

Organisations that are EFQM certified, perform better by creating data-driven insights backed up by organisational experts to fit priorities, purposes and people.

Dr José Alexandre Cunha, board member of Oman International Hospital and chairman of IGHS Group that manages the hospital said, "We have been in operation for just little over a year in Oman and to be accredited with this certification as the first hospital in the region truly speaks volumes of our commitment and dedication to make this hospital an impeccable landmark in Oman's healthcare sector. I am truly proud of this recognition for Oman International Hospital."

He added, "This certification not only reassures the people of Oman the highest standards of



treatment when they visit us but also motivates us to better ourselves to earn more such international recognitions. My sincere thanks goes to Oman's Ministry of Health and other government

sectors that have been supporting us."

Marcelo Pereira, CEO of OIH said, "We are thrilled to have achieved the EFQM certification. What better recognition there

can be than getting this accreditation just as the young hospital completes its first year? The certification reiterates our commitment to delivering the highest quality of treatment, services and

facilities to the people of Oman and the region."

OIH was officially inaugurated on the January 6, 2022 by H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammad al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health in the

presence of H E Abdul Salam Mohammed al Murshidi, executive president of Oman Investment Authority, 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.

The high-profile event started off with a ceremonial ribbon cutting by the chief guest H E Sa'eedi, declaring the hospital fully open with all its services and treatments available to the people of Oman.

OIH 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.

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 strategically located in the center 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.

Bangarraju X Kalyan Jewellers limited edition Harams released

Kalyan Jewellers, one of India's leading and most-trusted jewellery brand has partnered with Annapurna Studios to launch the *Bangarraju* Men's Jewellery Collection, ahead of the much-awaited Sankrathi release of the Akkineni Nagarjuna & Naga Chaitanya movie.

The long Navaratna haram and the iconic Puligoru haram worn by the father-son duo, in *Bangarraju*, is from the personal collection of the legend Akkineni Nageswara Rao, or ANR as he is lovingly known in the region. Through the *Bangarraju* movie, 'The King of Style' Nagarjuna, has brought into vogue the Panche Kattu (dhoti drape), Puligoru & Navaratna Haram – style that once defined the timeless ANR look.

Puligoru, which means tiger claw, is a traditional masculine design signifying courage, and is part of the cultural ethos and legacy.

The nine precious gemstones in the Navaratna haram on the other hand, symbolises purity, humility, awakening,



contentment, courage, love, wisdom, compassion and health. Kalyan Jewellers has recreated these two iconic pieces from the Akkineni family collection, giving fans a chance to recreate and embrace the iconic look.

Talking about this association, Kalyan Jewellers brand ambassador & *Bangarraju* lead, Nagarjuna said in a video message, "My father has always been my inspiration, and this traditional look that I have recreated for the movie *Bangarraju* is a tribute to him – even the jewellery that I

wear in the movie, is originally his. Ahead of the release of the film, this traditional look seems to have appealed to the audiences, and that is how Kalyan Jewellers came on board to recreate Nana Garu's haram designs."

Talking about the announcement, Ramesh Kalyanaraman, executive director – Kalyan Jewellers said, "We consider it an honour to be able to reproduce the iconic jewellery pieces that once belonged to Nageshwara Garu. As a brand, we have always followed a hyper-local product and outreach strategy. We have encouraged our patrons to not only take pride in their traditional designs, but also to embrace them in style – and when it comes to style, there is none that does it as wonderfully as The King (Akkineni Nagarjuna) himself. This is our special Sankranti offering to our customers."

Bangarraju jewellery can be ordered at Kalyan Jewellers outlets across India and the Middle East.

Sony widens 360 Spatial Sound experience

Sony Middle East & Africa announced a software upgrade for the premium HT-A7000 and HT-A5000 soundbars, which will add the customer-loved 360 Spatial Sound Mapping capabilities that first premiered in the HT-A9 home theatre system in 2021. Customers can access this innovative feature when connecting their soundbar to Sony's new SA-RS5 wireless rear speakers, launching April 2022, or the currently available SA-RS3S wireless rear speakers.

With Sony's revolutionary 360 Spatial Sound Mapping technology, customers can feel sound from every direction and distance. Using Sound Field Optimisation, the soundbar uses built-in microphones to ingeniously measure the relative height and position of the soundbar and rear speakers. 360 Spatial Sound Mapping technology then creates multiple phantom speakers by synthesising sound waves based on positional information. Thanks to this technology, Sony's wide spatial sound field fills every part of the living space, so everyone gets the same sound experience, where



ever they are in the room.

Customers can enhance the experience further by pairing with a compatible BRAVIA XR television. Using the Acoustic Centre Sync feature, both a soundbar and BRAVIA XR TV become the centre speaker in the home cinema system as part of the 360 Spatial Sound Mapping setup^{1,2}, enabling sound to precisely match what's on the screen for clearer dialogue and a more immersive experience.

Add SA-RS5 optional wireless rear speakers for a richer and more immersive 360 Spatial

Sound experience

Sony's new SA-RS5 wireless rear speakers deliver optimal sound quality and wide directivity for 360 Spatial Sound in combination with a compatible soundbar. They feature up-firing speakers for richer and more immersive 360 Spatial Sound as well as built-in battery power for up to 10 hours of playtime.

SA-RS5 wireless rear speakers' features:

Create immersive and clear sound: Up-firing speakers reflect sound off the ceiling for more im-

mersive overhead audio. Both wide directivity woofers and soft dome tweeters create a rich, expansive soundstage that offers exceptional clarity. Dual passive radiators enhance low-end tones, giving bass a boost.

Long-lasting battery life: With up to 10 hours of battery life when fully charged, the speakers offer flexible installation to fit any living room setup. They can be charged out of sight and easily powered up to automatically make a wireless connection with a compatible soundbar. It's quick and easy with no need for messy cables. If in a hurry, just 10 minutes of charge will give 90 minutes of use. SA-RS5 rear speakers also feature AC power connections for dual use.

One touch sound calibration: The SA-RS5 comes with OPTIMISE buttons and dual microphones in each speaker. Activate Sound Field Optimisation by pressing the OPTIMISE button on the unit and the speakers, combined with a compatible soundbar, will intelligently measure the distance between the speakers and ceiling using dual microphones.

ABLF Talks to focus on tech-aided solutions for pandemic challenges

The role of technology, increasing digitisation and the challenges in ensuring financial inclusion for all will be at the core of the conversations at the 16th Edition of the ABLF Talks that will be held virtually at the cutting-edge digital venue, ABLF City, on January 17. Top tech leaders from the region will converge to share their perspectives on the important measures that need to be taken to counter the impact of the pandemic on varied sectors.

Over 30,000 attendees from around Asia are expected to join in the virtual conclave that is a continuation of the leadership series launched in October 2020. For the past 16 months, the ABLF Talks, held under the patronage of Sheikh Nahyan



Mubarak al Nahyan, UAE Cabinet member and Minister of Tolerance and Co-existence, UAE and in association with the UAE Ministry of Economy and Dubai Cares, a UAE-based global philanthropic organisation, has been at the forefront of bringing together Asian leaders in discus-

sions around crucial socio-economic issues, and these conversations will continue till the end of March 2022.

At the Conclave on January 17 - the first in 2022 - the focus will be on the role of the crisis in accelerating the race towards a tech-led future. The conclave will

be toplined by leading names in the world of technology and finance including Fadi Pharaon, senior VP and head of market area, Middle East and Africa, Ericsson, who will spotlight the game-changing technologies that the company has invested in, to aid sustainable tech-en-

abled growth in the region.

The impact of the pandemic on investments and the changes in the financial sector, especially banking and startups will be the highlight of the panel discussion with Ahmed Alnaqbi, CEO, Emirates Development Bank (EDB), UAE and Sonia Gokhale, found-

ing partner, Venturesouq, UAE. Alnaqbi will also speak about EDB's role in the economic diversification of the UAE while Gokhale will highlight the impact of the pandemic on the startup scene in the Middle East and ways for entrepreneurs to attract investment.

A second panel discussion, on increasing digitisation of businesses to enable them to be agile and innovative in the midst of unprecedented crisis, will be held between Alaa Adel, vice president and managing director, MEA, Cerner Corporation and Dereck Hoogenkamp, entrepreneur, advisor, co-founder Palmfusion Technologies and owner and MD, Yalla Ltd.

The discussions are expected

to not only throw light on the new challenges facing businesses even as organisations and nations continue to grapple with the fluctuating situations wrought by the pandemic but also provide concrete solutions with the aid of technology.

The ABLF is brought to you by a powerful line-up of partners including the US\$45bn Indian conglomerate Aditya Birla Group, leading digital bank Zand, Etisalat along with CNBC Arabia (broadcast partner) and *Hindustan Times*, *Khaleej Times*, *Muscat Daily*, Al Bayan, Zee TV, WION (media partners) and Unicef.

To attend the ABLF Talks Conclaves virtually, register for free at www.ablf.com.

Duqm Airport marks its third opening anniversary

January 14, coincided with the third anniversary of Duqm Airport opening, one of the national achievements which reflect the sultanate's plans and strategies in building the airport ecosystem. Duqm Airport has contributed in the development journey of the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) in particular and Al Wusta governorate in general, that comes in line with the national economic plans of Oman Vision 2040 to be one of the five regional airports offering their air operational services besides Muscat International Airport and Salalah Airport.

Regarding the achievements of Duqm Airport during the last three years, Mohammed al Shuaili, VP-regional airports, Oman Airports said, "We congratulate Duqm Airport and all its partners on occasion of the third opening anniversary of the new terminal at Duqm Airport, which could quickly achieved a perfect synergy with other SEZAD components as a one of the key pillar at the area, completing the government's inclusive road map to turn it into an economic and tourism development pillar as part of the alignment with the current and future economic diversification plans offered by the SEZAD to the citizens and investors alike. Duqm Airport is a facilitating drive for investors and workers to transport and access to SEZAD as well as contributes in providing an express air logistic connection between Muscat, the capital and Al Wusta governorate and fosters the economic and tourism activities to Duqm, the future hub of promising future aspirations."

In this context, Ahmed al



Farsi, Duqm Airport manager said, "When the operations started at the new terminal and in a collaboration with the airport family from various entities, working groups have optimised their best to ensure offering smooth and safe travel experience for all passengers as there are scheduled flights every day except Friday while implementing the highest health, safety and precautionary measures enforced by the concerned entities to control the spread of COVID-19 and its variants immediately when the airport resumed its operations after the end of airports shutdown in Oman. The family of Duqm Airport has optimised the state-of-art technologies and facilities in the new airport to achieve its objectives and execute its operational targets in order to reach the Airport's ultimate desired goals."

Farsi added that Duqm Airport played its role in increasing the inward tourism to Duqm due to the availability of the scheduled flights and luxurious hotel facilities. "This encouraged so many tourists from Oman and abroad to visit Duqm and enjoy its around-the-year pleasant weather."

He mentioned that since the opening of the new terminal in 2019, the airport has received around 2152 flights up to the end of 2021, and around 136755 travellers had benefited from it for the same period.

Moreover; Oman Airports in a cooperation with its strategic partners has executed several emergency drills since the opening of the Airport as part of its efforts to upgrade its readiness to address any emergency cases within an annual emergency plan in place for all airports operated

by Oman Airports and in accordance with the modern world benchmarked airport standards. Duqm Airport also has been equipped by modern systems in communications, information technology, security monitoring systems and air navigation and meteorology systems which make the airport capable to handle various arriving flights either from the sultanate or the international flights.

Duqm Airport is located 14km from Duqm city and can be easily accessed from the southern part of the city through Sultan Qaboos Road which is located toward to left side from Airport roundabout.

It accommodates a half million passengers with a future expansion plans to accommodate 2mn passengers each year. Duqm Airport's total size exceeds 273km² and encompasses

a passenger terminal, traffic control tower with height of 37m, a cargo building, a 4km- ramp, a parking of 4-aircraft capacity including Airbus A380. Further, It includes a passenger terminal of 9614m² capacity along with service facilities besides air navigation and meteorology complex.

Duqm Airport aims to keep abreast with commercial and economic movement at SEZAD including the cargo building, with its potential for future expansion, which gives an additional importance for logistic transportation within the area besides Duqm Port, the key maritime trade hub. The sultanate's ultimate goal behind this airport is to position SEZAD in world map as an attractive economic and tourism hub in the Middle East and optimized its exceptional strategic location.

Nippon Paint ME joins hands with Karwa Motors

Nippon Paint Middle East has announced a collaboration with Karwa Motors, a strategic investment initiative by the State of Qatar and the Sultanate of Oman for assembly and manufacturing of buses. Nippon Paint, specialists in paint processes and solutions, will be the exclusive paint solutions provider to Karwa Motors

As part of the collaboration, Nippon Paint will work closely with Karwa Motors, which is a green field project for bus assembly and manufacturing to address the growing demand in the GCC and wider Middle East Nippon Paint was preferred as the exclusive paint solutions partner for Karwa Motors thanks to its innovative product and technical solutions, in addition to its value propositions. Karwa Motors has invested in state-of-the-art infrastructure to address long-term demand in the region for buses and is set to cater to the luxury coaches, city buses and school bus segments.

Initial orders to be executed under the new collaboration are for the export of buses to Qatar for a major Sport Event to be held in 2022, with the Nippon Paint Technical Services team addressing the specific requirement for customised product, shade and technical solutions.

Sharad Malhotra, director, Nippon Paint Middle East, said, "Nippon Paint, with its expertise in the commercial vehicles business, is happy to associate with Karwa Motors and shall add value to the partnership through its innovative and best in class product and technical solutions. We have always strived to be a leader in the Augmented Finishing Solutions space and spread our reach across the world. The Middle East has been a critical



Sharad Malhotra

market for us and this collaboration augers well for our long-term plans in the region. Leading edge and eco-friendly painting solutions have defined our relationships and growth plans".

"This collaboration will give us an opportunity to showcase our extensive range of services and solutions," he added.

Alpansh Sharma, GM, Nippon Middle East, said, "The demand for commercial vehicles and specifically buses and coaches in the Middle East continues to grow, considering the dependence on expats for the labour force. We would like to nurture this partnership with our extensive solutions and have a fruitful association for both the entities"

Dr Ibrahim al Balushi, CEO, Karwa Motors, said, "We are looking forward to a long-standing association with Nippon Paint, which has a rich legacy in the commercial vehicle paint and coating industry. We will jointly strive to provide innovative and ecofriendly solutions."

Mikel Ecenarro, COO, Karwa Motors, added: "We shortlisted Nippon Paint amongst other major paint suppliers owing to its innovative product capabilities, technical solutions and value propositions."

Real estate advisor Savills enters Pakistan market

International real estate advisor Savills has announced it has opened in three locations in Pakistan effective January 1, 2022.

Leading real estate advisory firm, which formerly operated as Colliers International franchise in Pakistan, will join Savills with their 42 strong team. The existing business, established in 2007, will give Savills extensive national coverage, operating out of three offices in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. It will form part of and further strengthen Savills' market leading Middle East operation and connect both East and West with our regional businesses as we continue to grow our global network.

Savills Pakistan will offer services including sales, leasing and investment advisory, valuation, research and development as well as project management. The team's existing client base includes the largest commercial bank in Pakistan, Habib Bank Ltd, Bank Alfalah and Standard Chartered Bank; one of China's largest state owned enterprises China Road & Bridge; telecommunications company Etisalat; one of the largest local listed developers TPL Properties and International companies including Royal Dutch Shell, Novartis, Maersk, GlaxoSmithKline and Pepsico International.

Mark Ridley, CEO of Savills Plc, said, "Pakistan is the fifth largest country by population, of which over a third reside in urban areas. With the government pro-



Mark Ridley

moting the construction and housing industry we see huge opportunity in this market and are really excited to be working with our new colleagues."

Steven Morgan, CEO of Savills Middle East, added, "Forming a business in Pakistan is a key strategic move as we further grow in this geographical area. We are already advising clients across the Middle East, Africa and Asia on extensive growth projects and we are looking forward to sharing this expertise with our team in Pakistan."

Hammad Rana, director of Savills Pakistan said, "Savills global platform represents an established and market leading advisory service. Our clients are set to benefit from the experience of the wider business as we collaborate closely to achieve the best results."

Savills Middle East business now spans the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, Oman, and Pakistan.

Ooredoo connects more locations with Fibre Home Internet

Reaching out to even more locations across Oman, Ooredoo brings its Fibre Home Internet service to Ruwi Expansion, South and North of Quryat Al Sahel, Bidiya and Sur. Residents in those areas can now enjoy an amazing value high-speed service from as little as RO29.4 per month.

With speeds of up to 1GB,



plus a whole range of unique benefits like unlimited data, 10 per cent discount on international calling, unlimited national minutes, and free modem and installation, it's the perfect solution for the whole family.

With Ooredoo's Fibre Home Internet services, customers can surf, chat and browse the Internet for much longer without

worrying about any interruptions while streaming movies and TV shows. So connect today and enjoy more ways to relax, work and share.

Residents in areas with new coverage can order through WhatsApp by sharing their ID and location to 95009500, or by calling the Fibre team on 1514.

Porsche MEA records 10% sales growth in 2021

Porsche Middle East and Africa FZE, a wholly owned subsidiary of Dr Ing h c F Porsche AG, Stuttgart, delivered 6,841 sports cars across the region in 2021, marking a 10 per cent increase compared to the previous year and the second highest retail result in the past seven years. Orders for new models rose 37 per cent, representing the highest order intake since 2012. This high demand and attraction that enthusiasts hold for Porsche's products gives the marque a strong start into 2022.

The ever-popular Cayenne premium SUV continued to win over customers with 2,427 sales representing 35 per cent of total volume. It was closely followed by the Macan which maintained strong growth with 34 per cent of total sales amounting to 2,359 units. The brand's compact SUV recorded a 25 per cent increase over the previous year despite a 2022 model year update in the final months of 2021. The top three volume markets for the regional office were the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, with the highest growth



recorded in India, Morocco and Saudi Arabia.

Dr Manfred Bräunl, chief executive officer at Porsche Middle East and Africa FZE, said, "We are very pleased with the growth we have seen during the past 12 months, given the challenges many industries continue to face. With over 70 years' experience of building benchmark sports cars, our brand appeal is exceptional. Thanks to our continuous investments in our product range and individualisation pro-

gramme, more than 6,800 customers took delivery of their dream Porsche in 2021. Without the strong support, professionalism, and passion of our importer network this result would not be possible, so I thank every member of the Porsche team out there for the support."

Demand for the iconic 911 remained strong with deliveries accounting for 14 per cent of total sales representing close to 1,000 units. The purist, high-performance GT models are in high de-

mand; more than a quarter of future deliveries will sport the GT badge.

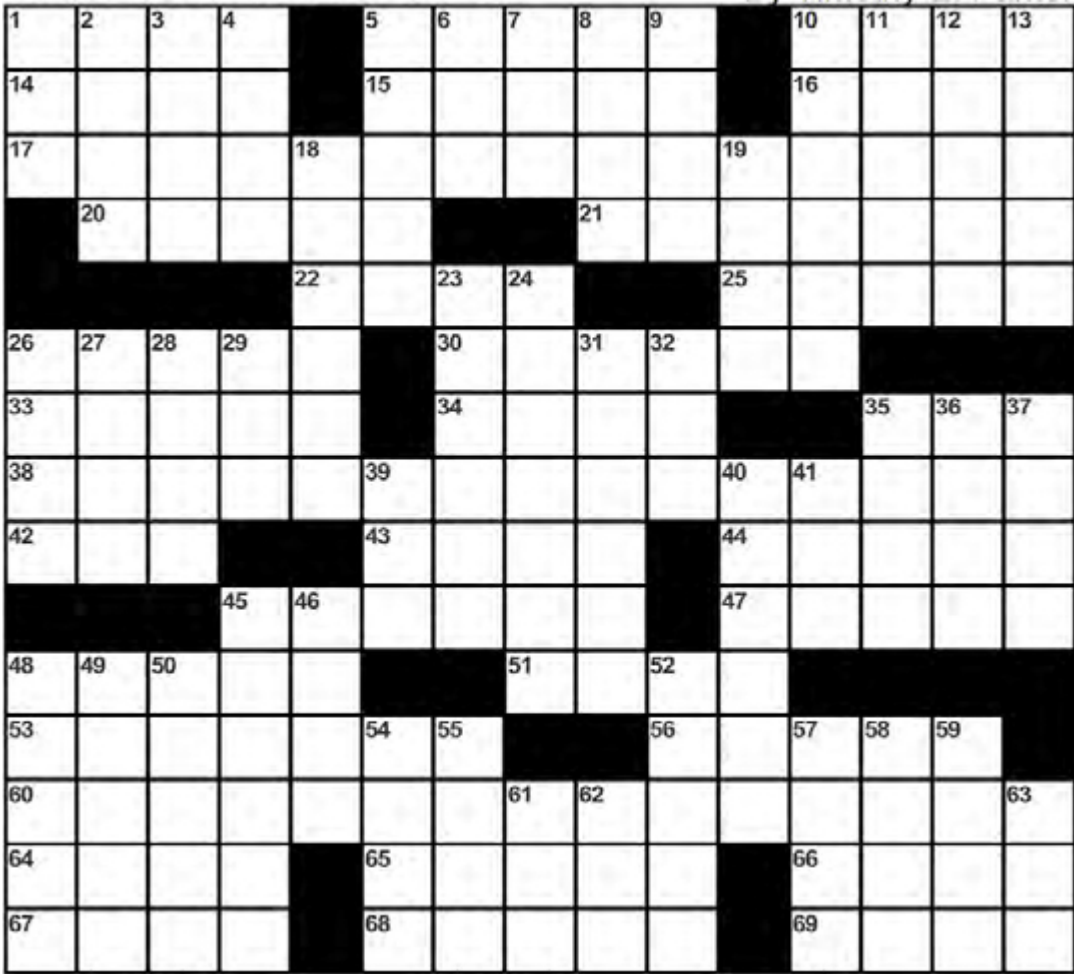
The 718 Boxster and Cayman were responsible for 4 per cent of sales with the impending release of the high performance 718 GT4 RS filling almost 30 per cent of the 718 order books. Two-door sports cars continue to remain attractive to Porsche customers, representing almost 20 per cent of the model share and unchanged from last year, despite the launch of a second

Porsche limousine with the Taycan.

The expansion of the Taycan range, Porsche's first fully electric sports car, will continue across the region through 2022, yet it has already accounted for 7 per cent of total sales, making it the preferred four-door limousine. The Porsche Panamera enjoyed a 190 per cent growth in demand over 2020 resulting in a five per cent model share. With its recently announced introduction of the new Platinum Edition, this model is set to continue its positive trajectory.

In addition to increasing new car deliveries, the offering from Porsche Exclusive Manufaktur for bespoke colour and trim finishes also witnessed significant growth. More than 85 per cent of all models ordered featured at least one individualisation option available through the brand's customisation programme. The recently extended colour choices via the Paint-to-Sample offer have seen an exceptional demand, with more cars ordered in special exterior colours than ever before in the region.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1) _ mater
 - 5) Operates a crowbar
 - 10) "Song" or "slug" attachment
 - 14) TV fixture of old
 - 15) Cocoon constructor
 - 16) Hourly wage, e.g.
 - 17) Procrastinator's response to a question
 - 20) Assume for argument's sake
 - 21) "Twelve Days of Christmas" bounders
 - 22) Vein glory
 - 25) Buying binge, e.g.
 - 26) Long-billed shorebird
 - 30) Crate eggs, e.g.
 - 33) Palomino, e.g.
 - 34) Type of lily
 - 35) Lion offspring
 - 38) Hitting up the boss
 - 42) "Indubitably!"
 - 43) Lucy Van_ of "Peanuts"
 - 44) Demagnetize
 - 45) Fingerprint features
 - 47) It falls in the fall
 - 48) "Li'l Abner" character Hawkins
 - 51) Lip-_ (fake sing)
- DOWN**
- 1) Decay-fighting org.
 - 2) It makes a sinner thinner?
 - 3) Kind of shark
 - 4) Poor-box contents
 - 5) Aristotle's instructor
 - 6) Car-washer's need
 - 7) Nest-egg initials
 - 8) Wicked as sin
 - 9) Rational
 - 10) Frozen, fruity dessert
 - 11) "Peter, Peter, Pumpkin_"
 - 12) Cubic meter
 - 13) Brief in speech
 - 18) Brennan of film
 - 19) Girl of Aberdeen
 - 23) Less willing to listen
 - 24) Signs up, as for the military
 - 26) Horse cart
 - 27) Scent detector
 - 28) Gets one's goat
 - 29) Letters on an air pump
 - 31) Girl's bow
 - 32) Doc bloc, for short
 - 35) Overseas greeting or farewell
 - 36) Lenin's land, for short
 - 37) "How have you _?"
 - 39) Local mail HQ
 - 40) Responds to a stimulus
 - 41) Line made with a compass
 - 45) Place with vats
 - 46) Act on, as advice
 - 48) Big, thick slices
 - 49) Famous writer of fables
 - 50) Senegal's capital
 - 52) Disturber of the peace
 - 54) Aquatic resorts
 - 55) Spill the beans
 - 57) "Arts" anagram
 - 58) Emerald Isle
 - 59) Chum up

61) Copacabana setting, briefly

62) GPS offering

63) Voiced turnaround

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You've got a lot of living to do, and you might have been going a little overboard lately. Knowing impulsive you, it's probably surprising that you haven't gone further than you have! It's time now to sit down and look things over, though, with an eye towards creating and sticking to a nice, stable budget. You can do it. Besides, aren't you trying to save up for a vacation? Finally that dream vacation will come true.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Whether you know it or not, the higher-ups you've been dealing with are quite pleased with you, and that may go double for one particular authority figure. Be patient. They might not be ready to talk about it just yet. You won't have to wait long for them to offer you a lot more responsibility, though, which, of course, is step one toward a raise or promotion. Better start indulging in power naps.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

You're famous for loving freedom, but a little-known secret is that you're also an extremely devoted partner, and that goes double if you've found an intellectual equal who you're also attracted to. If you're away from your friends for a few days, they'll just have to understand. If they're really good friends, they will, especially when you show up wearing a great big grin and actually admit that it might be love.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The number of chromosomes in human body is
- a. 42
 - b. 44
 - c. 46
 - d. 48
2. The purest form of water can be obtained from
- a. a deep tubewell
 - b. a running stream
 - c. a hot water spring
 - d. a heavy shower of rain
3. The Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports is located at
- a. Bangalore
 - b. Kolkata
 - c. Darjeeling
 - d. Patiala

Answers: 1. c 2. d 3. d

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

R	I	I	P
O	K	O	Y
I	N	L	L
B	A	S	L

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.

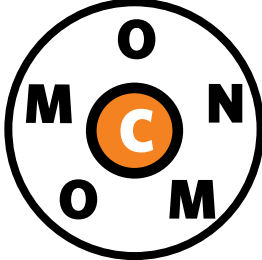
Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

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

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

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

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

Negotiators head home as Iran talks hit critical stage

Tehran, Iran - Chief negotiators from Iran and Europe returned home for consultations as talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal reached a critical stage, state media in the Islamic republic said on Saturday.

'The negotiators will return to Vienna in two days' but expert-level discussions at the eighth round of talks would continue on Saturday and Sunday, IRNA news agency said.

The talks between Tehran and world powers resumed in late November after they were suspended for around five months as Iran elected a new, ultraconservative government.

Iran agreed the nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States.

It offered the Islamic republic sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme.

But former US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the agreement in 2018 and imposed crippling sanctions, prompting Iran to begin rolling back its commitments.

'We are now at a stage of the negotiations where we are discussing difficult issues and how we can translate the subjects that we agreed upon in principle into words and enter them into a



Deputy Secretary General of the European External Action Service (EEAS) Enrique Mora (centre) and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani (right) attending a previous meeting of the joint commission in Vienna (AFP)



This file photo shows Iran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani leaving the nuclear talks at Palais Coburg in Vienna on December 27 last year (AFP)

document,' IRNA quoted an anonymous source as saying.

'We are discussing the details,' the source said, adding that 'this is one of the most te-

dious, long and difficult parts of the negotiations, but is absolutely essential for achieving our goal'.

The main aims of the negoti-

ations are to get the United States to return to the deal and lift sanctions, and for Iran to resume full compliance with the accord.

Tehran is seeking verification of the sanctions easing, as well as guarantees that Washington will not withdraw from the deal again. "Regarding the three subjects (lifting of sanctions, nuclear commitments and implementation, sequencing and verification), there are still open issues and some of them are tough," the source said.

The return of the negotiators to their capitals came as EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Friday that a deal with Iran remained 'possible', and

We are now at a stage of the negotiations where we are discussing how we can translate the subjects that we agreed upon in principle into words and enter them into a document

A SOURCE

that the talks were advancing in a 'better atmosphere' than before Christmas.

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said last week the efforts by 'all parties' to revive the nuclear agreement had resulted in 'good progress'.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian recently noted progress in the talks, but said it was 'too slow'.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that only 'a few weeks' were left to save the 2015 deal, and that Washington would consider 'other options' if the negotiations fail.

AFP



Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian (left) meets Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Friday (Twitter/@IRIMFA_EN)

China, Iran begin implementation of sweeping strategic partnership

Beijing, China - China said on Saturday it would begin implementing a strategic agreement with Iran, strengthening economic and political cooperation between the two countries as Beijing blasted Washington's sanctions on Tehran.

China and Iran signed the agreement last year after years of talks, with the wide-ranging partnership set to span areas including energy, security, infrastructure and communications.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi and Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian announced the start of the partnership's implementation at a meeting in east China's Wuxi on Friday, Beijing's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Few details of the secretive deal have been published, but the *New York Times* reported in 2020 that it would secure a regular supply of oil for China, citing a draft of the agreement leaked to the paper.

China is Iran's leading trade partner and was one of the biggest buyers of the country's oil before then-US president Donald Trump reimposed sweeping unilateral sanctions in 2018.

China has officially stopped importing oil from Iran, but analysts say Iranian crude is continuing to enter the country disguised as imports from other

countries.

Wang told his Iranian counterpart on Friday that China would continue to 'oppose illegal unilateral sanctions against Iran', the Foreign Ministry said.

Beijing has long sought to boost ties with Tehran, with Chinese president Xi Jinping describing Iran as 'China's major partner in the Middle East' on a rare visit to the country in 2016.

Wang and Amir-Abdollahian's meeting comes as talks continue in Vienna over a potential deal to halt Tehran's development of nuclear weapons.

A 2015 deal - agreed by Iran, the US, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany - offered Tehran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme.

But the US withdrew from the agreement in 2018, reimposing biting sanctions and prompting Tehran to begin rolling back on its commitments.

Talk to salvage the nuclear deal began in late November, after being suspended when Iran elected a new ultraconservative government in June.

Wang told his Iranian counterpart on Friday that China believes the United States is to blame for the current state of the deal, the Foreign Ministry said in its statement.

AFP

US Africa envoy to visit Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Ethiopia

Washington, US - The US special envoy for the Horn of Africa will visit Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Ethiopia next week amid ongoing crises in the two African nations, the State Department announced on Friday. David Satterfield and Assistant Secretary of State Molly Phee will travel to Riyadh, Khartoum and Addis Ababa from January 17-20.

In Riyadh, the pair will meet with the Friends of Sudan, a group calling for the restoration of the country's transitional government following a military coup in October.

The meeting aims to 'marshal international support' for the UN mission to 'facilitate a renewed



David Satterfield

civilian-led transition to democracy' in Sudan, according to the statement. Satterfield and Phee will then travel to Khartoum, where they will meet with pro-democracy activists, women's and youth groups, civil organisations and military and political



Molly Phee

figures. 'Their message will be clear: the United States is committed to freedom, peace, and justice for the Sudanese people,' the statement read.

In Ethiopia, the pair will talk with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to seek a resolution to the deep-

ening civil war. 'They will encourage government officials to seize the current opening for peace by ending the airstrikes and other hostilities,' the statement read.

They will also ask for the establishment of a ceasefire, the release of political prisoners and the restoration of humanitarian access.

Satterfield, the former US ambassador to Turkey, was appointed to replace Jeffrey Feltman as special envoy on January 6. Feltman quit just as he visited Ethiopia in a bid to encourage peace talks to end more than a year of war following the withdrawal of Tigrayan rebels.

The Tigrayan People's Libera-

tion Front, which last year threatened to march on Addis Ababa, by December had withdrawn to its stronghold, and the government has not pursued the rebels further on the ground.

Feltman had also sought to tackle the crisis in Sudan, but he was treated unceremoniously in October when Sudan's military ruler, General Abdel Fattah al Burhan, carried out a coup just after the US envoy had left the country.

Feltman's resignation came days after Sudan's civilian prime minister, Abdalla Hamdok, quit, leaving Burhan as the undisputed leader of the country.

AFP

Tunisia sentences nine extremists to death over soldier's murder

Tunis, Tunisia - A Tunisian court has sentenced to death nine extremists accused of having beheaded a soldier in 2016, a murder claimed by the Islamic State group, media reported on Saturday.

Tunisia hands death sentences to convicts mainly in trials related to national security under a 2015 terror law, despite a moratorium on capital punishment in place since 1991.

Friday's verdict concerns the murder of army corporal Said Ghozlani in November 2016, in the Mount Mghila area near the border with Algeria.

He was found beheaded in his home in that region, which is considered a hideout for extremists. The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for killing the soldier.

The Tunis court on Friday also sentenced to jail 15 people accused of involvement in the murder, with terms ranging from 32 to 44 years in prison.

Tunisia saw a surge in extremist activity following the

ouster of autocratic president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in the 2011 revolution.

Dozens of members of the security forces have since been killed in extremist attacks.

The security situation has greatly improved in recent years, but Tunisian forces continue to track down suspected extremists in the Mount Mghila and Mount Chaami regions.

In 2020, President Kais Saied called into question the moratorium on the death penalty, after the murder of a 29-year-old woman sparked outrage in the country.

Her body had been found in a ditch near the highway linking the capital Tunis to the residential suburb of Marsa.

A man was arrested and confessed to strangling her and stealing her phone.

At the time, Saied said, "Anyone who kills a person for no reason deserves the death penalty," prompting outrage from rights groups.

AFP

'108 civilians killed in Tigray airstrikes this month'

Geneva, Switzerland - At least 108 civilians have been killed since New Year's in a series of airstrikes in the war-torn northern Tigray region of Ethiopia, the United Nations said on Friday.

The UN also warned of a looming humanitarian disaster in the region, with its food distribution operations on the verge of grinding to a halt.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said on Twitter: 'My appeal to the parties: stop the fighting in all its forms. All people who need humanitarian aid must receive it as quickly as possible. It's time to start dialogue and reconciliation.'

The UN human rights office urged the Ethiopian authorities to ensure the protection of civilians, saying disproportionate attacks hitting non-military targets could amount to war crimes.

Northern Ethiopia has been beset by conflict since November 2020 when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray after accusing the region's ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), of attacks on federal army camps.

"We are alarmed by the multiple, deeply disturbing reports



The UN has warned that attacks hitting non-military targets could amount to war crimes (AFP)

we continue to receive of civilian casualties and destruction of civilian objects resulting from airstrikes in Ethiopia's Tigray region," rights office spokeswoman Liz Throssell told reporters in Geneva.

"At least 108 civilians have reportedly been killed and 75 oth-

ers injured since the year began, as a result of airstrikes allegedly carried out by the Ethiopian air force."

She detailed a series of airstrikes, including the January 7 attack on the Dedebit camp for internally displaced persons, which left at least 56 dead and

30 others wounded, of which three later died in hospital.

On Monday, 17 civilians were reportedly killed and 21 injured after an airstrike hit a flour mill, and on Tuesday, the state-owned Technical Vocational Education and Training institute was hit, reportedly killing three

men, said Throssell.

Numerous other airstrikes were reported last week, she added.

"We call on the Ethiopian authorities and their allies to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian objects, in line with their obligations under international law," said Throssell.

"Failure to respect the principles of distinction and proportionality could amount to war crimes."

Meanwhile, the United Nations' World Food Programme said its distributions were at an all-time low, with the escalation of the conflict meaning that no WFP convoy has reached the Tigrayan capital Mekele since mid-December.

"Life-saving food assistance operations in northern Ethiopia are about to grind to a halt because intense fighting in the neighbourhood that has blocked the passage of fuel and food," WFP spokesman Tomson Phiri told reporters.

"After 14 months of conflict in northern Ethiopia, more people than ever need urgent food assistance."

AFP

Egypt repression still remains ‘systematic’

Beirut, Lebanon - Egypt has recently freed several prominent political detainees, raising hopes for an easing of a sweeping crackdown on dissent. But for rights activists, repression remains ‘systematic’ and there is no relaxation in sight.

The Arab world’s most populous country, with 102mn residents, draws regular criticism over its rights record.

President Abdel Fattah al Sisi has progressively silenced dissent, but last year it appeared things were changing.

Sisi was elected in May 2014 after leading the military ouster of elected Islamist president Mohamed Morsi the previous year.

In 2021, however, he ended a years-long state of emergency and the laws and special tribunals that went with it.

Then several rights activists and political dissidents - liberal and Islamist - were released.

They have included Italian-Egyptian researcher Patrick Zaki, who was freed from pre-trial custody in December, and Egyptian-Palestinian activist Ramy Shaath, who arrived in France this month after more than two years in detention, in exchange for renouncing his Egyptian citizenship.

‘Brutal repression’

But at the same time, Egypt’s most well-known political detainee, Alaa Abdel Fattah, a lead-

ing figure in the 2011 revolution that toppled longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak, was sentenced to five years in jail. Another 2011 activist, former MP Zyad el Elaimy, received an identical sentence, while other activists were also jailed - with hard labour.

New repressive laws took effect, including a requirement that non-governmental organisations register with the authorities before mid-January or be dissolved.

Human Rights Watch says this ‘is complicated and burdensome, requiring hundreds of pages of documentation of past activities, funding sources, and planned activities’.

The process is not guaranteed, either. “Registration is not final until the Social Solidarity Ministry publicly approves the group’s registration,” the US-based watchdog said.

Another group, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, said it was informed in October that it could not register under its current name.

ANHRI was one of the largest and oldest rights groups in Egypt, but it shut its doors on January 10 after an 18-year history through which it had seen three presidents, a popular revolution and the military overthrow of a head of state.

For Human Rights Watch, “Egypt’s superficial attempts to create an impression of human



Billboards in New York City and Washington DC feature the statue of liberty gagged with the Egyptian flag, which the NGO says represents Egypt’s repression of American citizens (Twitter/@thefreedom)

Egypt’s superficial attempts to create an impression of human rights progress failed to disguise the government’s brutal repression of all manner of dissent in 2021

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

rights progress failed to disguise the government’s brutal repression of all manner of dissent in

2021.”

There is, it said, ‘no end to systematic repression’.

‘Complicit’ NGOs

Sisi completely rejects such accusations. Receiving journalists this month, he fired back: “Do you like our people more than we do? Are you more concerned for our country than we are? Here we have nothing to eat. Are you ready to help us?” In September, he presented his ‘national strategy for human rights’ while ac-

cusing international rights groups of not knowing the ‘challenges facing the country’.

Among the principles of his strategy is the consideration that education, health or electricity are more important than freedom of assembly.

Announcing the suspension of its operations, ANHRI cited ‘growing violations against

human rights’ and ‘an increase in police harassment, whether under a legal or judicial pretext or through explicit persecution’.

Gamal Eid, ANHRI’s founder, said the group was told it could no longer work on its fundamental issues of freedom of expression or prison conditions.

“We refuse to become an organisation that works on unimportant issues, and we will not become a complicit organisation,” Eid said, referring to NGOs that ‘polish the image of the government’.

Online and abroad

Eid says the authorities have harassed him for years. He has been beaten and warned to ‘behave’ himself, his colleagues have been detained, and he remains under a travel ban with his assets frozen. Rights groups say many other activists face such restrictions, though they are free, while the country holds about 60,000 political prisoners in custody.

Amnesty International and around 20 other civil society groups referred to the Egyptian government’s ‘abysmal human rights record’, which has left ‘peaceful activists, human rights defenders, lawyers, academics, and journalists detained for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association’.

AFP

France’s Taubira hopes to rally left against Macron

Paris, France - France’s well-liked former justice minister Christiane Taubira on Saturday launched her bid to unify the floundering French left and challenge President Emmanuel Macron at April presidential elections, but faces a slew of competing candidates reluctant to cede the limelight.

“I’m committing myself here before you because I share your aspiration for another kind of government,” the former minister under Socialist President Francois Hollande (2012-17) told supporters in Lyon at the official launch of her campaign.

Taubira blasted ‘top-down power and absence of social dialogue’ under Macron, promising to fight for higher wages, better conditions for school pupils and students, the health service and environmental protection.

The 69-year-old, born in the French South American territory of Guyana where she served as an MP, is admired on the left after fighting for a law recognising the slave trade as a crime against humanity.

“We will do all of this together, because that’s what we’re capable of,” she told a cheering crowd brandishing signs reading ‘With Taubira’.

But she risks becoming just one among six candidates scrambling for votes among the roughly 30 per cent of the electorate that leans left.

They range from firebrand Jean-Luc Melenchon - the best-rated in polls compiled by the JDD weekly at close to 10 per cent - to Greens candidate Yannick Jadot and Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo at 6.5 and 3.5 per cent.

A January poll credited Taubira with around 4.5 per cent support.

On the right, three challengers - conservative Valerie Pécresse, traditional far-right leader Marine Le Pen and insurgent TV pundit Eric Zemmour - have some prospect of



Christiane Taubira delivers a speech in front of supporters at a rally in the Croix-Rousse district of Lyon, eastern France, on Saturday (AFP)

I am committing myself here before you because I share your aspiration for another kind of government. We will do all of this together because that’s what we are capable of

CHRISTIANE TAUBIRA

taking on incumbent Macron in the election’s second round.

Although yet to declare his candidacy, the president himself enjoys the highest first-round poll ratings at around one in four voters.

Taubira’s backers argue that she has the power to stoke ‘ardour’ among left-wingers, who have been the biggest losers from the collapse of the traditional left-right political divide since Macron’s shock 2017 presidential win.

The former minister ‘wants to be the antidote to the weariness among left voters, who can’t stand any more fragmentation’, said Christian Paul, a Taubira supporter and mayor of the small town of Lormes in central France.

One tool Taubira has bet on is a so-called ‘People’s Primary’ that will crown the favoured leftwing candidate of around 120,000 registered voters.

But while she has pledged to respect the result, the other candidates have refused to sign up to the process.

AFP

Protests in New York demanding extension of eviction moratorium

New York, US - About 100 protesters turned out in Manhattan on Friday to demand the extension of a moratorium on rental evictions in New York state, a day before it was due to end.

The moratorium, granted in spring of 2020 by then governor Andrew Cuomo, has been regularly extended since then, but current governor Kathy Hochul has declined to do so after it expired on Saturday.

“You cannot allow a moratorium to lapse in the middle of winter, during a COVID surge,” said Jumaane Williams, a former Brooklyn council member and himself a candidate for the post of governor.

As in previous days in the run-up to the January 15 deadline, demonstrators waved banners and chanted slogans in front of the public library.

‘Housing is a human right’ read one banner, while another brandished a picture of Hochul with the words, ‘Governor of



Protesters march calling for an extension to the eviction moratorium, in New York city on Wednesday (AFP)

evictions’.

“Tomorrow is the end of the eviction moratorium,” said protest organiser Sarah Lazuy.

“It’s unacceptable to start eviction proceedings against 250,000 people in the state of

New York, when it’s winter. And there’s a pandemic still going on. It’s just unacceptable.”

If the moratorium does end on Saturday, “tens of thousands of women and children of colour in New York City are going to get

evicted by their landlords, are going to wind up on the streets are going to wind up in our shelter system. And that just is not possibly right,” said New York City comptroller Brad Lander.

AFP

Thieves loot freight trains in LA with impunity

Los Angeles, US - Dozens of freight cars are broken into every day on Los Angeles’s railways by thieves who take advantage of the trains’ stops to loot packages bought online, leaving thousands of gutted boxes and products that will never reach their destinations.

According to the tags found on Friday by an AFP team on a track near the city centre - which was easily accessible from nearby streets - many major US mail order and courier companies such as Amazon, Target, UPS and FedEx are being hit by the thefts, which have exploded in recent months.

The thieves wait until the long freight trains are immobilised on the tracks, and then climb onto the freight containers, whose locks they easily break with the help of bolt cutters.

They then help themselves to parcels, ditching any products that are difficult to move or re-



Packages spill from the open doors of shipping containers as a train passes through a section of Union Pacific train tracks in Los Angeles, on Friday (AFP)

sell, or are too cheap, such as COVID-19 test kits, furniture or medications.

Rail operator Union Pacific has seen a 160 per cent rise in the thefts in Los Angeles county since December 2020.

“In October 2021 alone, the increase was 356 per cent compared to October 2020,” UP said in a letter to the local authorities. The explosion in looting has

been accompanied by an upsurge in ‘assaults and armed robberies of UP employees performing their duties moving trains’, the letter said.

The phenomenon spiked recently with the peak of activity linked to Christmas shopping.

According to figures reported by UP, more than 90 containers were vandalised every day on average in Los Angeles County in

the last quarter of 2021.

To combat the trend, Union Pacific says it has strengthened surveillance measures - including drones - and recruited more security staff for its tracks and convoys. Police and security agents have arrested more than 100 people in the last three months of 2021 for ‘trespassing and vandalising’ Union Pacific trains.

“While criminals are being caught and arrested, charges are reduced to a misdemeanor or petty offence, and the person is back on the streets in less than 24 hours after paying a nominal fine,” said a spokesman for the rail operator. “In fact, criminals boast to our officers that there is no consequence,” he said.

Union Pacific wrote to the Los Angeles County attorney’s office at the end of December asking them to reconsider a leniency policy introduced at the end of 2020 for such offences.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Omicron spreads to Chinese city bordering Macau

The southern city of Zhuhai suspends public bus routes and warns residents not to leave the city

Beijing, China - The southern Chinese city of Zhuhai suspended public bus routes on Saturday after announcing it had detected at least seven cases of the highly transmissible Omicron coronavirus variant there and warning residents not to leave the city.

The coastal city of Zhuhai, which borders the gambling hub Macau, said late on Friday Omicron had been detected in one mildly ill and six asymptomatic patients, after launching mass testing due to a case in a neighbouring city.

China is battling a spate of coronavirus outbreaks, including several from the Omicron variant, as the country steps up vigilance against the virus ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics next month.

Millions of people across the country have been ordered to stay home in recent weeks, with scores of domestic flights cancelled and factories shut down.



Deserted roads in Huaxian county after the administration closed the area in the city of Anyang, in Henan province due to a fresh outbreak (AFP)

China faces a two-fold challenge from both the Delta and Omicron strains. Regions must not relax their prevention measures

MI FENG

Zhuhai officials have asked residents to avoid leaving the city 'unless necessary', with those who are required to show negative COVID test results within the past 24 hours.

The city had launched mass testing for its population of 2.4mn people on Friday after a COVID-19 case was detected in neighbouring Zhongshan earlier in the week. Businesses including beauty salons, card rooms, gyms and cinemas were or-

dered to close on Thursday, with officials announcing the suspension of public bus routes in parts of the city.

China has kept COVID-19 cases relatively low throughout the pandemic with its zero-tolerance strategy of immediately ordering mass testing and strict lockdowns when infections are detected.

But the fast-spreading Omicron variant has tested that strategy in recent weeks, appearing in the port city of Tianjin close to Beijing before spreading to the central city of Anyang.

National Health Commission spokesman Mi Feng told reporters on Saturday that the country faced a 'two-fold challenge' from both the Delta and Omicron strains of the virus.

He warned that regions that had not yet seen outbreaks 'must not relax' their prevention measures and 'strengthen risk auditing'.

AFP

Brazil begins vaccinating children despite President's objection

Sao Paulo, Brazil - Brazil began vaccinating children aged five to 11 against COVID-19 on Friday after the move was approved, despite objections from President Jair Bolsonaro.

Davi Seremramiwe Xavante, an Indigenous eight-year-old boy, was the first child to be vaccinated during an official ceremony at a Sao Paulo hospital, with the state governor Joao Doria in attendance.

The first COVID-19 vaccine dose administered in Brazil was also in Sao Paulo, in January 2021.

The new age group was approved for vaccination by Anvisa health authorities a month ago.

More than 20mn children are eligible for the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, as long as they have parental consent.



A girl receives her first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, at the Clinicas hospital, in Sao Paulo on Friday (AFP)

More than 300 children aged five to 11 have died from COVID-19 in Brazil, among a total of 620,000 deaths

HEALTH MINISTRY

his 11-year-old daughter, Laura.

Himself unvaccinated, Bolsonaro caused a storm when he asked to have the names of those responsible for approving the move made public.

An association representing Anvisa officials blasted Bolsonaro's 'fascist methods', and the authority's president de-

manded police protection for staff following threats.

According to official health ministry figures, more than 300 children aged five to 11 have died from COVID-19 in Brazil, among a total of 620,000 deaths from the disease in the country of 213mn.

The number of new cases has exploded since the emergence of the Omicron variant in late November.

Daily new cases on Thursday were just under 100,000, having been less than 6,000 two weeks ago. On Friday, Brazil reported 112,286 new cases in 24 hours, a figure close to the record of 115,228 daily registered on June 23, when the country was in the midst of the third wave of the pandemic.

AFP

Record daily cases in Latin America

Buenos Aires, Argentina - Latin America and the Caribbean registered a record of more than 300,000 new daily COVID-19 cases from January 7-13, according to an AFP count based on official figures.

Argentina was the worst affected country accounting for almost 140,000 of those cases, as well as a seven-day average of 96 deaths.

The country of 45mn has registered almost 7mn cases and more than 117,000 deaths since the pandemic began.

The average daily new cases in Latin America of 304,000 is almost double the previous high from the re-

gion's last wave when 155,000 daily cases were recorded from May 28 to June 3, 2021.

The new record was a 126 per cent increase on the previous seven days.

Deaths have likewise increased, although without reaching anything like the levels of the last wave.

The seven-day average from January 7 to 13 was 621 deaths, which is a 44 per cent increase on the previous seven days.

It is still a long way off the record number of average daily deaths of more than 5,500 between April 6-12, 2021.

AFP

A new Russian attack likely on Ukraine, say analysts

Paris, France - The failure of the United States and Russia this week to find a diplomatic solution to fizzing tensions over Eastern European security has increased the chance of a new Russian attack on Ukraine even if full-scale war is far from inevitable, analysts say.

Russia stands accused of having massed some 100,000 troops close to the Ukrainian border, as it seeks a commitment from the West that the pro-EU former Soviet state will never join NATO.

Senior Russian and US officials this week held talks in Geneva but there was no hint of any breakthrough, with Washington warning by the end of the week that Moscow could stage a false flag operation within weeks to precipitate an invasion.

"We have information that indicates Russia has already prepositioned a group of operatives to conduct a false-flag operation in eastern Ukraine," said Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary. "The operatives are trained in urban warfare and in using explosives to carry out acts of sabotage against Russia's own proxy forces."

Ukraine was meanwhile hit by a blistering cyberattack in the early hours of Friday blamed by the West on Russia and which some analysts feared could be the prelude to an attack.



Soldiers from Gotland's regiment patrol in Visby harbour on Thursday. Russia's mobilisation at Ukraine's border and the rougher tone between Russia and NATO have led the Swedish defence to increase its visible activities, including on Gotland in eastern Sweden (AFP)

Moscow responded to the ousting of Ukraine's former pro-Russia president in 2014 by seizing in a lightning military operation the Ukrainian Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, an annexation never recognised by the international community.

It then backed separatists who took control of two eastern Ukrainian regions in an unsolved conflict that has left over 13,000 dead.

Is there a way out?

NATO has made clear that it will never rule out the possibility that Ukraine could join the alliance, even if analysts see this as a very remote chance for now.

"Regrettably war is more likely. We've reached a real impasse," said Melinda Haring, deputy director of the US-based Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center.

"As things stand, the Russian and US positions are irreconcil-

able," Haring said.

Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, added: "The absence of a diplomatic solution logically leads to a further exacerbation of this crisis with a military solution already seen as a way out."

Samuel Charap, senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, noted that NATO had not even offered Ukraine a membership action plan let

alone membership.

"Finding a way to say that, that is politically viable, is going to be very difficult, of course, but so will a war," he said.

What is Russia planning?

But analysts say despite the ominous signals it is impossible to read the mind of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

For Marie Dumoulin, direc-

tor of the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 'the decision on whether or not to continue these talks will be taken by Vladimir Putin and no-one knows right now what it will be'.

Francois Heisbourg, special advisor to the Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS) in Paris, said 'the situation is totally volatile' and the 'risk of war high'.

Charap said it was 'an open question' whether the talks with the US had simply been a 'time buying exercise' for Russia.

"And I don't know whether that's the case and I don't think any of us really know."

What shape would military action take?

Even if Russia opted for military action, it may not come down to a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Putin could look to responses such as deploying Russian missiles in the separatist-controlled Donbass region of eastern Ukraine or Crimea, according to the prominent Russian security analyst Maxim Suchkov.

Heisbourg argued another option could be limited 'territorial gains' that would link the Donbass region with Crimea.

US intelligence sources have indicated that no final decision has been taken by Russia.

A French diplomatic source,

who asked not to be named added: "I do not believe there are preparations for an immediate invasion."

What would the consequences be?

Russia has repeatedly been warned by Western powers of 'massive' consequences were it to attack Ukraine again, although these would likely take the form of sanctions rather than any military riposte.

Moscow and the West would suffer a crisis unprecedented since the Cold War, likely tightening further the growing Russian partnership with China as well as its alliance with the autocratic regime of Belarus which borders three EU states.

For Dumoulin, 'the Russians are blowing hot and cold' and keeping 'maximum pressure to obtain more' concessions from the West over the architecture of European security in former Communist bloc states.

'The scenario of military intervention is not the most probable' because its 'cost, military, political, financial and human' would be considerable, she said.

Haring argued Putin would strike Ukraine 'in a way short of war', prompting Europe 'to wring its hands but stop short of unleashing its harsh package of sanctions'.

AFP

Residents of volcano island in Spain return home to fight ash

Los Llanos de Aridane, Spain - For weeks they dreamt of returning to the homes they fled when a volcano erupted on the Spanish island of La Palma.

Now that they are finally trickling back to them, their joy is tempered by finding everything covered in a sea of ash.

"It's another world," said Felix Rodriguez, a 61-year-old bricklayer, as he swept ash from the roof of his house to the terrace below.

He was one of around 1,000 people who were allowed to return to their homes this week, out of a total of 7,000 who were evacuated after the Cumbre Vieja volcano erupted on September 19, spewing lava and thick plumes of ash into the air.

But like many of the others, he won't be able to move back into his home right away.

In addition to blocking doors and paths with piles of ash, lava from the eruption damaged pipes, leaving him without running water.

The lava has also blocked a key road in the Aridane valley, forcing area residents to take much longer routes around the island for trips for basic services that used to take just five minutes.

While the red-hot lava miraculously spared Rodriguez's home, it engulfed the neighbouring cemetery, leaving only a few tombs visible.

'Horrible'

Spanish authorities declared the eruption officially over on Christmas Day following ten days of no lava flows, earthquakes or significant gas emissions.

No injuries or deaths have been directly linked to the eruption on the tiny isle, part of the Canary Islands which lie off Africa's northwest coast.

But it destroyed over 1,300 homes, mainly on the western side of La Palma, and covered 1,250 hectares of land, including vineyards and plantations of bananas and avocados.

Carmen Acosta (57) is one of the lucky few who was able to sleep in their home again for the first time after living in a hotel for



Houses lie damaged by the lava flow following the Cumbre Vieja's eruption, on the Spanish Canary Island of La Palma (AFP)



Felix Rodriguez Luis, a 61-year-old mason, removes ashes from the roof of his house, in the Las Manchas neighbourhood on La Palma (AFP)

over three months.

Her parents, who are in their 80s, live with her in the bright blue, one-story house that is surrounded by fruit trees and has a sweeping view of the Atlantic Ocean. "We have a lot of things to clean," said Acosta, as she was surrounded by plastic bags full of clothes, food and medicines which the family brought with them.

"Even in six months, it won't be finished. There is a lot of ash, a lot of garbage... It's horrible."

In the affected area, mounds of ash engulf orange and apple

trees, making them look like shrubs.

'Joy and helplessness'

Gladys Jeronimo, a recently retired 65-year-old housekeeper, had looked forward to resting after decades of work.

"But for now this is all there is: sadness and cleaning and cleaning," she said as she swept her porch. Jeronimo said she felt 'a lot of joy and helplessness at the same time'.

"Joy because it's over, but helplessness because we can't come back" permanently, since

We have a lot of things to clean. Even in six months, it won't be finished. There is a lot of ash, a lot of garbage... It's horrible

CARMEN ACOSTA

running water has not yet been restored, she said.

Her neighbour Maria Zobeida Perez Cabrera, a 68-year-old caregiver, said her second home, which used to belong to her parents, was 'horrible, like a graveyard,' because everything was covered in black ash. "Everything around us was black, there was no soil, no roof, even the plants were black," she said as she loaded a wheelbarrow with ash. Ruben Lopez, a geologist with the Spanish geographical Institute, said winds will blow 'much' of the ash into the sea.

While the surface of the lava has cooled, the flows "still store a lot of heat," he added.

"This will last weeks, even

months, and in addition they release gases," he said.

It will be easier to build on top of lava that has cooled than to remove it, he added.

'Throwing in the towel'

Like thousands of others, Jorge Diaz Hernandez does not know when he will be allowed to return to his home.

"This is the million euro question," the 36-year-old said with a shrug at a mountaintop lookout in the municipality of Los Llanos de Aridane.

During the eruption he came regularly to this spot to see if the banana plantation he has run for the past decade had been affected. It was spared the lava, but Diaz estimated it will take three years to restart production because of the ash damage.

"I am throwing in the towel, I will dedicate myself to something else," he said.

"I was already tired of the way agriculture and bananas are treated, the low prices, the cost of water, all that. This is the straw that breaks the camel's back," he added.

AFP

Birdwatchers flock for glimpse of rare snowy owl in US capital

Washington, US - The white dome of the US Capitol shines through the night, illuminating a small group huddled down the hill, bundled tightly against the winter cold and carrying long-lens cameras and binoculars.

The motley crew are not there to photograph Washington's famous monuments - they have their sights set on a rare creature that flew in from the Arctic: a snowy owl.

"There he is!" shouts one of the birdwatchers.

The crowd shifts positions to get a better angle.

"It's amazing," says an enthused Meleia Rose (41).

"I've been a birder a long time and this is my first time ever seeing a snowy owl."

Birdwatching, or birding as it is also known, is a popular pastime in the United States, with hobbyists typically hiking through forests or camping in rural areas to spot different species of birds.

So the majestic owl's appearance a week ago in the city, much further south than its usual habitat, has proven a magnet.

"You can see the Capitol," said Rose, wrapped in a big winter coat and accompanied by her partner. "It's arresting to have the contrast, the wildness with the city - but especially DC where it's so ... monumental and iconic."

The couple, who hired a babysitter for the special occasion, got a good look at the rare bird, allowing them to mark 'snowy owl' off their 'life list' - a catalogue of every bird they've seen.

Like others staring up at the young female owl, identified by its grey and white plumage, Rosa was alerted to its arrival by eBird, a network used by birdwatchers to signal particularly interesting finds, which logged 200mn observations last year by 290,000 enthusiasts worldwide.

Users had pinpointed the snowy owl near Union Station, a bustling transportation hub just down the road from the Capitol, where a line of taxis curls around a grassy park, criss-crossed with walkways and spotted with tents set up by the homeless.



The snowy owl sits on a flag pole in Washington DC (AFP)

At the centre of the park, on top of a marble fountain, a pair of yellow eyes peer out, searching for an evening snack - most likely one of the capital's countless rats.

An 'Arctic visitor'

One recent visitor was none other than Jacques Pitteloud, Switzerland's Ambassador to the United States and a passionate birdwatcher.

"The snowy owl has been on my list a long time," Pitteloud told AFP, "but it's truly extraordinary to see it in the middle of Washington DC."

"She was truly the superstar of Union Station!"

With broad white wings, these 'birds of snow and ice' are 'like a creature from another world', explained Kevin McGowan, a professor with Cornell University's Lab of Ornithology.

Snowy owls live a good part of the year near the Arctic Circle, but most migrate south for the winter - usually stopping near the US border with Canada.

Its visit so far south to Washington is "like having a polar bear coming by your neighbourhood," said McGowan.

"Snowy owls are such a charismatic bird," noted Scott Weidensaul, the co-leader of Project SNOWstorm, a group that researches and tracks snowy owls.

AFP

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Towering above Liberia’s ramshackle capital Monrovia stands a hotel that once symbolised an African dream yet today lies in ruins, a legacy of brutal conflict.

When it opened its doors in 1960, the Ducor was one of the only five-star hotels in Africa, boasting a night club and air-conditioned rooms, according to travel guides. At its height, it hosted VIPs such as former Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie. Guests would lounge by the swimming pool, sipping cocktails and watching the sun set over the Atlantic.

But the Ducor shut in 1989 at the outbreak of back-to-back civil wars which ran from 1989-1997 and from 1999-2003, and swiftly fell into disrepair.

Today, little of Monrovia bears the visible marks of war, but the Ducor’s decaying hulk stands as a reminder of the conflict that killed over 250,000 people.

The hotel lies in limbo, and even who owns it seems unclear.

The ruin, atop one of the city’s highest hills, looms over Monrovia’s downtown and the densely populated West Point slum.

The former hotel’s rooms have been stripped bare, mildewy walls are pockmarked with bullet and shell holes, and the grounds have become a haunt for drug users.

“It makes everybody sad,” said Ambrose Yebea, a retired tourism ministry official who previously offered tours of the hotel.

Liberia’s government once planned to restore the hotel to its former glory with the help of former Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

But there has been no progress since his downfall in 2011, and time continues to chip away at the Ducor.

Golden age

There were few hotels in Monrovia in the 1950s, according to Yebea, prompting the construction of the Ducor in 1960 to cater to travelling executives and government officials.

Designed by Israeli architect Moshe Mayer, in modernist style, it became one of Africa’s most luxurious hotels.

Then Israeli-foreign minister Golda Meir, who later became prime minister, attended its opening ceremony. As did Guinea’s independence leader Sekou Toure.

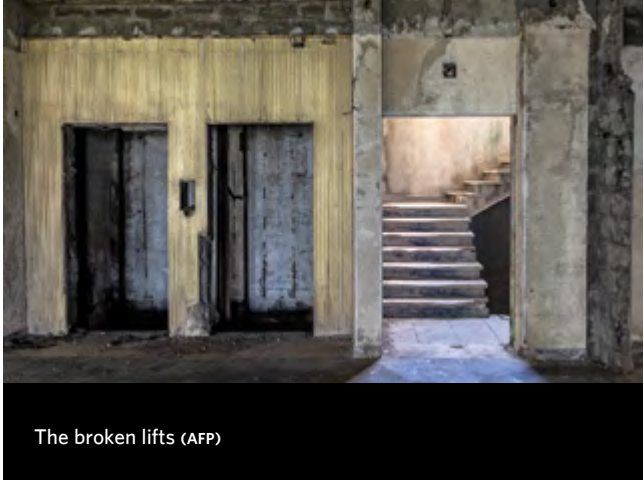
Photos of the hotel from the era show a gleaming building and guests taking life easy.

One of the persistent anecdotes related to the Ducor, which AFP was unable to verify, holds that former Ugandan dictator Idi Amin swam in the pool with his gun.

Another guest, Ivory Coast’s first presi-



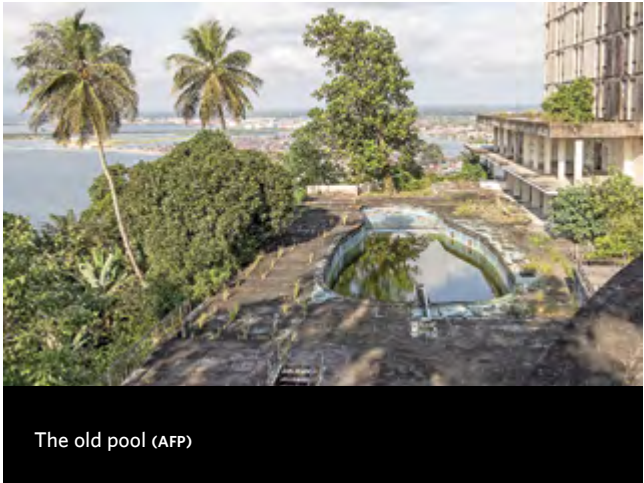
An old lounge area in the dilapidated Ducor hotel in Monrovia - the first five-star hotel in Africa, which opened its doors in 1960 (AFP)



The broken lifts (AFP)



Graffiti on the walls (AFP)



The old pool (AFP)



The West Point slum as can be seen from the hotel (AFP)

dent Felix Houphouet-Boigny, was so taken with the hotel that he arranged for Moshe Mayer to build a similar luxury establishment in Abidjan, which is still in operation.

Many of Africa’s leaders stayed at the Ducor during the 1960s and 70s, including Selassie, Yebea said, with several booking rooms during the 1979 conference of the Organisation of African Unity in Monrovia.

But by that point, the hotel was likely already in decline.

A 1975 World Bank report on Liberia describes the eight-story hotel as ‘quite run-down’ - and mentions government plans to renovate it.

Liberian ex-warlord Charles Taylor positioned gunmen in the Ducor during the 2003 siege of Monrovia, at the close of the war.

Later, squatters occupied the site. But president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who won office in Liberia’s first post-war election, evicted them in 2007.

She then launched renovation plans. In 2011, her government handed the Ducor to the Libyan African Investment Company (LAICO), a subsidiary of Libya’s sovereign wealth fund.

Libyan scheme

According to a 2011 government statement, the renovated hotel was due to have 151 rooms, restaurants, a shopping centre, a tennis court and a casino - as well as provide jobs in the impoverished country.

However, the project - which with another scheme to develop a rubber-processing plant was priced at US\$65mn - then fell foul of another war.

Liberia cut ties with Gadhafi’s Libya in 2011 as the country descended into civil war. Renovation works stopped.

“It came to us as a big shock,” said Frank Williams, a labourer who said he’d been one of 150 people employed by LAICO. “Today we are jobless.”

The project has been at a standstill since, and its future is unclear.

Neither Liberia’s presidency nor its tourism ministry, nor LAICO, responded to several requests for information.

The Libyan entity is under European Union sanctions over its alleged close links to the former Kadhafi regime.

In 2020, the UN Security Council also said that LAICO is struggling financially, incurring debts for the hotels under its management.

Some still hope to see the Ducor reborn.

Ambrose Yebea, the retired tourism official, said it could lure tourists and generate jobs.

“Every Liberian sees it the same way,” he said. “They want it to be refurbished.”

AFP



His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Oman's Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, (centre) with other dignitaries and winners at the Oman-Bahrain Sports Day

Sayyid Theyazin crowns Mussanah event winners

OMAN-BAHRAIN SPORTS DAY

Our correspondent
Muscat

His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Oman's Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, in the presence of His Highness Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al Khalifa, First Deputy Chairman of the Youth and Sports Council, President of the Public Sports Authority and President of the Bahrain Olympic Committee, crowned the winners of the triathlon at the Oman-Bahrain Sports Day event held in Mussanah on Saturday.

Apart from triathlon, in which 75 males and females participated, the event also included paragliding and capoeira.

In the male category, the first three places went to the Kingdom of Bahrain, where Omar Abdullah came in first, Abdul Rahman Mubarak second and Mohammed Mubarak won the third place.

In the female category, the first three places also went to the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Samira Zaid al Bitar took first place, Fatima Abdul Mohsen al Muhaimid came second, and Maryam Mansour al Areeedh ranked third.

The Oman-Bahrain Sports Day event comes within the framework of the strong brotherly relations that bind the two countries and to enhance partnership and cooperation in the sports field.

His Excellency Dr Abdul Rahman Sadiq Askar, CEO of the Public Sports Authority in the Kingdom of Bahrain, stressed the importance of holding such sports events that would contribute to developing the participants' experiences and competition.

He pointed out that cooperation in the field of sports between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Bahrain will continue at all levels, all aspects - technical, administrative or developmental.



Oman, Bahrain sign sports programme pact

Oman and the Kingdom of Bahrain signed an executive programme in the field of sports for the years 2022-2025 with the aim of encouraging the exchange of sports experiences.

The agreement was signed

by His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth and His Highness Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al Khalifa, First Deputy Chairman of the Youth and Sports Council and President of the General Au-

thority Sports and President of the Bahrain Olympic Committee.

It seeks to adopt joint sports programmes that will contribute to the development of the sports scene between the two countries.



England bowler Chris Woakes celebrates after dismissing Marnus Labuschagne (left) on the second day of the Hobart Test on Saturday (AFP)

England fight back with three Australian wickets in final session

THE ASHES

Hobart, Australia - England fought back to take three Australian wickets in the final session but still trail by 152 runs at the end of day two of the fifth and final Ashes Test in Hobart on Saturday.

After conceding a lead of 115 runs when bowled out for 188 in their first innings, the visitors bounced back in the last hour of the night session of the day-night Test.

With an hour to bat before stumps, Australia lost David Warner for his second duck of the match, caught brilliantly by Ollie Pope in the gully off the bowling of Stuart Broad.

Marnus Labuschagne fell for five, caught by wicketkeeper Sam Billings off Chris Woakes, while Mark Wood had Usman Khawaja gloving a short ball to Billings for 11.

At stumps, Australia were 37-3 with Steve Smith on 17 and nightwatchman Scott Boland on three.

Australian captain Pat Cummins said his side had done well not to have lost more wickets.

"They're the kind of night sessions you've got to be careful of in day-night cricket, if you get caught out with the new ball," Cummins said.

"It was warm and humid tonight and the ball seemed to do a little bit more. I think it's a pretty good effort only to be three down in really tough conditions."

Billings, making his Test debut, was optimistic about getting a result.

"We bowled really nicely tonight, we created some opportunities, created a lot of intensity," he said.

"They're in front in the game, but we have a chance to really make a statement and make some inroads in the morning."

England earlier bowled Australia out for 303 on a day when 17 wickets fell for 287 runs.

Australia are still in a commanding position and look likely to win this Test and claim a 4-0 win in the series.

Any hopes England had of salvaging anything from the Ashes realistically ended when their batting collapsed once again in the face of Australia's relentless pace attack.

England lost four key wickets in the middle twilight session, including a horror stretch when Dawid Malan (25), Joe Root (34) and Ben Stokes (4) fell for the addition of just seven runs.

When the final session began, England again lost wickets at regular intervals and only reached 188.

AFP

SCOREBOARD

Australia 1 st Innings 303	
England 1 st Innings 188	
AUSTRALIA 2nd INNINGS	
D Warner	c Pope b Broad 0
U Khawaja	c Billings b Wood 11
M Labuschagne	c Billings b Woakes 5
Steven Smith	not out 17
Scott Boland	not out 3
Extras	(lb 1) 1
TOTAL:	(19 Ov, RR: 1.94) 37/3
Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-5, 3-33	
Bowling: 5 Broad 6-1-9-1, Chris Woakes 5-11-3-1, O Robinson 4-2-5-0, M Wood 4-1-9-1	

Djokovic detained again in Australia, declared catalyst for 'civil unrest'

Melbourne, Australia - Australia returned Novak Djokovic to detention on Saturday, saying the tennis star's opposition to vaccination could cause 'civil unrest' and triggering a high-profile court showdown.

Having once failed to remove the unvaccinated 34-year-old from the country, Australia's conservative government is trying again.

And Djokovic is fighting back for the second time, with a new court appeal scheduled for Sunday. The case will be heard from 9.30am by the full Federal Court of three justices, a format that leaves little room to appeal any decision.

For now, the Serbian ace is back at a notorious Melbourne immigration detention facility after a few short-lived days of freedom following his first successful court appeal.

A motorcade was spotted moving from his lawyers' offices - where he had been kept under guard for most of Saturday - to the former Park Hotel facility.

For millions around the world, the Serbian star is best



Novak Djokovic

known as a gangly all-conquering tennis champion with a ferocious backhand and his anti-vaccine stance.

In court filings, Australia has cast him as a figurehead for anti-vaxxers and a catalyst for potential 'civil unrest' who must be removed in the public interest.

Djokovic's presence in Australia 'may foster anti-vaccination sentiment', immigration minister Alex Hawke argued, justifying his use of broad executive powers to revoke the ace's visa.

Not only could Djokovic encourage people to flout health

rules, Hawke said, but his presence could lead to 'civil unrest'.

So with just two days before the Australian Open begins, the defending champion is again focused on law courts rather than centre court.

After months of speculation about whether Djokovic would get vaccinated to play in Australia, he used a medical exemption to enter the country a week ago, hoping to challenge for a record 21st Grand Slam title at the Open. Many Australians believe Djokovic gamed the system to dodge vaccine entry requirements.

AFP

Virat Kohli steps down as India Test captain

New Delhi, India - Virat Kohli has stepped down as captain of India's Test team, with immediate effect, a day after losing the Test series to South Africa 2-1 with a seven-wicket loss in Cape Town.

Kohli took over as full-time Test captain in early 2015, when M S Dhoni had announced retirement in Australia, and has held the role since then.

Kohli's sudden announcement comes on the back of a recent saga between him and the BCCI, which started with his T20I resignation before the 2021 World Cup.

In early December, the BCCI then stripped Kohli of the ODI captaincy, naming Rohit Sharma the new white-ball leader.

A day later, BCCI president Sourav Ganguly said that he had asked Kohli not to step down as T20I captain, but Kohli soon contradicted Ganguly, saying his decision to step down was 'received well', termed as 'progressive' by the BCCI top brass, and that he 'wasn't told to reconsider' his decision.

Kohli also expressed his disappointment in the same press conference, saying he had been told about his removal as ODI captain just 90 minutes before



Everything has to come to a halt at some stage and for me as Test captain of India, it's now

VIRAT KOHLI

the selection meeting to pick the Test squad for South Africa, and 'there was no prior communication to me at all'.

The controversy stretched further when chief selector Chetan Sharma - while announcing the ODI squad for the South Africa tour on December 31 - said 'everyone who was present in the meeting' asked Kohli to reconsider his decision when he stepped down as T20I captain.

Taking to Twitter on Saturday, Kohli said: 'It's been seven years of hard work, toil and relentless

perseverance everyday to take the team in the right direction. I've done the job with absolute honesty and left nothing out there. Everything has to come to a halt at some stage and for me as Test captain of India, it's now. There have been many ups and also some downs along the journey, but never has there been a lack of effort or lack of belief. I have always believed in giving my 120 per cent in everything I do, and if I can't do that, I know it's not the right thing to do. I have absolute clarity in my heart

and I cannot be dishonest to my team.

'I want to thank the BCCI for giving me the opportunity to lead my country for such a long period of time and more importantly to all the team-mates who bought into the vision I had for the team from day one and never gave up in any situation. You guys have made this journey so memorable and beautiful. To Ravi Bhai [Shastri] and the support group who were the engine behind this vehicle that moved us upwards in Test cricket consistently, you all have played a massive role in bringing this vision to life. Lastly, a big thank you to M S Dhoni who believed in me as a captain and found me to be an able individual who could take Indian cricket forward.'

Kohli's stint as Test captain was a largely successful one, as he oversaw the team's rise to No.1 in the ICC rankings and several memorable overseas victories. In 2021, he led India to the final of the inaugural World Test Championship in Southampton. Overall, he steps down with the fourth-most wins as captain in Test cricket, with 40 wins from 68 games. Of the other 28, 11 were draws and 17 were losses. Cricinfo



Aslan Karatsev celebrates with the trophy after winning against Andy Murray in the Sydney Classic men's final, in Sydney on Saturday (AFP)

Red-hot Karatsev downs Murray to win Sydney title

Sydney, Australia - World number 20 Aslan Karatsev produced a masterclass Saturday to power past Andy Murray in the Sydney Classic final, signalling his intent of making another deep run at the Australian Open.

The No.1 seed won 6-3, 6-3 in one hour and 31 minutes, hitting 29 winners in a near-flawless performance that left the three-time Grand Slam champion out of answers.

"Thanks to my team we are doing an amazing job," Karatsev said during the awards presenta-

tion. Karatsev created history at last year's Australian Open after becoming the first Grand Slam debutant to reach a semi-final since the Open era began in 1968.

After his emphatic victory, the 28-year-old will be confident entering Melbourne Park having stymied Murray's bid to win a title for the first time since 2019.

"First time back in a final for three years, it's been a long road," an emotional Murray said at the presentation.

Murray, who has been given a

wildcard into next week's Australian Open, had been encouraged by his play heading into a Grand Slam where he has finished as runner-up five times.

But Murray, who had undergone career-saving hip surgery, was blown off the court by the red-hot Russian.

His serve was under immediate pressure as Karatsev muscled him around the court to gain the break in the opening game.

Karatsev continued to stand and deliver, piercing the lines to run Murray ragged.

A double fault from the Scot handed Karatsev the first set and the Russian then stormed to a 3-0 lead. Murray showed trademark fight and had opportunities to break in an epic fifth game but Karatsev held on and then motored to victory.

Karatsev, who had knocked out Murray's British compatriot Dan Evans in a three-set semi-final thriller on Friday, plays world number 72 Jaume Munar of Spain in the first round of the Australian Open.

AFP



Thanasi Kokkinakis

Adelaide local Kokkinakis wins his first ATP title

Adelaide, Australia - Home favourite Thanasi Kokkinakis claimed the first ATP title of his career on Saturday after downing fellow big-server Arthur Rinderknech in three sets at the Adelaide International final.

The Australian prevailed 6-7 (8/6), 7-6 (7/5), 6-3 in two hours and 38 minutes.

"I wouldn't want to win my first title anywhere else... I've been practising on this court since I was nine years old," Kokkinakis said at the awards presentation.

In-form Kokkinakis had beaten former US Open champion Marin Cilic in a three-set semi-final nerve-jangler on Friday in what has been an impressive start to what he hopes is a breakout season. In his first final in five years, Kokkinakis overcame the Frenchman's pyrotechnics with the help of his home fans.

Little separated the big-servers in a first set that predictably had to be decided by a tie break.

After winning the tie break, his momentum carried over into the third set. He broke his title drought in the ninth game.

AFP

Paula Badosa wins Sydney Classic title

Sydney, Australia - Paula Badosa issued an ominous warning ahead of the Australian Open by beating French Open champion Barbora Krejickova in a three-set thriller to win the Sydney Classic on Saturday.

The world number nine from Spain prevailed 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (7/4) in two hours and 22 minutes after hitting 32 winners and 12 aces.

"We both went to the limit today. We both broke into the top 100 a few years ago and now we are playing in a big final," Badosa said after defeating the fourth-ranked Czech.

They are on course to meet again at the quarter-finals of the Australian Open when it starts next week.

The 24-year-old Badosa is eyeing a breakout Grand Slam tilt with her quarter-final effort in last year's French Open - which Krejickova won - her deepest run at a major.

She will enter Melbourne Park

confident after her third straight victory over Krejickova, having won both their previous matches in straight sets last year.

This was far tougher with an aggressive Krejickova confidently approaching the net early, but it failed to rattle Badosa, who drew first blood.

Krejickova edged ahead early in the second set and overcame service wobbles to force a decider.

Sticking to the script, the topsy-turvy contest saw Badosa gain an early break of serve before Krejickova immediately hit back. But Krejickova was on the brink and two points from defeat in the 10th game before serving strongly to prolong the contest.

They showed no signs of fatigue, upping the ante with superb winners in a tense tie break.

Badosa, however, kept her composure and fell to the ground in celebration after Krejickova's forehand slammed into the net.

AFP



Paula Badosa with the trophy after defeating Barbora Krejickova (AFP)

Barty hopes 'tough lessons' bring Australian Open title



Ashleigh Barty of Australia speaks at a press conference ahead of the Australian Open at Melbourne Park, in Melbourne on Saturday (AFP)

Melbourne, Australia - World number one Ashleigh Barty hopes that some 'tough lessons' will help propel the home favourite to a first Australian Open title.

The 25-year-old is strongly fancied to be crowned champion in two weeks' time, breaking her duck at a tournament where she has never gone beyond the semi-finals. She fired a warning to the rest of the field by claiming the

singles and doubles titles in Adelaide last week and is full of confidence.

Recently engaged to her long-time boyfriend, Barty said she was at ease heading into her home Slam despite the weight of expectation and being number one seed.

"I know I say it a lot - regardless of the number next to my name, that doesn't change the way we approach it. Particularly

here in Australia, it's exciting," Barty said on Saturday.

Barty won the French Open in 2019 and Wimbledon last year to finish the season as world number one after winning five titles.

It elevated her alongside Steffi Graf, Martina Navratilova, Serena Williams and Chris Evert as the only women to finish as the top-ranked player for three consecutive years.

The humble Australian said she was constantly learning despite being in such distinguished company.

"Each and every match I learn. Every experience I learn from, whether it's good, bad or indifferent," she said.

"You have to be able to take learnings from every experience. That's certainly been no different here in Australia - I've had some pretty tough lessons, but also some incredible moments. Hopefully that puts me in good stead for another year, another crack here, and we just keep going."

AFP

Medvedev ready to beat anyone in Australian Open

Melbourne, Australia - US Open champion Daniil Medvedev declared on Saturday that he is mentally and physically ready for the Australian Open and capable of beating anybody.

The Russian second seed looms as the player to beat if Melbourne title-holder Novak Djokovic loses his fight against deportation from Australia.

Djokovic is still in the men's draw for next week but faces deportation after the Australian government cancelled his visa for a second time.

Medvedev is feeling comfortable in his own skin having blown away the world number one in straight sets to win his first Grand Slam crown at the US Open last year. The 25-year-old is confident of going one better after losing to Djokovic in last year's Australian final.

"I've had a lot of time to prepare for the Australian Open,"

Medvedev told reporters, two days before the first Slam of the year. "I still have two days more to prepare well. I'm feeling ready physically and mentally. That's the most important thing. That's when I can play good and beat anybody."

Medvedev said his US Open breakthrough has given him the confidence to win more Grand Slams.

"Sometimes before tournaments I could be a little bit concerned, nervous and sometimes angry if I was not playing well," he said.

"It (US Open) did change this. Now I feel like I know even more what I can do, how I can play, what I have to do to play like this.

"In general, the US Open title has given me a lot of confidence, in my life and in my tennis as well. I'm feeling much more confident than last year in terms of knowing my game, what I'm capable of."

AFP



Oman's Zubair hits fifth place in Hankook 24H Dubai

Dubai, UAE - Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair and the Al Manar Racing by HRT Team claimed fifth position in the Hankook 24H Dubai at the Dubai Autodrome on Saturday afternoon.

Zubair teamed up with Dutchman Indy Dontje, Germany's driver Luca Stolz and Austrian Martin Konrad in the second of two Mercedes-AMG GT3's run by the Haupt Racing Team.

They finished seven laps behind the leading Audi R8 LMS GT3 after completing 589 tours of the Dubai circuit, said a press statement.

The sister Abu Dhabi Racing by HRT car finished fourth in the hands of team owner Hubert Haupt, Khaled al Qubaisi, Raffaele Marciello and Manuel Metzger, with the outright race win after 596 laps and 24 hours of demanding racing falling to MS7 by WRT's Mohammed Saud Fahad al Saud, Axcil Jefferies, Dries Vanthoor, Christopher Mies and Thomas Neubauer.

"The race was a very good one, definitely a tough one," Zubair said after the race.

"Coming into the Pro category, we knew there was going to be a lot of tough teams. But from practice and qualifying, my team did a really great job, the team and all the drivers.

"We really felt that we had a chance for the win but we had fuel pump issues and lost three laps. From then on, the chance of victory had gone. Definitely a tough one, but finishing fifth out of 82 cars and in the Pro category in my first 24 Hours is something that I should feel proud of."

The crew began the race strongly and held fifth place throughout much of the first sec-



Al-Manar Racing Mercedes competes in the Hankook 24H Dubai at the Dubai Autodrome on Saturday afternoon (Supplied photo)



Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair (Supplied photo)

tor behind the two WRT and MS7 by WRT Audis, their third-placed team-mates in the Abu Dhabi Racing by HRT Mercedes and Barwell Motorsport's Lamborghini Huracan.

With just over six hours of the race run, the leading Audi had completed 133 laps and Al Manar Racing's Mercedes was a mere one and a half laps adrift. The team pitted soon after-

The race was definitely a tough one. But my team and all the drivers did a really great job

AL FAISAL
AL ZUBAIR

wards and slipped to 12th with Zubair taking over driving duties into the early evening. The Omani was swiftly back up to 11th.

With less than ten hours to go, as dawn broke over the Dubai circuit, the had climbed back to fifth place with Zubair at the wheel, 343 laps into the race and two laps behind.

But the quartet were not able to reduce the deficit during the

morning and through the closing stages of the race and were forced to settle for fifth overall.

The team qualified the Mercedes-AMG GT3 in third place on Friday afternoon with an average of the best three laps of 1min 59.060sec.

Pole position fell to Team WRT's Audi R8 LMS GT3, with Zubair's team-mates Haupt, Qubaisi, Marciello and Metzger lining up in second place on the front row of the grid.

The Al-Manar Racing Mercedes was a mere 0.375 seconds off pole position.

Teams were then permitted to carry out night-time practice on the Dubai Autodrome circuit.

Al-Manar racing Mercedes ran for 35 laps and was classified in sixth place with the fastest lap of the session set by Sainteloc Racing's Audi R8 LMS GT3.



Ghana's Andre Ayew (right) fights for the ball with Gabon's Andre Poko (centre) during the AFCON Group C match in Yaounde on Friday (AFP)

Andre Ayew jibe after Ghana held as Morocco qualify for AFCON last 16

Yaoundé, Cameroon - Ghana captain Andre Ayew dismissed Gabon as a 'small team' as a controversial late equaliser saw Friday's Africa Cup of Nations clash between the sides finish 1-1 after title contenders Morocco secured their place in the last 16.

Ayew's fine early strike had the four-time champions on course to claim their first win in Group C only for Jim Allevinah to blast in a superb 88th-minute equaliser that put Gabon on the brink of the next round but left Ghana's hopes on a knife-edge.

The Black Stars were furious that Gabon scored after opting not to return the ball when Ghana put it out of play as midfielder Daniel-Kofi Kyereh went down injured. "It was very small of them, but then that is how it is with small teams," Ayew said.

Senegal held

Ghana have just one point, with Gabon on four and Morocco on the maximum six from two matches after defeating tournament debutants the Comoros 2-0 earlier in the same Stade Ahmadou Ahidjo in Yaounde.

Selim Amallah gave the 1976 champions an early lead and then set up substitute Zakaria Aboukhalil to seal the win a minute from time.

Morocco need just a draw against Gabon to finish as group winners while the Comoros, the Indian Ocean island nation, are still looking for their first goal and point at their first ever Cup of Nations.

After losing the 2019 final to Algeria, Senegal have high hopes of finally winning a first continental title in Cameroon but they needed a 97th-minute Sadio Mane penalty to beat Zimbabwe 1-0 in their opening game and on Friday they drew 0-0 with west African neighbours Guinea.

Senegal and Guinea sit on four points while Malawi are just behind them after coming from behind to triumph 2-1 against Zimbabwe. Appearing at only their third Cup of Nations, Malawi's Flames claimed just their second ever win at the finals and will go into their last game against Senegal with a chance of making the knockout stages.

AFP

No 'hiding' place for Lukaku as De Bruyne strike stretches Man City's lead

Manchester, UK - Chelsea boss Thomas Tuchel voiced his frustration at Romelu Lukaku after Kevin De Bruyne's brilliant strike beat the Blues 1-0 to open up a 13-point lead at the top of the table.

A tale of two Belgian internationals saw Lukaku spurn a chance to silence his critics early in the second half before De Bruyne produced the one outstanding moment of quality in the game by curling home from outside the box.

A 12th consecutive league win for the champions strengthens City's grip on the title race as they streak towards a fourth league crown in five seasons.

Chelsea got the better of Pep Guardiola's men in last season's Champions League final, but securing their place in Europe's top club competition next season now looks like the height of their ambitions for the rest of the Premier League season.

The Blues remain second but have won just one of their last six



Manchester City's Kevin De Bruyne (left) celebrates after scoring a goal during the match against Chelsea, in Manchester on Saturday (AFP)

league games. "Our offensive players need to show up more. We need consistency. Chelsea is not a place to hide," said Tuchel. Lukaku was supposed to be the final piece required to turn the European champions into challengers for City's title over the long haul.

But he has scored just twice in his last 11 league appearances ei-

ther side of being dropped for voicing his unhappiness at how the season has gone since a club-record £98mn move from Inter Milan to Italian media.

And Tuchel rejected suggestions the striker is starved of service.

"Sometimes he needs to do the service," added the German. "He had many ball losses with-

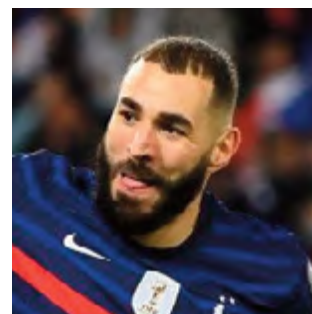
out any pressure. He had a big chance. Of course we want to serve him but the performance up front, we have to do much better."

City dominated possession throughout but struggled to open up a makeshift Chelsea defence featuring second-choice goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga and Malang Sarr on just his second Premier League appearance.

"We cannot forget who we played, they are European champions, and how incredible a side they are," said Guardiola. "They defended well, they waited for transition to punish us and we won from one transition."

City's one clear chance before the break came from a Chelsea mistake. Mateo Kovacic's pass deflected off De Bruyne into the path of Jack Grealish, but the most expensive English player of all-time missed the chance to mark his biggest moment yet as a City player as his shot was turned behind by Arrizabalaga.

AFP



Karim Benzema

Benzema crowns France comeback with player of the year prize

Paris, France - Karim Benzema has crowned his surprising rehabilitation with Les Bleus by being named France Football's national player of the year.

The Real Madrid striker was recalled by France coach Didier Deschamps after being dropped by him in late 2015 following a scandal involving a sex tape featuring a former teammate.

"It had been almost six years since I last played, I had to feel my way a little, watch, adapt. It didn't take long," Benzema, who turned 34 in December, said.

AFP

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