



H M issues two Royal Decrees

Royal Decrees establish embassy in Singapore, appoint ambassadors

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq issued two Royal Decrees on Monday reading as follows:

Royal Decree No. 97/2022 establishes an embassy of Oman in the Republic of Singapore.

Article 1 establishes an embassy of the Sultanate of Oman in the Republic of Singapore.

Article 2 cancels Royal Decree No 111/2010 on establishing a consulate general for the Sultanate of Oman in the Republic of Singapore.

Article 3 says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from

its date of issue.

Royal Decree No. 98/2022 appoints ambassadors.

Article 1 grants the title of ambassador to the following and determines their placements:

● Plenipotentiary Minister **Sheikh Mohammed Ahmed Salim al Shanfari** as Oman's Ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia.

● Plenipotentiary Minister **Eng Nasser Said Abdullah al Manwari** as Oman's Ambassador to the Republic of the Philippines.

● **Issa Saleh Abdullah al Shibani** as Oman's Ambassador to the Republic of India.

Article 1 says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

ONA

'Digital polls a quantum leap in electoral process'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The voter turnout of 39.42 per cent in the municipal council elections held on Sunday is a normal rate, H E Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidi, chairman of the main committee for the elections and Undersecretary in the Ministry of Interior, stated on Monday.

H E Busaidi, addressing a press conference along with other members of the election committee on the success of the electoral process, added that the Ministry of Interior is working on evaluating and reviewing the voter turnout.

In the last municipal council elections held in 2016, when the whole process was manual and the voters had to go to the polling booths to exercise their franchise, the turnout was 39.85 per cent.

H E Busaidi said that the Ministry of Interior had sought to make a quantum leap in the use of the latest digital technologies in order to facilitate candidates and voters alike in the electoral process. "Employing digital technologies in line with the government's digital transformation programme is a priority of the information and communication technology as laidout in Oman Vision 2040," he stated.



Employing technologies in line with the government's digital transformation programme is a priority

H E KHALID BIN HILAL AL BUSAIDI

Till Monday evening there were no objection to the election results, he pointed out. This indicates that the process - for being foolproof - had negligible scope for any objection.

An objection request can be submitted online via the Ministry of Interior's website during the legally specified period.

"The use of smartphones for

voting also contributed to reducing the overall financial cost of the electoral process," H E Busaidi added.

H E Dr Ali bin Amer al Shidhani, Undersecretary for Communications and Information Technology in the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, and chairman of the Technical Com-

mittee of the elections, informed that no challenges were witnessed on the technical side of voting.

H E Sayyid Hamoud Faisal al Busaidi, Minister of Interior, after the results were announced on Sunday, congratulated the winning candidates. He wished the members success in performing their missions.

He also thanked all parties that contributed to the success of the elections - the government departments, the private sector establishments, the members of the preparatory and organisational committees and all others who were involved in the process.

► NEWS BRIEF

STATE COUNCIL DISCUSSES DRAFT EDUCATION LAWS
Muscat - The State Council presented its observations on the draft versions of the School Education Law and the Higher Education Law on Monday.

This was done in preparation for submitting the draft laws to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, along with the opinions of the State Council and the Majlis A'Shura.

The deliberations took place during a session held under the auspices of Sheikh Abdulmalik Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council. The discussions highlighted the need to regulate the provision of education laws in line with Oman Vision 2040, as well as the aspirations of the Omani society.



GCC debt issuances drop on higher oil income



US blizzard leaves 32 dead; power outages bring chaos

SQU runs Mwasalat bus using its own biodiesel

Our Correspondent
Muscat

With an aim to achieve zero carbon neutrality and finding renewable and sustainable sources of energy, a research team from the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) succeeded in running a public transport bus powered by biofuel, a first of its kind initiative in Oman.

SQU, in cooperation with the National Transport Company (Mwasalat), on Monday took the 'Green Bus' around the city, marking a successful real-world testing of the project.

The biodiesel engineered by the SQU research team is mixed with oil extracts from date palm seeds, making it a greener fuel than the conventional diesel.

The Green Bus project is part of an agreement between SQU and Mwasalat under which the SQU research team will be using one of the Mwasalat buses for testing in order to assess the quality of biodiesel in addition to providing technical support, exchanging technical expertise and implementing a number of related initiatives to-



gether with the transporter.

The inauguration of the Green Bus was held under the patronage of H H Sayyid Dr Fahad bin al Julanda al Said, Vice-Chancellor of SQU.

The trip started from the Sultan Qaboos University Cultural Centre in Al Khoudh and ran through the Sultan Qaboos Street to reach the Al Alam Palace, before returning back to the starting point.

"The project reflects the importance of cooperation and coordination among scientific research institutions, the government and private sectors in implementing this type of national initiative seeking to achieve a number of strategic goals," H H Dr Said asserted.

Elaborating on the details, he said that the project aims to produce biodiesel by mixing extracts from date seeds using an

innovative recyclable chemical catalyst, to reduce the production costs so as to make it commercially viable.

"The project will contribute to achieving zero carbon neutrality, finding renewable and sustainable sources of energy and support creating opportunities for economic and social growth, besides helping to achieve sustainable development and limiting the conse-

quences of the climate change."

The SQU research team has also obtained funding from the Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) to work on the second phase of the project to produce 100 litres of biodiesel, in addition to conducting further experiments to produce glycerol, solketal, and other similar compounds to raise the economic

The project reflects the importance of this type of national initiative seeking to achieve a number of strategic goals

H H SAYYID DR FAHAD AL SAID



value of the project.

The research project is led by a SQU scientific team involving Dr Lamia bint Adnan al Hajji, associate professor in the College of Science, and Professor Dr Alaa Hamid al Muhtasib, Deputy Director of the Sustainable Energy Research Centre at the university.

Visitors to Oman increase by 145% in November: NCSI data

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's tourism sector received a shot in the arm with the onset of the winter season, as hordes of foreign tourists started arriving in the sultanate from November itself.

In November this year, 273,014 people visited the sultanate compared to 111,432 in November last year, presenting a significant 145 per cent growth, according to the National Centre



for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The number of visitors in Oman reached 2.5mn till November, while 4.7mn people from the sultanate travelled outside, the NCSI data showed.

According to the latest figures, the GCC citizens were among the top nationalities that visited the sultanate till November, followed by Indian, Yemeni, Pakistani and German citizens. While 1.4mn people from the GCC visited Oman till November, there were

292,000 Indian; 98,000 Yemeni; 65,000 Pakistani and 75,000 German visitors.

Following the rise in tourist arrivals, revenues of 3-5 star hotels surged by 91.7 per cent to reach RO161.2mn till November this year, as per the monthly statistical bulletin of tourism indicators issued by the NCSI.

The number of guests in the 3-5 star hotels increased by 33.9 per cent till November compared to the same period in 2021, while occupancy rate grew

by 18.2 per cent.

The number of guests from the GCC states increased till November by 418.8 per cent to 145,192 compared to 27,945 guests during the corresponding period in 2021.

European guests recorded an increase of 327 per cent.

The number of Omani guests in hotels, however, decreased by 14.9 per cent, from 756,661 at the end of November 2021 to 643,859 until November this year.

Ministry launches sports initiative for elderly women

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MCSY) recently launched an initiative 'Harakatek Barakah' or 'Your Movement is a Blessing' with an aim to spread awareness of sports activities among elderly women.

"Harakatek Baraka is the first of its kind initiative for women's sports in Oman," Khawla bint Rashid al Rawahi, head of sports activities in the Women's Sports Department at MCSY, told *Muscat Daily*.

Under the initiative, more than 60 elderly women recently participated in the first recreational sports day at Sultan Qaboos Complex in Bausher in the capital city of Muscat, she said.

The ministry, in cooperation with the students from the Department of Physical Education and Sports Sciences at the Sultan Qaboos University, and the women's scouts from the Muscat Club, managed and organ-



Under the initiative, more than 60 elderly women recently participated in the first recreational sports day at Sultan Qaboos Complex

KHAWLA BINT RASHID AL RAWAHI

ised the event, Khawla informed.

According to her, the event included many games and tug of war. There were several competitions as well for which prizes were given to the winners.

In addition to a lecture on health and nutrition, a health corner had also been set up to disseminate information and guidelines on health issues related to elderly women.

ture and community awareness through promotion of recreational activities among all members of the society.

"It accords special attention to elderly women so as to encourage them to engage in various sports activities."

Talking of the future plans, she said that the ministry seeks to hold the event annually.

"Similar events will be held in all governorates in the coming days," she added.

RO1,000 fine for online promotion without licence

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Qais Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), has issued a decision (No 619/ 2022) this week to regulate business activities involving marketing and promotion of merchandise via websites and social media.

The decision makes it mandatory for the promoters of products and services seeking to use social media as a platform to obtain a licence from the ministry.

The decision excludes people engaged in non-profit activities, like charity or voluntary services, as well as those merchants promoting his/her own products or services.

As per the decision, an administrative fine not exceeding RO1,000 will be imposed on anyone who violates the pro-



visions of the decision.

The decision was issued on December 21, and will take effect 90 days after the date of its publication in the Official Gazette.

The decision states that an applicant's request may be finalised within 15 days from the date the authorised department receives the necessary documents.

Once the licence application is approved, the department will issue a three-year licence, renewable, to enable the applicant to practise e-marketing and promotional activities.



EA plants 3,000 mangrove saplings in Muscat's Wadi al Arsh Khor

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Environment Authority (EA) on Monday planted 3,000 mangrove saplings in Wadi al Arsh Khor in Muscat governorate.

A statement issued by EA said, 'As part of its efforts to plant ten million trees, the authority, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, planted

3,000 saplings of mangrove trees in Wadi al Arsh Khor in the wilayat of Seeb.

In July this year, EA embarked on a mission to produce 500,000 mangrove saplings in Al Wusta governorate. Mangroves are considered to have a significant impact in maintaining ecological balance and preserving beaches from erosion; while helping the growth of commercially valuable fish and other marine creatures around them.

From January 2020, EA in co-operation with the Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) has also been pursuing a target to plant 10mn wild tree saplings in ten years.

The authority said that the wild tree species will include ghaf, al samar and sidr, for which nurseries are being set up.

Revamped e-Health portal launched

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its digital transformation mission, the Ministry of Health launched a revamped e-Health portal at a ceremony held at the Grand Millennium Hotel in Muscat on Monday.

The ceremony was held under the auspices of H E Dr Hilal Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, and in the presence of H E Dr Fatima Mohammed al Ajmi, Undersecretary in the MoH for Administrative, Financial, and Planning Affairs, along with a number of Directors General at the ministry, and heads of information technology from various directorates and hospitals.

In his address to the gathering, H E Dr Sabti stressed that the ministry "is committed to its Digital Transformation Plan (2021-25) and implementation of digital initiatives in the health sector".

He added that ministry was determined to complete the project of the National Digital Health Strategy in order to consolidate efforts of various sectors.



MoH emphasises on the importance of integrating artificial intelligence to boost health services

H E DR HILAL ALI AL SABTI

The Minister emphasised on the importance of integrating artificial intelligence in the health

sector to boost the services.

"The ministry is also keen to enact laws and regulations to share medical record data with the public and private health institutions," he pointed out.

The launch event highlighted the basic functioning of the portal, with the authorities explaining the details of the services that the ministry would extend through this platform.

During the event, the methodology of streamlining e-services and the implementation and development plan for the project were also reviewed, besides having a detailed presentation on digital health.

According to the ministry, the first phase of the MoH Digital Transformation would focus on automating the electronic health services in the Directorate General of Private Health Establishments, Pharmaceutical Affairs and Drug Control, in addition to Medial Staff Licensing, and other services linked to businesses and individuals involved in the sector.

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Are smartphones making us smarter?

Shaddad al Musalmi
Muscat

Whether smartphones are making individuals smart or dumb can be a different debate altogether. But that this device is making the world smarter is nobody's doubt.

Smart devices are needed for smart governance and the just held municipal council elections are a pointer towards this direction.

As Sunday's elections for 11 civic bodies were conducted via smartphones, all ROP services and bank transactions are too being done mostly through e-services - making use of technology that is completely customisable now.

While your phones may be preloaded with apps to help you perform your day-to-day activities efficiently, the increased use of apps has been evident in Oman's government services.

With regards to the municipal council elections, H E Sayyid Hamoud Faisal al Busaidi, Minister of Interior, recently said that the government embarked on the modernisation of election



procedures in line with its vision towards digital transition.

"The new high-accuracy application was launched ensuring both secrecy and cybersecurity. This process is fully reliant on artificial intelligence accessible via

smartphones to enable the voters from Oman and abroad alike to elect their preferred candidates," he said.

H E Sayyid Hamoud stressed that both voting and sorting operations contributed to saving

time and effort, besides minimising its financial implications.

"The procedures were streamlined for voters, candidates contesting the elections and the supervising committees," he said.

With e-governance increasingly becoming helpful in the growth story, the concerns of naysayers about 'too much application' of technology are found to be not based on reality.

"There is no proof that digital technology or our phones harm our biological cognitive abilities. Smartphones function as an

plex tasks than we could with our abilities," he added.

Khan, however, from a developer's standpoint, added, "Today's developers are using ready frameworks and plug-ins to achieve development goals in a shorter time.

"In order to meet these shorter timelines, newer devel-

functionalities. So, things are getting easier now than ever."

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology recently announced that the digital transformation programme (2022) included launching of the first phase of the National Unified e-Government Services Portal, unrolling 88 e-services rendered to citizens and businesses, and streamlining procedures and re-engineering of 70 per cent of basic e-government services.

In the context of the Royal Directives to continue boosting digital competence and preparedness and to accelerate the pace of e-government transformation, His Majesty the Sultan during his meeting with the Council of Ministers in December 2020 reaffirmed his constant follow-up of the efforts exerted by the government.

During the meeting, His Majesty directed the speedy implementation of the National Unified e-Government Services Portal to serve as a composite platform incorporating all government services.

Smartphones function as an auxiliary tool, which only enhances our horizon to calculate in bigger numbers and store more information

ATA ALI KHAN

auxiliary tool, which only enhances our horizon to memorise more, to calculate in bigger numbers, to store more information and present them whenever we need them," said Ata Ali Khan, Partner Equinox, who funds IT companies.

"Additionally, smart technology augments decision making skills that we would be hard pressed to accomplish on our own. Supplemented by technology, we are actually capable of accomplishing much more com-

operators begin coding with framework without having fundamental of code. While the technology does enable a smarter audience, developers are getting dumber by the day."

Tariq al Barwani, an Omani IT expert, is of the view that phones are getting smarter and not people. "We are not getting smarter but life is getting easier because of technology. Previously phones were dumb but now they are becoming smarter and things are getting easier because of their

MAFWR to establish Mahout port in Al Wusta



Our Correspondent
Muscat

With an aim to develop the fisheries sector and support fishermen, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has decided to establish a port in Mahout in the Governorate of Al Wusta.

The ministry has invited specialised companies to provide consultancy work to set up the port and buildings of the fishermen's village in the Sarab area in the wilayat of Mahout as well as buildings in the fishermen's village in the wilayat of Ras Mudrakah in Al Wusta.

The deadline for submitting bids is January 19, 2023.

Fish production declines, value up

The efforts of MAFWR to enhance the contribution of the fisheries to the national economy have been rewarded with a 3.1 per cent growth in the value of the total fish production till the end of September.

The total value of the fish pro-

duction in Oman reached RO294.361mn till the end of September this year, compared to the same period in 2021, according to the latest data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

However, the total volume of fish produced during the first nine months of the year was 489,218 tonnes, registering a decline of 20.8 per cent compared to the same period last year, when it stood at 617,772 tonnes.

Artisanal fishing, which constitutes the largest share of Oman's fish production, recorded a drop of 23.2 per cent at 455,476 tonnes by the end of September this year, compared to 593,341 tonnes during the same period in 2021.

The Governorate of Al Wusta marked the highest fish landing through artisanal fishing as it stood at 161,684 tonnes, posting a decline of 33.6 per cent by the end of September this year compared to the corresponding period in 2021.

The Governorate of South

Sharqiyah came second with production reaching 142,843 tonnes, however against a drop of 26.7 per cent by the end of September, as compared to the same period last year.

Dhofar governorate recorded third largest production of 43,579 tonnes, even though its volume of production decreased by 15.9 per cent this year.

However, fish production through artisanal fishing in the Governorate of Muscat increased by 22.7 per cent by the end of September, with a total production of 25,610 tonnes, compared to 20,870 tonnes during the same period in 2021.

The statistics showed that the commercial and coastal fishing sectors recorded a growth of 8.6 per cent and 42.2 per cent respectively, until the end of September.

Small pelagic fishes constituted the largest share of artisanal fishing by the end of September as it stood at 222,072 tonnes, comprising a drop by 33.2 per cent compared to the same period in 2021.

Ministry launches project to diversify strains of mountain goats in N Sharqiyah, Dakhliyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to support the livestock sector in the sultanate, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has launched a new project to increase and diversify the strains of Omani goats.

An official at MAFWR said that the project funded by the Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund "aims to establish small and medium enterprises for the breeding of mountain goats in North Sharqiyah and Dakhliyah governorates".

"The ministry will provide 100 female mountain goats and five male goats of the same strain," the official informed.

According to him, the initiative targets the wilayats of Bidbid,



Samail and Izki in Dakhliyah, and Ibra, Mudhaibi, Dima Wa al Taien in North Sharqiyah.

The ministry has laid down a few conditions for those who wish to participate in the project. The participant should be an Omani, having an experience in

raising goats, and should give full-time to the project.

He/she must provide agricultural land of not less than two acres and establish sheds on an area of not less than of 500sqm with a permanent source of water.

Livestock vaccination

MAFWR has started the first phase of livestock vaccination in Dhahirah governorate as part of its National Project for Livestock Immunisation, with over 29,000 animals having being immunised already.

The campaign targets 29 villages across the governorate and it will continue until the end of March 2023.

An official in the ministry said, "The campaign aims to immunise livestock, reduce infection and prevent common disease transmission between animals and human beings. The programme also aims to provide vaccination to the largest number to protect herds from epidemics, including plague, smallpox and foot-and-mouth disease that cause great economic losses."

Egyptian Navy commander visits MSC



Muscat - Vice Admiral Ashraf Ibrahim Atwa, Commander of the Egyptian Navy, along with a military delegation accompanying him and the Defence Attaché of the Egyptian Embassy in Muscat, visited the Maritime Security Centre (MSC) on Monday.

The guests were accompanied by Rear Admiral Saif Nasser al Rahbi, Commander of the Royal Navy of Oman. Upon their arrival, the guests were greeted by Commodore Adil Hamoud al Busaidi, Head of MSC.

During the visit, the guests

toured the centre's facilities and viewed its latest equipment and technologies used in carrying out its national duties. They were also briefed on the tactical roles and tasks carried out by the centre in the safety of the maritime environment.

Separately, MSC was also visited by a delegation of the College of Defence of the State of Qatar, headed by Brigadier Rajeh Mohammed Aqeel al Thabit.

The guests were greeted by Commodore Busaidi upon their arrival at the centre.

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MARKET WATCH	
MSX30	4,831.15
Sensex	60,566.42
FOREX RATES (RO1 equals)	
Indian	214.97
Pakistan	587.91
Bangladesh	274.96
Philippines	143.12
Sri Lanka	949.22
*Rates as on December 26 Source: xe.com	

BRIEFS

India's PhonePe completes separation from Flipkart

Flipkart and PhonePe announced the full-ownership separation of PhonePe, India's leading digital payments platform, from the e-commerce giant.

Establishing these businesses as individual entities will allow both to chart their own growth paths, as they continue building industry-leading offerings that provide access and inclusion for Indians, the joint statement of companies said.

Flipkart Group acquired PhonePe in 2016. The joint statement claimed that it was today India's largest digital payments platform. It said over 400mn registered users, more than one in four Indians are now using PhonePe.

Since its launch, it said it successfully digitised more than 35 million offline merchants spread across Tier II, III, IV cities.

GCC debt issuances drop on higher oil income, rising interest rates

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Higher oil income significantly improved economic and fiscal outlooks of the GCC countries this year and sharply reduced the borrowing needs of sovereigns and corporates in the region. As a result, fixed income debt issuances in the GCC recorded a steep decline during 2022.

As GCC sovereigns are expected to report fiscal surpluses for 2022, fixed income debt issuances in the region have dropped by 41 per cent year-to-date this year, according to a report released by Kuwait-based asset management firm Kamco Invest.

"Fixed income issuances in the GCC witnessed a steep decline during 2022 led by lower issuances from both sovereigns and corporates. The decline in government issuances mainly reflected higher oil prices that lowered the funding requirements. On the corporate side, the decline was led by rising interest rates as well as high equity valuations that made raising funds from the equity markets more enticing verses the bond



market," Kamco said.

On the economic front, Kamco said, the GCC governments are expected to record one of the highest annual GDP growth rates this year led by thriving economic activity post the pandemic, in addition to elevated government spending in the project market.

"According to consensus estimates, GCC economies are expected to clock a GDP growth rate of 7.3 per cent in 2022 as compared to 2.5 per cent in 2021. Growth in 2023 and 2024 are expected to be relatively

smaller at 3.4 per cent and 2.9 per cent, respectively," Kamco noted.

It said that sovereign rating actions in the GCC favoured positive actions with two upgrades during this year as against one downgrade.

Oman's sovereign rating witnessed two upgrades this year by S&P from B+ to BB- in April 2022 followed by another upgrade to BB in November 2022 with a stable outlook. Fitch also upgraded Oman's sovereign rating to BB from BB- during August 2022. The upgrade

For 2023, Kamco Investment expects that tighter monetary policies globally would limit overall fixed income issuances in GCC that would be further dampened by global recessionary pressures

dominate with US\$230.1bn in maturities over the next five years, whereas sukuk maturities are expected to be at US\$138.3bn, it added.

2023 outlook

For 2023, Kamco expects that tighter monetary policies globally would limit overall fixed income issuances in GCC that would be further dampened by global recessionary pressures.

As per the report, GCC bonds and sukuk maturities are expected at US\$67.5bn for 2023 and the refinancing of these instruments are expected to account for the bulk of the issuances by corporates and governments in the region.

"That said, the higher cost of borrowing and strong profitability coupled with cash generation is expected to discourage some refinancing activity in the near term."

"We expect fresh issuances to be back-end loaded once stability is seen in global interest rates and exchange rates. We expect corporate issuers to come back to market during the latter half of 2023 once market conditions seem favourable," Kamco said.

Bank Muscat's new DigiTrade portal well received by corporate customers

Muscat - Bank Muscat's new Trade Portal DigiTrade, which was launched earlier this year has been well received by the bank's corporate and institutional customers for facilitating online initiation of trade transactions and real-time tracking.

Introduced in line with the bank's customer-centric vision and commitment to digital transformation in line with Oman Vision 2040, Bank Muscat DigiTrade helps corporate customers log in from their office or home and perform a number of paperless transactions for different trade products and services.

Corporate customers have particularly benefited from the single sign-on process using their online banking credentials instead of having to visit a branch and submit requests in person during regular banking hours, a press release said.

In particular, the new trade



portal enables speedier, efficient and highly-secure trade-financing solutions for corporate customers who will receive auto notifications and email alerts upon the processing of transactions by the bank, and can gener-

other salient features of Bank Muscat DigiTrade, which is easily accessed through the bank's online banking platform.

Bank Muscat, which is recognised as one of the leading trade finance providers in the region, provides tailor-made global trade products and services as part of its trade financing solutions, which are simple to use and come with a highly-competitive pricing structure.

The bank issues letters of credit (LCs), all types of guarantees, standby LCs, handles documents under collection, offers document checking services under export letters of credit, confirms letters of credit and provides various trade financing solutions including forfaiting, receivable financing, trust receipt financing etc., and facilitates secured trade payments and receipts between buyers and sellers.



SEZAD to hold Environmental Forum in Duqm on January 9

Duqm - The Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) will organise the Second Environmental Forum titled, 'Together for reducing our carbon footprint in Duqm', on January 9, 2023.

A number of lecturers and specialists from the government and private entities, concerned with climate change and carbon emissions reduction, will be participating, in addition to companies operating in the zone.

The forum aims at finding innovative mechanisms to solve

potential environmental challenges resulting from various construction and industrial works in the SEZAD.

The Second Environmental Forum will shed light on the necessity for combining efforts to raise awareness of preserving the environment, reducing environmental impacts, and supporting and developing foundations of joint cooperation between various organisations and companies operating in the SEZAD in aspects related to climate affairs.

It will also highlight plans to reduce carbon emissions and adaptability to climate changes, in an effort to achieve net zero carbon emissions in Duqm.

The forum comes within the framework of efforts exerted by the SEZAD, represented by the Environmental Awareness Team of the Environmental Sustainability Department, in its commitment to protect and preserve the environment.

ONA

As energy crisis bites, Spaniards snap up solar panels

Pozuelo de Alarcón, Spain - Demand for solar panels has shot up to unprecedented levels in Europe as energy crisis shows no sign of letting up, in a welcome boost for a sector with huge potential.

"Here we have sun almost all year round," said Paloma Utrera showing off the black panels installed on her roof in Pozuelo de Alarcón in Spain, a well-heeled suburb of western Madrid.

"We need to make the most of it."

Like many Spaniards in recent months, Utrera has started producing her own electricity after installing 13 photovoltaic panels on her roof with a total output of 4.5 kilowatts.

"It's not cheap" but with the help of EU and government subsidies, "the savings we'll make on the electricity bill, the investment isn't that bad," she said.

The 50-year-old airline industry employee said she's halved

her electricity bills since having the solar panels installed in September.

"It's a really worthwhile investment," said Utrera.

According to Engel Solar, which carried out the installation, rooftop solar panels can generate between 50 and 80 per cent of the average household's electricity needs.

And given the current prices of electricity, that makes for an "interesting" proposal, said Engel Solar commercial director Joaquin Gasca.

Set up in Barcelona in 2005, the company with 200 employees has seen its turnover soar fivefold over the past two years and expects to see a further jump in 2023.

"The phone just never stops ringing, it's crazy," said Gasca.

A rooftop investment

And it's not just individuals.

Businesses and public entities



are also getting on board, driven not only by the energy crisis linked to the war in Ukraine but also encouraged by the public funding available through the EU's vast Covid recovery plan.

All of this has given an unprecedented boost to rooftop solar in the Iberian peninsula.

"Until about a year ago, if you looked at the rooves in your town or city, you would hardly see any solar panels for self-generation... but that's totally different now," said Francisco Valverde, a renewable energy specialist at Menta Energia consultancy.

Jose Donoso, head of Spanish

solar power lobby UNEF which groups some 780 businesses, agreed.

"People are seeing how their neighbours are putting in self-generating installations, that they're happy with them and are saving money, so they themselves are encouraged to get solar panels," he told AFP.

UNEF says the installed rooftop solar capacity should exceed two gigawatts this year, a figure more than three times higher than in 2020.

Solar power has become "very competitive" with a cost that is "90 per cent lower than what it was 14 years ago," Donoso said.

"People have started realising that their money is better off invested in their rooftops rather than sitting in the bank."

Democratising energy

For the photovoltaics industry, this resurgence of interest is a

welcome development after years in which the sector was left to languish.

As Europe's sunniest country, Spain was one of the leaders in solar power at the start of the century until the 2008 financial crisis halted the boom.

Since then, it has fallen behind neighbours.

A right-wing government threw shade on the sector by cutting subsidies. It then introducing a tax on households that sold excess electricity to the national grid, a move derided by critics as a "tax on the sun".

But the tax - which NGOs say was imposed following pressure from energy giants worried about competition from self-generated electricity - was shelved in 2018 when the left came to power and stepped up support for renewable energy.

Since then, the sector has grown rapidly.

Self-generation "democratises

Russia to cut its gas exports by 25%

Moscow, Russia – Russia will reduce its gas exports by about a quarter by the end of 2022, according to Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak.

“At the end of the year, gas production will be 12 per cent less than in 2021, and exports will decrease by about 25 per cent. This is primarily due to the shutdown of export infrastructure,” Novak said in an interview published by state news agency TASS on Monday.

Novak, however, pointed out that country’s production and exports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) will grow by more than 8.7 per cent, while coal consumption in the domestic market will increase by 6.8 per cent.

He said a number of meetings were held with President Vladimir Putin since the end of February to analyse risks in Russia’s logistics chain for oil and gas sales.

“As a result, a new configuration of supply chains was provided. Fast and well-coordinated work was organized by federal authorities under the leadership of Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, in conjunction with



industry companies and legislators, who promptly considered government and industry initiatives,” Novak said.

He said Western nations are introducing new sanctions because Russia was able to cope with their previous measures, warning that these restrictions will have side effects such as increased inflation and lower economic development rates.

He said many Western oil and gas companies “are already wary of all these processes” and pulling back on investments.

Due to the decrease in energy investments in the EU “the world will face a shortage and a new round of crisis,” Novak asserted.

Warning of serious problems around the world within the next five to ten years, he said Europe will be affected the most “as they have reduced Russian gas imports and are now focusing on LNG and the growth of their own production.”

“However, resources there are very limited, and this increase will not be long-term,” he claimed.

EU energy ministers last week agreed on a gas price cap of €180 (US\$190) per megawatt hour in the bloc, weeks after imposing an embargo on seaborne imports of Russian crude oil a price cap of US\$60 per barrel on Russian crude starting December 5.

An EU ban on imports of petroleum products from Russia will also come into effect on February 5.

Decision on establishing a potential gas hub in Turkey would be taken in 2023, however, the platform will comprise of a variety of suppliers, including from Russia, Russian deputy prime minister said on Friday.

“We are currently working actively on this issue with our Turkish colleagues and other potential countries that could participate in the project,” Novak told Russia 24 TV.

Explaining details about the gas hub project, Novak said since Algeria, Qatar, and Azerbaijan are currently supplying gas to Europe, Turkish gas hub would include not only Russian suppliers, but also other exporters.

“I think the decision will be made in 2023,” he said.

Novak said the planned gas hub in Türkiye would be a center where the prices would be determined according to the market conditions as an alternative to the platforms in the Netherlands and England.

He said that by the end of June, Russia’s oil output had reached pre-war levels after insurance and payment concerns in the oil industry with ‘friendly nations’ were settled.

Novak also warned that Russia would ban the supply of oil and petroleum products to countries that adhere to the price ceiling imposed by the Western countries.

Novak noted that his country may also reduce oil production in early by up to 7% to 500,000 or 700,000 barrels per day as a response to the price cap move.

He further warned that the price of petroleum products was expected to increase by February next year as additional sanctions enter into effect.

Novak said Europe’s price cap on natural gas is unreasonable and would have an impact on nations like Norway, Algeria, and the US.

“It seems to me that our European partners do not fully understand that such measures will lead to redistribution of gas. With such restrictions, the supplying countries look for other markets and thus dramatically reducing gas liquidity in Europe,” he said.

Anadolu Agency

EU cuts gas consumption by 20% in four months

Brussels, Belgium – EU countries have cut the amount of natural gas they consume by 20 per cent over the past four months as they adapt to an energy crunch, the bloc’s statistics agency said.

Taken overall, the number was higher than the voluntary 15 per cent target the European Union member states had signed on to in August.

It underlined the bloc’s drive to reduce demand for energy as it copes with greatly diminished supplies from Russia, which has turned off its gas taps in retaliation for EU sanctions over its war in Ukraine.

Finland led the dive, with gas consumption down 53 per cent between August and November, compared with the average consumption for that period between 2017 and 2021, Eurostat



said.

All but two EU countries showed declines, with major economies Germany, France slicing the amount of gas used by 25 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, over that period.

Malta and Slovakia showed upticks in gas consumption of

less than 10 per cent over those four months. Cyprus was the only EU country not using natural gas.

The EU on Monday agreed a gas price cap that would kick in if the cost of gas soared towards a historic high reached in August, as countries scrambled to fill storage ahead of winter.

After months of wrangling the price cap was set at 180 euros per megawatt hour for futures contracts - close to half of where it spiked to in August, when it reached nearly 340 euros.

On Tuesday, the European benchmark for gas futures was trading around 107 euros per megawatt hour.

Safeguards apply to the price cap, to meet concerns by Germany and the European Commission that the ceiling might scare off gas suppliers and push them to sell in more profitable Asian markets.

The cap can only be triggered if it breaches the threshold for three consecutive days, and then only if it were more than 35 euros over the global price paid for liquefied natural gas.

The commission also reserved the right to suspend the price cap mechanism if it appeared to be causing supply problems.

The Kremlin has slammed the EU price cap as “a violation of the market price-setting”.

AFP



Asian stocks start week positively

Hong Kong, China – Asian stocks started the week on a positive note Monday, buoyed by gains on Wall Street last week, although spiralling Covid-19 cases in China weighed on sentiment in thin holiday trade.

Several markets were closed, including Hong Kong, Sydney and Singapore, but benchmark indexes in Shanghai, Tokyo, Mumbai and Seoul saw modest gains.

China’s surging Covid-19 cases were a key concern for investors. But their ability to assess the pandemic’s impact on the world’s second-largest economy has been constrained by the National Health Commission’s announcement on Sunday that it would no longer publish daily case numbers.

Trade remained predictably cautious on Monday with investors steering clear of aggressive share-buying ahead of the year-end holidays, but Tokyo and Shanghai closed up over half a percent, while Seoul ended slightly higher.

A set of fresh data last week indicated a slowing of US inflation, although many investors kept their guard high, predicting sluggish overall growth next year.

However, the personal consumption expenditures price index, eyed closely by the Federal Reserve as a gauge of inflation, increased 0.1 per cent from October to November and 5.5 per cent from November last year.

But analysts expected caution to rule the day until more concrete signs emerged that inflation was under control.

“While inflation may be receding... investors will likely remain sufficiently sceptical until we see a more sustained and pronounced deceleration,” Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management said in a commentary.

“The final week of key US economic releases for the year contained more lumps of coal than holiday presents in the stocking, hinting that it is dead slow ahead as all signs point to slower growth next year.”

AFP



US consumer confidence jumps in December

Washington, US – Consumer confidence in the US economy spiked in December, bouncing more than expected as inflation expectations dipped and gas prices cooled, survey data showed.

While consumer inflation in the United States has been hovering at its highest levels in decades, price hikes have shown signs of easing as policymakers struggle to cool demand.

The closely-watched consumer confidence index rose more than analysts predicted to 108.3 this month, markedly higher than the revised 101.4 figure in November, said think tank The Conference Board.

“Consumer confidence bounced back in December, reversing consecutive declines in October and November to reach its highest level since April,” said Lynn Franco, The Conference Board’s senior director of economic indicators.

Consumers’ current outlook improved, with inflation expectations dropping to the lowest since

September last year, she said.

Recent declines in gas prices have been “a major impetus” for this trend, although plans to buy homes and big-ticket appliances continued easing, Franco said.

But she cautioned that a “shift in consumers’ preference from big-ticket items to services will continue in 2023.”

Although the Federal Reserve has moderated its pace of interest rate hikes to fight inflation, officials have signaled that there is still some ways to go.

Consumers are less gloomy about the short-term business outlook and labor market, but overall expectations remain at “a level associated with recession,” said The Conference Board.

“The (overall) level remains depressed compared to pre-pandemic readings,” Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics said in a note.

But consumption remains “positive and is supporting growth,” even as households are squeezed by higher costs.

AFP

Japan approves 2023 budget

Tokyo, Japan – Japan approved a 114tn yen (US\$839 billion) budget for the year ahead, including record defence spending after a major security strategy overhaul announced this month.

The fiscal 2023 budget approved by the cabinet includes 6.8tn yen (US\$51bn) for the defence ministry, up approximately 30 per cent from last year.

It comes a week after the government approved a new security strategy including plans to raise defence spending to two per cent of GDP by fiscal 2027, bringing Japan in line with NATO member guidelines.

In its largest defence shake-up in decades, Japan also vowed to reshape its military command, and acquire new missiles that can strike far-flung enemy launch sites.

The policy overhaul is laid out in three defence and security documents that describe Beijing as “the greatest strategic challenge ever to securing the peace and stability of Japan”, as well as a “serious concern” for the international community.

The new budget includes 211.3bn yen for buying US-made Tomahawk cruise missiles, and 93.9bn yen for mass production of Japanese-made type 12 surface-to-ship missiles.

Both items are intended to help Japan secure what it calls “counterstrike capacity” - the



ability to hit launch sites that threaten the country.

“We plan to acquire all the Tomahawk missiles we need in the next fiscal year,” a defence ministry official told reporters on condition of anonymity, declining to confirm reports Japan will buy up to 500.

The defence budget also includes 110.4bn yen for acquiring equipment and training Japanese troops to operate the Tomahawks.

The missiles will be deployed in 2026 at the earliest, officials said.

The budget also contains money for building ships equipped with the Aegis defence system.

It still has to be approved by parliament and could prove controversial with debate raging over how to pay for rising defence spending.

Japan’s budget has been increasing for decades due chiefly to snowballing medical care and social welfare fees in the rapidly ageing society.

Roughly one third of the government’s revenue relies on the issuance of government debts.

Officials say they will secure defence funding largely with spending cuts and reallocating surplus funds.

But Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has also raised the possibility of more taxes to help pay for the spending, an unpopular proposition.

AFP

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Lulu, KR host 'best fan face'

Lulu Hypermarket teamed up with the P&G division of Khimji Ramdas in a unique and exciting attempt to break the Guinness record for the most number of people moisturising their beard simultaneously to pick up the 'best fan face' during the season of football.

The event was held at Lulu Baushar under the campaign Gillette 'Shave and show your best fan face' on December 20.

The event, which was held to promote the Gillette brand from the P&G stables, brought to-

gether 300 consumers who participated in the campaign with the aim of breaking the world record. The event also gave an experiential moment for the consumers to try Gillette products as they were allowed to keep the grooming bag with various products which they used for the record breaking execution.

As part of the event, Lulu had set up a grooming area in the parking area of its Baushar outlet, providing consumers a chance to present their smartest look using

the Gillette Mach3 razor which is built for precision and made for comfort, with stronger blades that stay sharper longer, as well as the best in category KCG beard oil.

Consumers were then invited to 'present their best fan face' by showcasing their best emotions to different football-related activities, such as penalty kick etc. All consumers participating in the campaign also received a gift hamper.

Commenting on the campaign, Shabeer K A, regional di-

rector - Lulu Hypermarkets, Oman, remarked, "The timing of this activity is perfectly in sync with the season. With the just concluded football world cup football fans all over the country are still basking in the excitement the season has provided. We are happy and privileged to be again a part of P&G's record breaking initiatives and hope that this platform provides an eco-system to encourage some out of the box marketing concepts and innovative products. P&G as a brand has been supporting our outlets

with one of the strongest portfolios of trusted and quality brands."

Sridhar Moosapeta, CEO Consumer Products Cluster, Khimji Ramdas, added, "We are extremely happy with the response we received through this campaign and we thank Lulu for their continuous support towards all our initiatives. At P&G, we are committed to introducing fresh and innovative ideas to serve the heightened needs and behaviours of consumers worldwide."

Floward wins 'Al Roya Award'



Floward, the go-to online flowers and gifts delivery destination in MENA and UK, won the 'Al Roya Award' during the tenth edition of the Al Roya Business Award Ceremony held under the patronage of H H Sayyed Adham bin Turki al Said and in partnership with Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in Grand Millennium Muscat on December 21.

The ceremony was attended by H E Li Lingbing, Ambassador of the Peoples Republic of China to the Sultanate of Oman, and several diplomats and distinguished figures in the private and public sectors of the sultanate, a press release said.

Floward's team in Oman received the trophy that was presented by Hatim bin Hamad al Taie, editor-in-chief of Al Roya newspaper and general supervisor of the award for Floward's outstanding performance in the

sultanate and in the field of e-commerce.

Abdulaziz B al Loughani, Floward CEO and chairman, said, "We thank Al Roya newspaper for recognising our efforts in contributing to the Omani economy. We are thrilled to receive this honour on the tenth edition of the award, and we will continue to provide the best service for our customers."

Established in 2017, Floward is a full-fledged e-commerce solution that offers prime fresh-cut flowers sourced from the best growers and farmers around the world and arranged locally by a team of florists, and designers.

Floward also offers cakes, chocolate and perfumes curated by the region's most exciting designers bundled with its flower arrangements and manages last-mile same-day delivery to ensure the best customer experience.

Muscat Singers hold Winter Concert on Dec 10

A highly polished and professional performance was given by Muscat Singers at the Bosch Center for Performing Arts on December 10. This was their first concert since COVID silenced all singing.

The concert opened with Gabriel Faure's Requiem, which is divided into seven movements including the Pie Jesu, which highlighted the clear, bell like voice of Elayne Looker, Soprano soloist and longtime member of Muscat Singers. The choir put on a spectacular performance leaving the audience breathless, a press release said.

The second half was opened by an acapella arrangement of David Willcocks' 'Blessed be that Maid Mary'. Muscat Brass, an ensemble of the highest caliber, then performed a Christmas medley including Rudolph



Around the World, Trilogy on Away In A Manger, Jingle Bell Rock, White Christmas and more



festive tunes with great verve. The best part of the evening was an opportunity for the audience to sing along with the choir and the brass to old favourites such as Joy to the world, Silent

Al Mouj Muscat takes up work on Murooj Lanes homes

Al Mouj Muscat held a groundbreaking ceremony to mark the start of construction of Murooj Lanes, an exclusive collection of luxury apartments and town houses situated close to the Marina at Oman's premier lifestyle and leisure destination.

Al Mouj Muscat is a thriving urban oceanfront community of 2,200 residences which are home to 8,000 people from 85 countries and where this latest development of 283 homes will create a new neighbourhood within the family-friendly Ghadeer District, a press release said.

Murooj Lanes comprises a mix of apartments from studios to spacious penthouses and garden suites as well as elegant three and four-bedroom town houses. Such choice, along with the quality that is synonymous with properties at Al Mouj, is proving popular with a broad range of buyers from professional singles to couples and growing families and only nine homes within the Murooj Lanes' collection remain available for purchase.

Each home will be built to Al Mouj Muscat's exacting standards and will be contemporary in design with spacious layouts, modern, light-filled interiors and high-quality bathrooms and kitchens. The residents will enjoy delightful views of Ghadeer's exquisite landscaped gardens and the surrounding open spaces that blend with the natural environment.

Conveniently located alongside Al Mouj's largest public park, Murooj Lanes give its residents the opportunity to enjoy many shared leisure facilities.

SBA offers special service for Nissan customers

Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) has announced 'Happy Wednesday' and 'Exciting Thursday' attractive after-sales service promotion for the benefit of Nissan customers.

Under 'Happy Wednesday', customers who visit their nearest Suhail Bahwan Automobiles Service Centre with prior appointment on any Wednesday during the campaign period can avail exciting benefits. They can win scratch and win exciting services and get 20 per cent discount on value added services, a press release said.

As part of the 'Exciting Thursday' scheme customers with prior appointment on any Thursday during the campaign period can avail exciting benefits of 20 per cent discount on periodic maintenance service, raffle draw chance to win free periodic maintenance service, 20 per cent discount on value added services.

The unique offer also boasts a host of advantages for Nissan vehicle owners. Customers who buy a Nissan Service Package, will now a 20 per cent discount on value added services along with interior cleaning. The package includes four maintenance



services to get the benefits. The after-sales service promotion offer is valid till December 31, 2022.

A spokesperson for SBA said, "Every customer purchasing a Nissan vehicle can be assured of Nissan's top-class after-sales service, which guarantees the advantage of well-trained experts.

"We always use only genuine replacement parts. Customers can expect consistency and support during after-sales service, which ascertains Nissan's performance and resale value in the years to come."

Alizz Islamic Bank offers 4.75% profit rate on goods finance

Alizz Islamic Bank has announced a special offer for goods finance at a very competitive profit rate of only 4.75%.

If you are willing to purchase furniture, equipment, home appliances or other domestic implements, goods finance is the solution for you, a press release said.

At Alizz Islamic Bank, personal finance is based on 'Murabaha'. Under the Goods Murabaha Product, the bank will at the customer's request purchase the goods from the authorised dealer and sell the same to the customer at an agreed price.

The advantage is that you know the bank's profit mark-up and installment at the time of signing the deal, and it never changes throughout the financing term. This arrangement allows for immediate possession & ownership of the goods.

"Goods finance is available to Omanis and residents. Upon their request, the bank can purchase any type of shari'a-compliant goods for the customer, who will know the profit rate and installments before signing the agreement.

Goods finance is available for up to 100% of the goods value. They just have to transfer their salary to any of the Alizz Islamic Bank branches, Mohammed bin Juma al Ghassani, AGM - chief Consumer Banking officer of Alizz Islamic Bank, informed.

Regional finale of Huawei ICT competition held

Under the patronage of H H Sayyid Taimur bin Asa'ad al Said, chairman of the Board of Governors of the Central Bank of Oman, and in partnership with the Ministry of Transport and Communications and Information Technology, the Ministry of Labour and Omantel, the regional finale of Huawei ICT Competition Middle East 2022 was held in Muscat recently.

The winners were announced at a closing ceremony that took place on December 22. This year's competition saw 15 teams of the brightest young tech talents compete together, short-listed originally from 19,300 participants representing 472 universities and 11 countries across the Middle East and Central Asia, a press release said.

Oman Team 1, comprising Mohamed Salim al Yahyai, Ahmed Khalid al Raisi and Talal Ahmed al Hadrami from Na-



tional University of Science and Technology, and Oman Team 2, comprising Mohamad Khier Ghotok from Arab Open University and Ashraf Uzzaman and Muna Said al Hinai from Univer-

sity of Technology and Applied Sciences-Shinas, secured the 'Outstanding Performance' award following several months of national and regional competitions between some of the re-

gion's brightest young minds and leading academic institutions.

This year, the Jordan team comprising students Hamzah al Zubaidi and Aws al Rayya from

Princess Sumaya University for Technology and Yazan al Shanik from Yarmouk University won the first prize of \$20,000. The second place went to Pakistan Team 1, comprising

Muhammad Ali and Asad Anwer from Mehran University of Engineering and Technology Jamshoro and Eman Yaqoob from Lahore College for Women University and Iraq Team 1,

comprising Sadeem Moulood from Ninevah University, Mohammed Shakr from Salahaddin University and Mohammed Hussein from University of Anbar.

Ooredoo increases connectivity in uncovered areas

A wider access to the mobile Internet across Oman has been facilitated, thanks to a recent renewal of Ooredoo's license obligation following an approval from the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA).

Through its deployment of new mobile broadband capable network sites to rural and remote communities, Ooredoo brings 2G, 3G and 4G coverage to not less than thirty-seven previously uncovered areas for the first time. Meanwhile, consumers in thirty-one other villages across Oman have been able to retain their coverage by 2G, 3G and 4G mobile technologies, a press release said.

These mobile technologies support many people, including students who can make use of content in digitally accessible formats and the wider coverage therefore helps ensure equal access to information and knowledge by students.

Increased adoption of mobile Internet increases public access to e-Government services as well. Moreover, small to medium enterprises and home-based entrepreneurs can use the mobile services to participate in the dig-



ital economy and contribute to national economic growth, diversification and innovation across different sectors.

Dr Ahmed Abdullah al Abri, chief Technology and Information officer at Ooredoo, said, "The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority's framework fosters the expansion of mobile broadband networks to rural and remote areas across Oman. This supports our overarching national objective of digital inclusion as aligned with the objectives laid out in the Oman Vision 2040.

"So far, we have completed 50% of our objective during 2021 and 2022 and work will continue into 2023."

HONOR X6 Debuts in Oman Market

MHD-ITICS officially announced its appointment as the exclusive distributor for HONOR mobiles in Oman during an event held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, in Qurum, to launch the Honor X6.

Delegates present from Honor included House Ma, GCC CEO, Amol Govind Sonake, VP, GCC Sales, Jack Chen, product manager, GCC and Russell Huo, country manager, Oman, who attended the event along with the management team of MHD-ITICS.

Addressing the event, House Ma said, "Honor team considers Oman as one of our key strategic markets in the Middle East. Our partnership with the Consumer Division of MHD-ITICS is the result of our study of their excellent



distribution network, logistics capabilities, and infrastructure. Through this strategic partner-

ship, we are targeting accelerated growth in market share for Honor.

"Their inherent zeal for business, responsible and practical distribution practices and an un-

wavering commitment to delivering best-in-class customer service is what inspired Honor to work with MHD-ITICS. This alliance will also improve the availability of our products in the market, enhance the shopping experience of our customers and will help us achieve our ambitious business goals."

During the event, Honor launched its new smartphone - Honor X6, which is the latest addition to its state of the art 'X series'. The Honor X6 is equipped with a triple camera system that includes a 50MP main camera, a 2MP macro camera and a 2MP depth camera, an ultra-large 5000 mAh battery and expandable storage to go along with its 4GB+64GB memory.

NBO's Muzn upgrades customer experience

National Bank of Oman's (NBO) Islamic banking window, Muzn, continues to expand its diverse network of Cash Deposit Machines (CCDMs).

With more than 135 locations across Oman, it's now easier than ever to make secure cash deposits through NBO's CCDMs, 24x7, without having to visit a branch. Operated by Muzn's parent organisation NBO, the state of the art self-

service terminals are part of the bank's ongoing commitment to make it effortless for all customers to manage their finances, a press release said.

Salima al Marzouqi, assistant general manager and chief Islamic Banking officer of Muzn, said, "At Muzn, we always aim to provide our customers with access to innovative, simplified and Islamic Shari'a-compliant solutions, while making their



Salima Al Marzouqi

everyday banking experience as seamless and convenient as possible. Our growing network of CCDMs, which are conveniently found at various locations, offer a practical alternative to waiting in line in a branch and represent just one of many ways to bank with us."

Muzn offers a host of innovative, competitive and quality financial solutions with the values of Islamic Shari'a at the core and

has been recognised for its customer-centric approach throughout 2022. In early December, Muzn won the Most Innovative Islamic Window award at the Islamic Banking and Finance Summit 2022. It was also named Best Islamic Bank Oman 2022 at the World Economic Magazine Awards and Islamic Bank of the Year 2022 at The Banker Islamic Bank of the Year Awards,

Health Innovation Forum reviews initiatives

For the second day, H E Dr Hilal Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, discussed innovative ideas of health personnel at the Health Innovation Forum.

Head of the Forum organising committee, Dr Yousef al Washahi stated that most participants of the second day were doctors working in the health sector from MoH and other institutions.

Around 40 physicians from across the Sultanate of Oman were selected to attend and present initiatives.

He added that detailed presentations were made, whereby the participants discussed their initiatives and suggestions with the Minister of Health.

Dr Washahi said this was the first edition of the Health Innovation Forum based on three key principles - the first of which is the importance of people in human development especially with regard to the health system, the second principle addresses



participation of health cadres, while the third principle is innovation that concerns presenting innovative solutions for the health system issues, and its current and future challenges.

He stressed that this is only the beginning of a long new path concerned with innovation in health as a basic issue in the health system to be employed to serve the sector in the short and long term.

The Forum reviewed and discussed plenty of distinct initiatives. For instance, Fahima Muhammad al Harthi, head of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Unit at the Royal Hospital, presented her innovative idea on relieving childbirth pain through an environmentally friendly way.

Her initiative was based on the priority of the environment and natural resources with 2050 set for zero carbon neutrality.

Omantel prepares employees to be tech-savvy

In continuation of its commitment to bringing best-in-class trainings to its workforce, Omantel, a leading provider of integrated telecommunication services in the Sultanate of Oman, recently offered a select group of employees a custom educational programme delivered by the Stanford Center for Professional Development in the Stanford University School of Engineering.

Catalysing Digital Transformation, an intensive twelve-week educational programme, was offered through Omantel's Digital School, whose mission is to keep employees abreast of emerging technologies and strengthen Omantel's digital capabilities to create and capture new value in the market, a press release said.

Danube Home's Kitchen Solutions offers perfection

Danube Home the region's leading one-stop-shop for home improvement and furnishing needs, has a one-stop solution for customers looking for the perfect kitchen.

With a range of stylish and functional kitchen fittings, designed to suit the tastes and needs of every family - from space saving storage to state-of-the-art design innovation and beyond, Danube Home is setting a new standard for home kitchens. Apart from the stellar range of products, Danube Home also offers a 'Design and Develop' service that helps customers design their dream kitchens, from scratch, a press release said.

Danube Home offers free kitchen designing and consultation services. The in-house interior design expert starts with an initial consultation with the customer, to understand their specific requirements in order to design a seamless workspace.



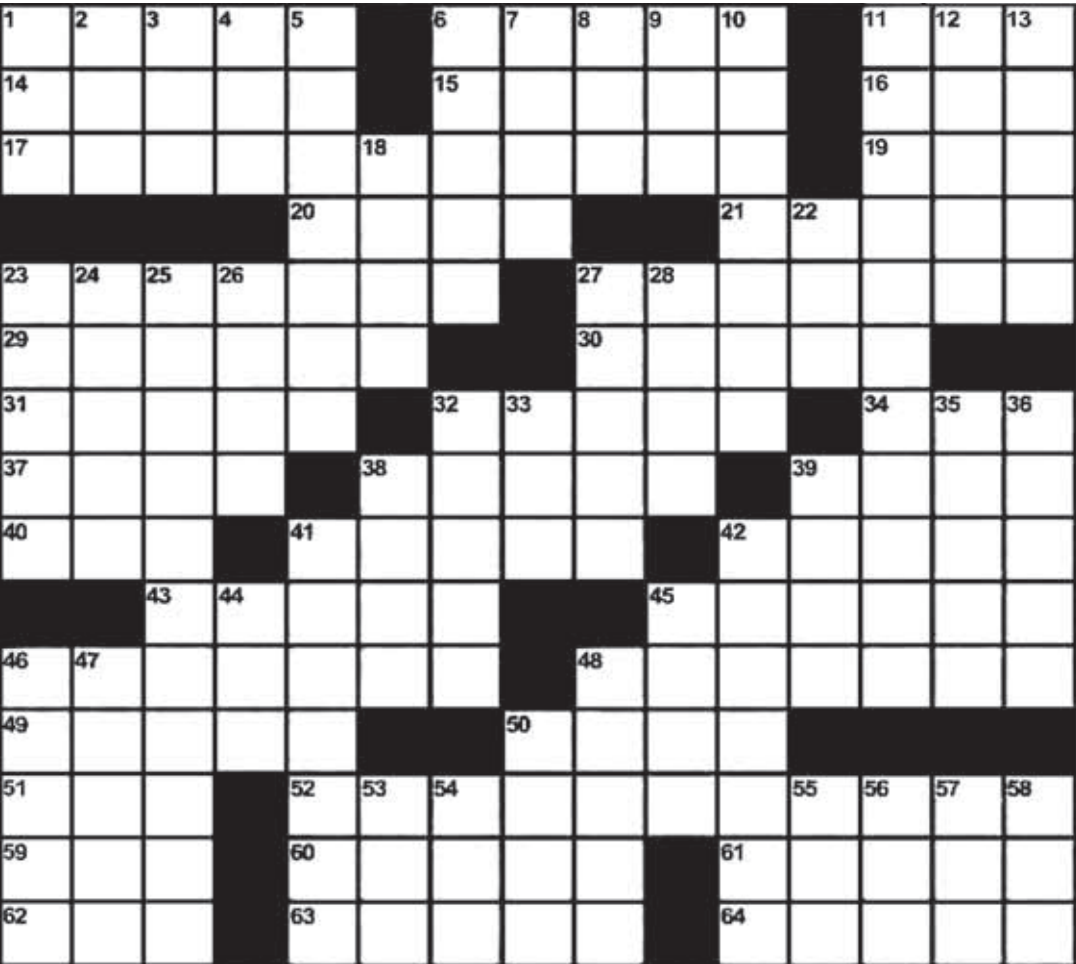
The team uses the blueprint of the kitchen provided by the customer and performs a site visit to take accurate measurements. The designers then create the perfect kitchen and present it to customers. Once the final design is locked, the customers can sign off on the project and watch their dream kitchen come to life.

The expert Danube Home Design and Develop team works with a wide variety of kitchen

styles and can recommend the ideal solution based on the available space - from islands, to parallel and U-shaped kitchens and more.

Customers can also choose from a variety of natural or modern finishes, depending on their specific tastes. Danube Home products are affordably priced and their design team has expertise in working within budgetary and time constraints.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Big dipper
- 6) It may be French
- 11) Pipe contents, sometimes
- 14) Wound up
- 15) Seasons with lots of singing
- 16) Certain flightless bird
- 17) It's not up for haggling
- 19) Some fraternity characters
- 20) Dairy fann declarations
- 21) Have an impact on
- 23) Persian governors
- 27) African pullover
- 29) Common chalet style
- 30) Ancient Greek theater
- 31) Unrefined
- 32) " _ well"
- 34) Second person
- 37) Many deer
- 38) Dead-on
- 39) Caroler's syllables
- 40) Cigar residue
- 41) It goeth before destruction
- 42) Muddies the water
- 43) Internet messages
- 45) Puddinglike dessert
- 46) Common office sup-

plies

- 48) Listen, in literature
 - 49) Be a parasite
 - 50) Take care of yourself
 - 51) Japanese sash
 - 52) They're all rational
 - 59) Came in first
 - 60) Bouncing off the walls
 - 61) Lofty home
 - 62) Cabin type
 - 63) Talk pompously
 - 64) Military academy freshman
- DOWN**
- 1) Pastoral place
 - 2) Mandela's party
 - 3) Banned insecticide
 - 4) Romanian currency
 - 5) Japanese soybean
 - 6) Proofers catch them
 - 7) Belonging to both of us
 - 8) Ryan's "Love Story" co-star
 - 9) "Hold on a..."
 - 10) Dangerous African flies
 - 11) Derby-winning filly
 - 12) In a wild and crazy fashion
 - 13) Type of bar
 - 18) Bound along
 - 22) Exclamation of sur-

prise

- 23) Pelvic parts
- 24) Big dos
- 25) Clockwise from due north
- 26) Physics units
- 27) "La_ Vita"
- 28) Mine passageway
- 32) Angles between leaves and branches
- 33) Schoolboy
- 35) Ravel work (with "La")
- 36) German industrial city
- 38) Lake near Niagara Falls
- 39) Band's schedule
- 41) Sicilian capital
- 42) Old glove-compartment item
- 44) Automobile sticker
- fig.
- 45) List of dishes
- 46) Expression of displeasure
- 47) Off-limits
- 48) Beginning of a conclusion
- 50) Move quickly and lightly
- 53) Serving of corn
- 54) Santa in California?
- 55) _ canto

56) Before, in palindromes

57) Umbrella stiffener

58) "Wait" partner

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Don't go galloping off into the sunset. It's not a day for playing the Lone Ranger. Instead, you'd do better to check in with your colleagues or housemates, see what's happening, and stick around to deal with any unanticipated problems. You guys need to conserve your gains as a team. There will be other days for playing hero. But you're already such a hero that you probably already knew all that.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

If you get stuck in an argument with a friend today, make sure you don't miss the point of the exchange. Keep your emotions in check and stay focused on what you really need to accomplish with this person. Chances are the issue you're squabbling over isn't the real root of the problem. You need to dig deeper to get to that. The other person might not be prepared to do this, but you can't get anywhere without their cooperation. Try to convince them to open up.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

You understand that money can't buy you happiness, despite the fact that you might get a charge when you find a long-forgotten stash of cash in a coat pocket. But today, the idea of getting more money is just too tempting to pass up. A small gamble isn't such a bad idea, as long as you're comfortable with losing your initial bet. But you must avoid any significant gambles that involve contracts. Risks are not going to pay off now.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

If there's something you really want to happen, there's a good chance that you'll begin to see progress in that direction. Sure, it's no guarantee that it will work, but then there are no guarantees in these things. And, in fact, that's part of what makes the whole prospect so exciting: You never know what's going to happen. So cross your fingers and send a few emails and wait and see what course it all takes. Maybe you should make a few phone calls too.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You don't just think deeply, you feel deeply. You consider deeply. You imagine how things could be different on a deep level. You process deeply. You feel strongly about the world in both its spiritual and physical dimensions, and you aren't content if you haven't been able to penetrate to a deep level of understanding of your milieu. So get started.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Take a little time out from your busy schedule to think about life. Specifically, think about the meaning of it. Yes, it sounds heavy. And, on the one hand, it is heavy. On the other hand, you get a real kick out of thinking about things like the meaning of life. It buoys you up knowing that you're keeping tabs on the deep mysteries, on the unknowns, as well as on stuff like whether you paid your phone bill.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You might want to call up somebody you haven't seen in a while. And if the yearning to connect with someone from your distant past comes over you, you should do just that! Look them up and then say hello. Maybe they've got something (a memory, an insight) that you've been missing. Maybe you'll both just be glad to see that, yes, things change and people lose contact, but there's still some core self that remains the same and still appreciates the connection it once had with a kindred core self.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

You do best when you have a goal in sight. It makes sense, after all. How can you move forward if you don't know where you're going? So, define your object first thing in the morning. Then set about achieving it. Along the way, take careful note of how things really are. After all, illusions get you nowhere, but letting your plan evolve could yield better results than you ever imagined.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

A flighty friend is suddenly very serious about upcoming plans that are important to them, and they're giving you a guilt trip about not getting involved. They don't realize that they're asking for more than they have ever been willing to give, so it might be up to you to remind them that they let you down when you were counting on them. It could start an argument, but you will make your point. In order to make your friendship better, you have to speak the truth.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Don't stress yourself out trying to control things you can't control. If you can't control them (and you know what they are), you can't control them. So take a step back and then take a deep breath and then let go. You've done everything you can do (and you know it), so just enjoy the free time if you can (and you can). Why do you always have to be doing something anyhow? Some days it's okay to just be.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You're a practical, down-to-earth person. No one would argue with that. But you're also a deeply spiritual person who can see the profound in many of the basic elements of your world. To you, buildings aren't just concrete and glass, they're expressions of human ambition, human creativity, and human fear of mortality. This deep perspective gives you insight into everything you see.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You spend a day looking for big answers to big questions, all the while getting done what you need to get done. It's exhausting! But you do it. When the day ends, make sure you rest. The best way to do that is to treat yourself to a nice, long workout. You'll feel relaxed and refreshed, and all those big questions won't loom so large. Not that they aren't important, because they are. But you can't solve them all at once, and you need to keep your strength up along the way.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. A British expression sometimes used for "goodbye" is "toodle ..." what?

- A. Bye
- B. Poodle
- C. Pop
- D. Pip

02. Which is likely to be most useful in treating the symptoms of a cold?

- A. Warfarin
- B. Digitalis
- C. Lemon and honey
- D. Insulin

03. What is Cajón del Maipo in Chile?

- A. A mountain lake
- B. A canyon
- C. A wetlands
- D. An archipelago of offshore islands

Answers: 1.D 2.C 3.B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

U	N	S	E
I	W	H	E
M	L	I	T
S	C	L	N

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

US blizzard leaves 32 dead, power outages

More than 200,000 people across several eastern states woke up without power on Christmas morning

New York, US - A brutal winter storm that brought Christmas chaos to millions of Americans will be slow to dissipate, the US National Weather Service said on Monday, after intense snow and frigid cold caused power outages, travel delays and at least 32 deaths across the eastern part of the country.

"Much of the eastern United States will remain in a deep freeze through Monday before a moderating trend sets in on Tuesday," the NWS said in its latest advisory.

In Buffalo, western New York, a blizzard left the city marooned, with emergency services unable to reach the worst-hit areas.

"It is (like) going to a war zone, and the vehicles along the sides of the roads are shocking," said New York Governor Kathy Hochul, a native Buffalo, where eight-foot (2.4-metre) snow drifts and power outages made for life-threatening conditions.

Hochul told reporters on Sunday evening that residents were still in the throes of a 'very dangerous life-threatening situation' and warned anyone in the area to remain indoors.

More than 200,000 people across several eastern states woke up without power on Christmas morning and many



Detroit residents brave the frigid temperatures and heavy gusts of wind in downtown Detroit on Friday (AFP)

more had their holiday travel plans upended, although the five-day-long storm featuring blizzard conditions and ferocious winds showed signs of easing.

The extreme weather sent wind chill temperatures in all 48 contiguous US states below freezing over the weekend, stranded holiday travelers with thousands of flights canceled and trapped residents in ice- and

snow-encrusted homes.

Thirty-two weather-related deaths have been confirmed across nine states, including at least 13 in Erie County where Buffalo is located, with officials warning the number is sure to rise.

Officials described historically dangerous conditions in the snow-prone Buffalo region, with hours-long whiteouts and bodies

discovered in vehicles and under snow banks as emergency workers struggled to search for those in need of rescue.

The city's international airport remains closed until Tuesday and a driving ban remained in effect for all of Erie County.

"We now have what'll be talked about not just today but for generations (as) the blizzard of '22," Hochul said, adding that

the brutality had surpassed the region's prior landmark snowstorm of 1977 in the "intensity, the longevity, the ferocity of the winds".

Due to frozen electric substations, some residents were not expected to regain power until Tuesday, with one substation reportedly buried under 18 feet of snow, a senior county official said.

'Conditions are just so bad'

The NWS earlier warned that blizzard conditions in western New York's Great Lakes region had continued into Sunday, with 'additional snow accumulations of 2 to 3 feet through (Sunday night)'.

One couple in Buffalo, across the border from Canada, told AFP on Saturday that with the

3,500 scrapped on Saturday and nearly 6,000 on Friday, according to tracking website Flightaware.com. More than 1,000 US flights had already been canceled just hours into Monday, the website reported.

Travelers remained stranded or delayed at airports throughout Christmas Day including at major hubs in Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Detroit and New York.

Road ice and white-out conditions also led to the temporary closure of some of the nation's busiest transport routes, including the cross-country Interstate 70. Drivers were being warned not to take to the roads - even as the nation reached what is usually its busiest time of year for travel.

The extreme weather has severely taxed electricity grids, with multiple power providers urging millions of people to reduce usage to minimise rolling blackouts in places like North Carolina and Tennessee. At one point on Saturday, nearly 1.7mn customers were without electricity in the biting cold, according to tracker poweroutage.us.

The figure dropped substantially by Sunday night, although more than 50,000 customers in eastern states still lacked power. AFP

Much of the eastern United States will remain in deep freeze through Monday before a moderating trend sets in on Tuesday

NWS

Influential Israeli Zionist rabbi Haim Druckman dies at 90

Jerusalem - Rabbi Haim Druckman, spiritual leader of the religious Zionist movement in Israel, died on Sunday aged 90 after contracting COVID-19, a Jerusalem hospital said.

For decades Druckman was the most important figure in the religious Zionist movement, which represents roughly 12 per cent of Israel's Jewish population.

"The Hadassah hospital announces with sorrow the death of rabbi Haim Druckman," the facility said in a statement, adding that he had been hospitalised for 10 days. Hadassah had said in a previous statement that Druckman had contracted COVID-19.

The religious school he presided over said he was 90 years old.

Druckman was a mentor to Israeli politician Bezael Smotrich from the Religious Zionism political bloc, an extreme-right alliance.

Bezael Smotrich is set to be



Mourners react during the funeral of Israeli Orthodox Jewish rabbi Haim Druckman at Merkaz Shapira near Kiryat Malachi on Monday (AFP)

finance minister in incoming premier Benjamin Netanyahu's new government.

"The Jewish people have lost one of the spiritual giants of his generation, a just (person), an educator, a man who dedicated his life to the Torah, to the Jewish people and the land of Israel," Smotrich said in a statement.

Netanyahu expressed his condolences to Druckman's family,

saying that Israel 'has lost a great spiritual leader'.

"I have lost a personal friend whom I held in great esteem," he added.

Born in what was then Poland in 1932, Druckman escaped deportation during World War II and in 1944 migrated to Palestine, which was under British mandate.

AFP

Ethiopia govt team in Tigray after Nov 2 peace deal

Nairobi, Kenya - A high-level Ethiopian team arrived on Monday in the capital of rebel-held Tigray for a first official visit following a peace deal aimed at ending a brutal two-year conflict.

The delegation visiting the Tigrayan capital Mekele will 'supervise the implementation of major issues in the peace agreement' signed on November 2, an Ethiopian government statement said.

The team is led by House of Peoples Representatives speaker Tadesse Chafo and includes Redwan Hussein, who is the security adviser to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, as well as the ministers of justice, transport and communication and labour.

The head of Ethiopia's road infrastructure authority and the heads of Ethiopian Airlines and Ethio Telecom - Mesfin Tasew and Frehiwot Tamiru - are also present.

"The delegation is the first of its stature as a high-level federal government body heading to Mekele in two years," the statement said. "This gesture is an attestation to the peace agreement getting on the right track and progressing," it said.

The delegation was greeted by rebel authorities, including their spokesman Getachew Reda, Tigrayan photographs showed.

The war began in November 2020 when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray after accusing the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the ruling party in the region, of attacking army bases.

Estimates of casualties vary widely, with the United States saying that as many as half a million people have died.

The conflict has also unleashed one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters in recent times.

More than two million peo-

ple have been displaced, hundreds of thousands have been driven to the brink of famine and around 13.6mn people are dependent on humanitarian aid, according to UN figures.

Of these, 5.4mn are in Tigray, seven in Amhara and 1.2mn in Afar.

Monitoring mechanism

The agreement signed in the South African capital Pretoria provides for the disarmament of rebel forces, the re-establishment of federal authority in Tigray and the reopening of access to the region.

The two sides on Thursday agreed to create a joint monitoring and compliance mechanism to oversee the deal and receive complaints about any abuse towards civilians.

Aid has started trickling back into Tigray since the peace deal was signed, going some way to alleviating dire shortages of

food, fuel, cash and medicines.

But the region of six million is still largely without electricity and phone lines, while internet and banking services have only partly been restored.

Mekele, was hooked up to the national electricity grid on December 6, and the country's biggest bank, the Commercial bank of Ethiopia, announced on December 19 that financial operations had resumed in some towns. The rebels say that two-thirds of their forces have disengaged from the front lines.

Pro-government forces - specifically troops from Eritrea to the north, and militias from the Ethiopian region of Amhara - are not mentioned in the peace deal but remain in Tigray.

The rebel authorities, local people and aid workers there have told AFP that these forces have carried out looting, raping, summary executions and abductions.

AFP

Philippines floods force thousands to flee homes

Manila, Philippines - Christmas Day floods in the Philippines forced the evacuation of nearly 46,000 people from their homes, civil defence officials said on Monday.

Eleven people were killed and 19 others were missing after a week's worth of heavy seasonal rain in the southern and eastern regions of the country, they said, updating earlier official figures.

The flooding hit the south on Sunday, with the disaster dampening celebrations on the mainly Catholic nation's most important holiday.

Rivers overflowed, swamping rural villages and highways as well as the cities of Ozamiz and Oroquieta, governor Henry Oaminal for the province of Misamis Occidental said on government radio.

"The heart of the city was flooded including the public market. Power was cut off and there was no (telephone) signal," he said, referring to Oroquieta, the



Rescuers evacuating people from a flooded area in Ozamiz City, Misamis Occidental on Sunday (AFP)

provincial capital with 72,000 residents.

"We've had floods before, but these are the worst rainfall and water flow levels we have ever had," he added.

"The waters rose above the chest in some areas, but today the rains have ceased," civil de-

fence worker Robinson Lacre told AFP by phone from Gingoog city, which accounted for 33,000 of the 45,700 people evacuated from their homes.

The coastguard said it rescued members of more than two dozen families in Ozamiz and nearby Clarin town at the height

of the flooding.

Photos released by the coastguard showed its orange-clad rescuers cradling toddlers plucked from homes at nighttime in waist-deep floodwaters.

Seven deaths - mostly from drowning - were reported in Clarin and the nearby southern

towns of Jimenez and Tudela.

The coastguard also said strong winds and big waves sank a fishing boat on Christmas Day off the coast of the central island of Leyte. Two crew members were killed, while six others were rescued.

Two others, including a baby girl, drowned in the eastern towns of Libmanan and Tinambac after they were hit by floods several days before Christmas, the civil defence office said.

The coastguard said it also rescued 23 fishermen aboard two boats that capsized when hit by big waves off the southern city of Zamboanga on Sunday.

Nineteen people remain missing, most of them subsistence fishermen from the country's Pacific seaboard who went to sea despite rough conditions.

The weather turned bad as the disaster-prone nation of 110mn people prepared for a long Christmas holiday.

AFP

Six pro-Turkish fighters killed in Syria clashes

Beirut, Lebanon - Six Syrian fighters from a pro-Turkish group died in clashes with regime troops that still raged on Monday in northwest Syria, rebel forces and a war monitor said.

A pro-Turkey rebel statement said the six were killed and three more wounded in the offensive launched by government forces backed by Kurdish forces from Sunday night in the Afrin region near the Turkish border.

The dead were fighters from Faylaq al-Sham, an alliance of rebel groups considered close to the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, said a source from the group.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has a wide network of sources on the ground, said the regime troops and Kurdish forces

took control of two Faylaq al-Sham positions in intense fighting involving heavy weapons.

Clashes were continuing on Monday morning, local residents told an AFP correspondent.

Such exchanges of fire occur regularly between Damascus regime forces and pro-Turkish rebels including Faylaq al-Sham, which controls part of the border strip with Turkey.

The group has taken part in Turkish army offensives launched since 2016 in northern Syria, mainly against Kurdish fighters.

The ongoing fighting on Monday was unrelated to Turkey's recent threats to launch a broad ground offensive against Kurdish groups in northern Syria, several sources told AFP.

AFP

Final verdicts in Suu Kyi junta trial set for Friday

Yangon, Myanmar - A Myanmar junta court will give its verdicts on five remaining charges in the 18-month trial of jailed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Friday, a legal source told AFP.

Suu Kyi has been a prisoner since the military toppled her government in February last year, ending the Southeast Asian nation's brief period of democracy.

The Nobel laureate, 77, has already been found guilty on 14 charges ranging from corruption to illegally importing walkie-talkies and breaching the official secrets act, and has been jailed for 26 years.

"Both sides gave final arguments today at court," said a source with knowledge of the case on Monday who requested anonymity as they were not authorised to speak to the media.

"There will be a verdict on coming Friday (30th) December," the source said.

Suu Kyi appeared in good health, the source added.

Rights groups have slammed the trial as a sham, and on Wednesday the UN Security Council called on the junta to release Suu Kyi in its first resolution on the situation in Myanmar since the coup.

The resolution marked a moment of relative council unity after permanent members and close junta allies China and Russia abstained, opting not to wield vetoes following amendments to the wording.



This file photo shows a Burmese protester wearing a T-shirt depicting detained Myanmar civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi during a demonstration outside the Embassy of Myanmar in Bangkok on December 19 (AFP)

The remaining five corruption charges Suu Kyi faces relate to the rental of a helicopter for a government minister, a case in which she had allegedly not followed regulations and caused 'a loss to the state'.

Each carries a maximum jail term of 15 years. In previous corruption cases, the court has generally sentenced Suu Kyi to three years per charge.

Disappeared

Suu Kyi is currently imprisoned in a compound in the

capital Naypyidaw, close to the courthouse where her trial is being held, and has been deprived of her household staff and pet dog Taichido.

Since the coup, she has largely disappeared from view, seen only in grainy state media photos from the bare courtroom. The country has been plunged into turmoil, with some established ethnic rebel groups renewing fighting with the military in border areas, and the economy in tatters.

Dozens of 'People's Defence

Forces' eschewing Suu Kyi's strict policy of non-violence have also sprung up to battle the junta and have surprised the military with their effectiveness, analysts say.

There are almost daily killings of low-level junta officials or anti-coup fighters, with details murky and reprisals often following quickly.

Analysts say the junta may allow Suu Kyi to serve some of her sentence under house arrest while it prepares for elections it has said it will hold next year.

Suu Kyi has been a prisoner since February last year. The Nobel laureate, 77, has already been found guilty on 14 charges ranging from corruption to illegally importing walkie-talkies and breaching the official secrets act, and has been jailed for 26 years

The military alleged there was widespread voter fraud during 2020 elections won resoundingly by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, although international observers said the poll was largely free and fair. More than 2,600 people have been killed in the military's crackdown on dissent, according to a local monitoring group.

Rights groups have accused the military of extrajudicial killings and launching air strikes on civilians that amount to war crimes.

The latest civilian death toll issued by the junta stands at over 4,000.

AFP

Seoul: Warning shots fired after North Korea drone incursion

Seoul, South Korea - South Korea accused the North of flying 'several' drones across their shared border on Monday, prompting Seoul's military to deploy warplanes and fire warning shots to ward them off.

"Our military first detected a North Korean unmanned aerial vehicle around the Gimpo airspace at 10:25am (0125 GMT)," the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said in a statement. 'Several North Korean unmanned aerial vehicles invaded our airspace' in the border areas around Gyeonggi province, it added.

The incursion prompted Seoul to fire warning shots and deploy fighter jets and attack helicopters. One of the warplanes, a KA-1 light attack aircraft, later crashed in Hoengseong County, Yonhap news agency reported.

The military did not indicate whether the objects had been shot down, or had gone back over the border, one of the most heavily-fortified locations in the world. But Yonhap reported that South Korean warplanes were trying to shoot down the drones, some of which reached airspace near the capital Seoul.

Flights were temporarily suspended at Gimpo and Incheon international airports - the country's two major hubs

- for about an hour at the request of the JCS, according to Yonhap, which cited an official from South Korea's transport ministry.

Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, said the incident marked the first time that South Korean flights were suspended over 'the appearance of North Korean drones', adding they were likely for spying purposes.

"Considering North Korea's poor level of drone development, there is little possibility that they carry the drone attack capabilities used in modern warfare," he added. "It is speculated that they came over to our area as part of reconnaissance training during the recent winter training."

Weapons tests

The incursion is the first time in five years that North Korean drones have invaded South Korean airspace and comes as Pyongyang has carried out an unprecedented blitz of weapons tests this year, including the launch of its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missile yet.

Last week, Pyongyang also fired two short-range ballistic missiles and claimed to have developed new capabilities to take images from space.

AFP

Canada bus rollover leaves four people dead, dozens injured

Montreal, Canada - Four people have died and dozens more were injured after a passenger bus rolled over in western Canada, with authorities saying on Sunday that icy roads were likely the cause. The accident occurred on Saturday evening on a highway some 330km (200 miles) east of Vancouver in an area of British Columbia hit by days of bad winter weather.

Federal police said on Sunday afternoon they suspected 'extremely icy road conditions' caused the rollover, but that the investigation was ongoing. "Four people are confirmed deceased and multiple people have sus-

tained injuries."

The regional health authority said that fifty-three people in total had been treated at hospitals after the accident, with 36 having 'serious to minor' injuries.

As of Sunday morning, eight people were still hospitalised, including two in critical condition.

British Columbia Premier David Eby said he was 'shocked and saddened' by the news.

"Our thoughts are with those impacted by the crash, their loved ones, and the first responders and health-care workers giving their all to treat people and keep them safe."

AFP

UN says 180 Rohingya adrift on boat feared dead

Dhaka, Bangladesh - Relatives of around 180 Rohingya refugees adrift on a boat for weeks in the Indian Ocean presume that all those on board are now dead, the UN refugee agency said.

Thousands of the mostly Muslim Rohingya, heavily persecuted in Myanmar, undertake risky sea journeys from Myanmar and refugee camps in Bangladesh every year trying to reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

This latest boat is thought to have set out last month and was reported to be drifting close to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, India's Andaman Islands and the Malacca Strait, one of the world's busiest shipping routes.

"Relatives have lost contact. Those last in touch presume all are dead. We hope against hope



Health workers check a Rohingya refugee who was feeling sick after his arrival by boat in Krueng Raya, Indonesia's Aceh province on Sunday (AFP)

this is not the case," the UNHCR tweeted on Sunday.

"If true, this will be devastating news. Our heart goes out to

all the families who would have lost loved ones in this shocking tragedy. We repeat our pleas to the States in the region to help

save lives. This must be a priority." Last week Noor Habi, a resident of a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh, said her 23-year-old daughter Munuwar Begum was on the boat and had spoken to her sister by walkie-talkie.

"We are in danger. Please save us," Begum had said, according to an audio clip of the call.

"There is no food and water with us, and there is no one to save us from this drowning boat."

On Sunday another boat - the third in recent months - with a broken engine and carrying 57 Rohingya refugees landed on Indonesia's western coast after a month at sea, police said.

Last week another 104 Rohingya refugees were reportedly rescued from another boat off Sri

Lanka, hundreds of kilometres from Myanmar on the other side of the Bay of Bengal.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) this month urged states in the region 'to work urgently and collectively to avoid a repeat of the 2015 crisis when thousands of men, women, and children faced tremendous challenges in accessing life-saving care and support resulting in loss of life at sea'.

"Governments and partners have come together before, to address this at the regional level... With the lives and safety of refugees hanging in the balance, at the hands of smugglers, we once again call for urgent regional action," it said.

AFP

Brazilian man arrested for bomb plot ahead of Lula inauguration

Brasilia, Brazil - Brazilian police have arrested a man after he allegedly placed explosives in a fuel truck near Brasilia's airport, hoping to sow 'chaos' ahead of president-elect Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's inauguration, local media reported on Sunday.

The man, identified as George Washington de Oliveira Sousa, was arrested on Saturday on terrorism charges and is a supporter of Brazil's far-right outgoing president Jair Bolsonaro.

The arrest came after the truck's driver found the device on Saturday morning in the capital city, where Lula will be sworn in on January 1.

And although there was an attempt to activate the device, it did not explode, Robson Candido, civil police general delegate of Brasilia, said in a press conference, according to the news portal G1.

Oliveira Sousa confessed to



Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva speaks during a presentation of the final report of the cabinet of governmental transition in Brasilia on December 22 (AFP)

authorities that the bomb was part of a plan to 'start chaos' and 'prevent the establishment of communism in Brazil', according

to statements by the civil police published in local media.

He said the idea was hatched with other Bolsonaro supporters

who have been protesting outside the army headquarters in Brasilia, calling for a military intervention to prevent Lula from

assuming power.

The goal, Oliveira Sousa told police, was to place at least two explosives in strategic locations,

with an aim of initiating a 'declaration of a state of siege in the country' and from there 'provoking an intervention by the armed forces,' Brazilian daily *Folha de Sao Paulo* reported.

Bolsonaro supporters blocked highways and demonstrated in front of army barracks around the country following Lula's win in the October 30 presidential runoff.

Nearly two months later, there are still camps in front of some military bases.

Police said they found an arsenal of weapons in the apartment of Oliveira Sousa, who works at a service station in the northern state of Para.

Oliveira Sousa said he was inspired to acquire the weapons 'by President Bolsonaro's words', and had a cache worth about 160,000 reals (US\$31,000), according to *Folha de Sao Paulo*.

Bolsonaro, a strong supporter

of gun rights, has previously stated that 'an armed people will never be enslaved'.

According to statements, Oliveira Sousa had planned to distribute the weapons among those camping in front of barracks, the paper said.

Lula, a 77-year-old leftist who already served as president of Brazil from 2003 to 2010, will assume power for the third time with a grand inauguration in Brasilia.

Bolsonaro, aged 67, has meanwhile maintained an extremely low profile since his election loss, with limited public appearances.

On Christmas Eve, he rode his motorcycle for the first time since his defeat and chatted with supporters.

And on Sunday, he posted a video on social media in which he wished viewers a 'Merry Christmas'.

AFP

INDIA

North in grip of severe cold

Capital city New Delhi reeled under a cold wave and foggy conditions

New Delhi, India - North India is in a grip of cold wave conditions as temperatures plummet making life difficult for the people. In the plains of North India, the lowest minimum temperature of 0.0 deg C was reported over Rajasthan's Churu, according to India Meteorological Department.

The national capital New Delhi reeled under a cold wave and foggy conditions, causing disruption of normal life. Delhi on Sunday recorded a minimum temperature of 5.3 degrees Celsius while most parts of northern India today witnessed temperatures in a range between 3 to 7 degrees Celsius said India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Monday. Besides New Delhi, reports of shivering and foggy conditions came in from many other parts of North India.

"Severe cold reported at most places over Punjab; cold day at most locations with isolated severe cold day reported over Haryana, Chandigarh and Delhi; cold day to severe cold day at isolated places over northwest Rajasthan and west Uttar Pradesh," read an IMD tweet.

The district magistrate in Bihar's Patna said in a notice on Saturday that the schools will remain closed for students up to class 8 from today till year-end



Women labourers in warm clothes walk at Kartavya Path on a cold winter morning, in New Delhi on Monday (ANI)

in view of cold wave conditions. Dense fog engulfed parts of Uttar Pradesh's Moradabad lowering visibility in many areas. As per IMD, "Moradabad will witness a minimum temperature of 7°C and a maximum temperature of 18°C while dense fog will continue to persist today".

Fog and cold wave conditions prevailed in Uttar Pradesh's Ghaziabad today. Haridwar in UP too witnessed dense fog as the minimum temperature remained below

10 degrees Celsius. Meanwhile, in Punjab's Amritsar, fog and cold wave conditions prevailed as the minimum temperature was recorded at 6.5 degrees Celsius today. In Haryana, thick fog shrouded the city of Ambala.

Rajasthan is experiencing a particularly biting cold winter. "Today, cold wave to severe cold wave conditions prevailed at isolated pockets over Rajasthan," IMD tweeted.

In Rajasthan's Mount Abu, the dip in temperature caused

snowing. People in Mount Abu woke up to snow-covered grounds. The snow froze on the windows of the vehicles. The lowest minimum temperature of 0.0 deg C was reported over Rajasthan's Churu in the plains of North India. The cold wave has brought with it a blanket of fog over North India. IMD has predicted foggy conditions to continue for the whole week.

According to the IMD, visibility across most of the northern states remained poor with Bhatinda in Punjab and Bikaner

in Rajasthan recording 'zero visibility'. Not only in Bhatinda, but the visibility throughout Punjab also remained low, with Amritsar recording visibility of 25 metres.

The visibility in the national capital was recorded at just 50 metres this morning.

Haryana too recorded low visibility. While places like Ambala and Hissar recorded a low of 25m and 50m respectively, visibility in Chandigarh was 200 metres.

According to IMD data, places like Sri Ganganagar and Churu in Rajasthan also recorded low visibility of 25 and 50 metres, respectively.

Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal also recorded very low visibility on the day with the number dipping to 50 metres in Uttar Pradesh and Odisha, while North Bengal recorded visibility of 200 metres.

In the last few days, several trains have been delayed and some got cancelled owing to a thick layer of fog. Even on Sunday, as many as 10 trains of the Northern Railway ran late due to prevailing fog. The Northern Railway on the same day had informed that 14 Delhi-bound trains were running late, due to dense fog in the national capital region.

ANI

Shraddha murder case forced break up with Tunisha: Sheezan to cops

Mumbai, India - In a major reveal by the main accused in TV actor Tunisha Sharma's death case, her former boyfriend Sheezan Khan reportedly told police that he was 'so disturbed by the atmosphere in the country that emerged after the gruesome murder of Shraddha Walkar' allegedly by her live-in partner, that Khan decided to end their relationship, sources said on Monday.

During his first day in police custody, Sheezan told Waliv police that he ended the relationship with Tunisha after seeing repercussions emerging from the Shraddha Walkar case and told his former paramour that belonging to a different community stands in their way as did their age gap. During interrogation, Sheezan further revealed that Tunisha had earlier also attempted suicide after they broke up. "Tunisha had recently tried to commit suicide a few days before her death, but at that time I saved her and told Tunisha's mother to take special care of her," police sources quoted Sheezan as saying.

Tunisha and Sheezan broke up a fortnight before

she was found dead inside a toilet in a TV shoot set on December 24.

On Sunday, a court in Vasai, Maharashtra, sent actor Sheezan Khan to police custody for four days in connection with Tunisha Sharma's alleged suicide case. Waliv police produced Khan in the court after his arrest in the case for abetment to suicide. The case was registered against him under Section 306 of the Indian Penal Code.

Tunisha was found dead on the sets of a TV serial on December 24, according to Waliv Police. They received information that after a tea break, the actress went to the toilet and when she did not come back, the police broke the door open and found her hanging.

No suicide note was recovered at the spot by police. The police have said the reason behind Tunisha's alleged extreme step that ended her life could be her breakup with Sheezan over a fortnight back.

The First Information Report, or FIR, of the case, revealed that the two actors were in a relationship, and had broken up 15 days ago.

ANI

Shift Kashmiri Pandits to safer Jammu, says Ghulam Nabi Azad

Srinagar, India - Democratic Azad Party Chief and former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad said that the Kashmiri Pandit employees of the Jammu and Kashmir government should be temporarily shifted to Jammu till the situation improves in Kashmir.

Questioning the safety of the Kashmiri Pandits, he said that life is more important than employment and the government should transfer Kashmiri Pandits to Jammu. "The Government should transfer Kashmiri Pandit employees to Jammu and transfer them back only when the situation improves," said Azad.

"If our government comes to



Kashmiri Pandits stage a protest outside the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) office over the alleged remarks by the Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, in Jammu on Friday (ANI)

power, we will transfer the Kashmiri Pandits to Jammu until the situation improves," he said. Lt Governor Manoj Sinha had

last week said that Kashmiri Pandits serving in the Valley will not be paid their salaries if they do not attend their duties.

Migrant Kashmiri Pandits have been protesting against the decision of the government claiming that they are being

threatened by the terrorists and can't go back to work.

"We are receiving death threats repeatedly, the latest being on Wednesday night. We were told that a policeman would be posted outside the place of our posting. But we do not trust the security policy of the administration," said a Kashmiri Pandit.

"The main reason behind the protests is an insecure environment prevailing in Kashmir. We have been protesting since the day targeted killings started against the minority community in the Valley. We appeal to the government to post us at safe and secure places," said Rohit, a Kashmiri Pandit who is partici-

pating in the protests.

Kashmir has been witnessing a series of targeted killings since October last year.

Targeted killings in Kashmir Valley were part of a larger conspiracy by terrorists of Hizbul Mujahideen and other terrorist outfits to disturb the peace and democratic process in Kashmir Valley and also to create terror among the politically elected representatives, an NIA charge sheet said earlier.

The revelation came when the NIA in September filed the charge sheet against six accused in the targeted killing of a Sarpanch of Adoora village in Jammu and Kashmir's Kulgam.

The counter-terror agency

filed the chargesheet in a special NIA court in Jammu in the case of the killing of Sarpanch Shabir Ahmad Mir by Hizbul Mujahideen. The case was initially registered on March 11 at Kulgam police station in Jammu and Kashmir and re-registered by the NIA on April 8.

Investigations have revealed that the handlers of the Hizbul Mujahideen hatched a criminal conspiracy in collusion with terrorist associates and over ground workers and terrorists of Hizbul Mujahideen active in Kashmir Valley to carry out the targeted killing of Sarpanch Shabir Ahmad Mir, said the NIA.

ANI

Maldives former president sentenced to 11 years in jail

Male, Maldives - A court in Maldives found former President Abdulla Yameen guilty in a corruption and money laundering case and sentenced him to 11 years in prison and also fined him US\$5mn, Avas, a Maldives-based newspaper reported.

The criminal court, in its verdict, found Yameen guilty of the charges and Chief Judge Ahmed Shakeel said that it is questionable that the money that documents show was deposited to Yameen's personal account from Yoosuf Naeem's account. Former president Yameen was accused of receiving US\$1mn stolen from state coffers in the country's biggest-ever corruption scandal, Avas reported.

Yameen abused his position and took US\$1mn from a private company to facilitate the sale of Aarah for resort development.

According to the charges,

Yameen accepted a bribe of US\$1mn from former MP Yoosuf Naeem, who is being tried on bribery charges alongside Yameen. The trial began at the Criminal Court on January 2, and hearings in the trial concluded on November 30, Avas reported.

The prosecution sought the maximum penalty for the conviction due to Yameen's position as head of State at the time of the crime. The prosecution requested 11 years in prison and a six-fold increase in the fine. However, as the law states that the fine can be increased up to five-fold at the maximum, the State requested to impose the maximum amount as a fine as under the law.

The verdict also found Yoosuf Naeem guilty of bribery, and the prosecution asked for the maximum penalty for the former MP.

ANI

COVID: China's Xi urges steps to 'protect' lives

Beijing, China - Chinese President Xi Jinping urged officials on Monday to take steps to protect lives in his first public remarks on COVID-19 since Beijing dramatically loosened hardline containment measures this month.

Having mostly cut itself off from the rest of the world during the pandemic, China is now experiencing the planet's biggest surge in infections after abruptly lifting restrictions that torpedoed the economy.

Studies have estimated that around one million people could die over the next few months. Many in the population are now grappling with shortages of medicine, while emergency medical facilities are strained by an influx of undervaccinated elderly patients. "At present, COVID-19 prevention and control in China are facing a new situation and new tasks," Xi said in a directive, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

"We should launch the patriotic health campaign in a more targeted way... fortify a community line of defence for epidemic



A worker produces face masks at a factory in Handan, in China's northern Hebei province on Monday (AFP)

prevention and control, and effectively protect people's lives, safety and health," Xi said.

Hospitals and crematoriums across the country have been overflowing with COVID patients and victims, while China's National Health Commission on Sunday announced it would stop publishing daily nationwide in-

fection and death statistics.

The decision to scrap the daily virus count comes amid concerns that the country's blooming wave of infections is not being accurately reflected in official statistics.

Beijing has admitted the scale of the outbreak has become 'impossible' to track following the

end of mandatory mass testing, as people are now not obliged to declare test results to authorities.

And last week, Beijing narrowed the criteria by which COVID-19 fatalities were counted - a move experts said would suppress the number of deaths attributable to the virus.

The winter surge comes

ahead of two major public holidays next month, in which millions of migrant workers are expected to travel to their hometowns to reunite with relatives.

Authorities are bracing for the virus to hit under-resourced rural areas hard, and on Monday called for the guaranteed supply of drugs and medical treatment during New Year's Day and the week-long Lunar New Year holiday, which begins January 21.

The ruling Communist Party and State Council issued a notice calling on officials to 'ensure the smooth and orderly adjustment and transition of epidemic prevention and control measures'.

Millions infected

In recent days, health officials in the wealthy coastal province Zhejiang estimated that one million residents were being infected per day, while the coastal city of Qingdao predicted roughly 500,000 new daily infections and the southern manufacturing city of Dongguan eyed 250,000 to 300,000.

AFP

CAPTAIN MARVEL

Babar Azam hits unbeaten ton to lead Pakistan’s fightback in first Test against New Zealand

Karachi, Pakistan - Babar Azam knocked a fighting hundred and the recalled Sarfaraz Ahmed hit a half century to guide Pakistan to a healthy 317-5 on the opening day of the first Test against New Zealand in Karachi on Monday.

The pair led Pakistan's recovery from 110-4 during a 196-run fifth wicket stand, as the home team lost only Sarfaraz in the last two sessions.

New Zealand spinners had taken three early wickets on a spin-assisting National Stadium pitch and one before lunch but had to wait until the closing moments when Ajaz Patel got Sarfaraz caught in the slip for 86.

At close, Azam was unbeaten on 161 and Agha Salman three as the home team looked to lift from last week's 3-0 loss at the hands of England, their first ever whitewash at home.

Azam now has 1,170 runs in nine Tests this year - the highest run scorer in Tests in 2022.

He also beat Mohammad Yousuf's 2006 aggregate of 2,435 in all three formats, taking 2,584 runs across the board this year.

The Pakistan skipper swept

spinner Michael Bracewell for a six towards mid-wicket to reach his ninth Test century. He has also hit 16 boundaries.

Sarfaraz, playing his 50th Test and first since January 2019, cracked nine boundaries in his 256-minute knock but missed out on a century.

"It's something I am sad about, but then I look back and

and Azam told me to relax, so I was calmer afterwards," he said.

Costly miss

New Zealand will be ruing letting Azam off the hook when he was on just 12, after Daryl Mitchell spilled a regulation catch at slip off Bracewell.

The tourists also failed to run out Azam on 54 when Devon

Babar Azam now has 1,170 runs in nine Tests this year - the highest run scorer in Tests in 2022. He also beat Mohammad Yousuf's 2006 aggregate of 2,435 in all three formats, making 2,584 runs across the board

think, 'what if I had fallen without scoring?'," he said.

Happy to return to the field after fearing he would not play for his country again, he confessed to needing some support from his team.

"When I went in and played the first three deliveries I had a very fast heartbeat, so during the lunch break my fellow players

Conway missed the stumps, with the Pakistan skipper well short of his crease.

"Babar made the most of his chance and batted really well," said Patel.

"Obviously no one wants to drop catches but it happens sometimes, it's just the nature of the game."

AFP



Pakistan captain Babar Azam celebrates after scoring a century against New Zealand on the first day of the first Test in Karachi on Monday (AFP)



Australia's Cameron Green (R) celebrates dismissing South African batsman Lungi Ngidi on Monday (AFP)

Green bags five wickets as Aussies seize control against South Africa

Melbourne, Australia - Cameron Green celebrated landing one of the richest contracts in Indian Premier League history by taking a career-best 5-27 as Australia ripped through South Africa's fragile batting in the second Test on Monday.

After the visitors were dismissed for 189, an aggressive David Warner, in his 100th Test, was unbeaten on 32 and Marnus Labuschagne was not out on five to steer the hosts to 45-1 at stumps on day one.

Usman Khawaja was out for one, caught behind by Kyle Verreynne off Kagiso Rabada.

"That's cricket summed up," Green told reporters. "You can have a really slow start to the summer and think cricket's so tough and then you have a few days like this, and it brings you back."

"It's a very special feeling (getting five wickets)."

Australia won the first of three

Tests by six wickets inside two days on a hostile and green Gabba pitch in Brisbane last week.

The deck at the Melbourne Cricket Ground was less bowler-friendly, but captain Pat Cummins surprisingly chose to field at a venue where toss-winning teams normally bat first.

It proved to be an inspired decision in front of 64,876 fans with the Proteas losing early wickets as they again struggled against the hosts' bowling firepower.

After slumping to 67-5, Verreynne and Marco Jansen launched a stirring fightback in a gutsy 112-run stand.

But then Green - the second-most expensive buy at the IPL auction last week behind England's Sam Curran - went on a blitz, snapping the partnership when Verreynne got an outside edge on 52 that Steve Smith collected.

Two balls later, Jansen was

gone, caught by wicketkeeper Alex Carey for 59 off Green before the giant Australian bowled Kagiso Rabada and Lungi Ngidi.

Green took 4-8 in the spell with the Proteas losing their last five wickets for 10 runs.

Early pressure

South Africa started nervously, losing Sarel Erwee and Theunis de Bruyn cheaply.

They were stunned just before lunch when Elgar, who passed 5,000 Test runs, and the experienced Temba Bavuma departed in consecutive balls.

It left them in trouble at 58-4 and the inexperienced middle order facing a daunting task.

When Khaya Zondo was out in the fifth over after lunch for just five, courtesy of a stunning diving catch from Marnus Labuschagne the end looked nigh before Verreynne and Jansen dug in.

AFP

Top Australian Test award named after Shane Warne

Melbourne, Australia - Australia's men's Test Player of the Year award will be renamed in Shane Warne's honour, officials said Monday, as tributes were paid to the late spin-king at the Boxing Day Test against South Africa.

Warne, considered by many as second in stature only to Donald Bradman in sports-mad Australia, died unexpectedly aged just 52 in March.

The Shane Warne Men's Test Player of the Year award will be presented annually, second only to the prestigious Allan Border Medal for the most outstanding player across all formats.

"As one of Australia's all-time greats, it is fitting we acknowl-



Shane Warne

Whilst we continue to mourn his passing, it is fitting that we honour Shane at his beloved Boxing Day Test at the MCG

NICK HOCKLEY

edge Shane's extraordinary contribution to Test cricket by naming this award in his honour in perpetuity," said Cricket Australia chief Nick Hockley.

The announcement came on the opening day of the Boxing Day Test at the Melbourne

Cricket Ground, Warne's home venue where he achieved many memorable feats, including an Ashes hat-trick and his 700th Test wicket.

Warne's Test cap number 350 has been painted square of the wicket for the duration of the

match, while both the Australian and South African teams wore floppy white hats in his memory during the national anthem ceremony.

"His place as a legend of Australian and world sport is assured," added Hockley.

"Whilst we continue to mourn his passing, it is fitting that we honour Shane at his beloved Boxing Day Test at the MCG."

A stand at the venue has already been named in his honour.

Credited with reviving the art of leg-spin, Warne took 708 Test wickets as part of a dominant Australian team in the 1990s and 2000s before becoming a respected commentator.

AFP

England's Stokes hits out at ICC for not paying enough attention to scheduling

London, United Kingdom - England Test captain Ben Stokes has hit out at the International Cricket Council (ICC) for not paying enough attention to scheduling, adding that the rising popularity of domestic T20 leagues across the world is threatening the existence of the longest format of the game.

Stokes, who led his side to a 3-0 Test whitewash of Pakistan recently, added that the way Test cricket was being handled and spoken about these days, especially in the backdrop of the growing popularity of league cricket, was hurting him.

"The scheduling doesn't get enough attention that it should. A great example is England's one-day series against Australia after the T20 World Cup. That was shoving three games in there. It



Ben Stokes

made sense to someone to schedule a series which meant nothing," said Stokes in an interaction with the legendary Ian Botham on BBC on Monday.

"Test cricket has been spoken about in a way I don't like. It is losing the attention of the fans with all the new formats and franchise competitions. We understand

there are so many opportunities for players away from Test cricket. But for me it is so important for the game," added Stokes.

Hinting that Test-playing nations should follow England's footsteps of playing ultra-attacking cricket, Stoke said "entertainment", more than "result", will go a long way in popularise the five-

day format.

"Taking the result away from the mindset is a great starting point. Putting focus on making every day entertaining. Not allowing people to know what is going to happen. If people turn up excited about what they are going to watch you've already won before a ball has been bowled," said Stokes.

He urged the ICC to do "something different" to popularise Test cricket.

"I love playing Test cricket and felt we could do something different," added Stokes.

The 31-year-old all-rounder is also not happy with a lot of different squads being selected and players being rested because of the abundance of cricket being played and the commitment of cricketers to their franchises.

'ERLING IS OBSESSED WITH GOALS'

London, United Kingdom - Kevin De Bruyne believes Manchester City teammate Erling Haaland can go on and score 800 goals before his career ends.

Haaland, who will return to the city of his birth when the champions resume their Premier League title defence at Leeds on Wednesday, has scored 24 goals in just 19 appearances since his summer move from Borussia Dortmund.

"He already has about 200 goals, so he can probably go to 600, 700 or 800 if he stays fit and does the things that he does," said De Bruyne.

The Belgian international has played with a host of top strikers in his career and is well-placed when it comes to 22-year-old Haaland's place in the pecking order.

De Bruyne enjoyed a fruitful



Erling Haaland

Haaland already has about 200 goals, so he can probably go to 600, 700 or 800 if he stays fit and does the things that he does

KEVIN DE BRUYNE

relationship with the club's record goalscorer Sergio Agüero before the Argentinian left the Etihad Stadium in 2021.

He has also combined with

Romelu Lukaku on international duty, former City teammate Gabriel Jesus and new World Cup-winner Julian Alvarez, a current fellow City player.



"It is very hard to compare because they are all totally different," said De Bruyne.

"They have all scored 300 or 400 goals. Erling is so obsessed with goals he can maybe go beyond that."

He added: "He is still a young boy enjoying his life and he takes his football very seriously. He loves scoring goals, so I think that is the most unique thing he has."

AFP



Andrea Agnelli

Juve scandal rumbles on as accounts stay deep in the red

Milan, Italy - Juventus' troubles will continue on Tuesday when the shareholders of Italy's biggest football club meet to approve the latest disastrous set of accounts following last month's mass boardroom resignations.

Juve's board quit as an investigation by prosecutors in Turin into allegations of false accounting and irregularities in the transfer and loans of players led to 15 people and the club being charged with a variety of offences.

On Tuesday revised losses for the 2021/22 season of 239.3 million euros (255 million dollars) will be ratified, the fifth straight set of annual accounts in the red.

Juve are listed on the Italian stock market and in September announced record losses of 254 million euros, a figure revised downwards after losses for 2020/21 were revised upwards from 209 million euros to 226 million euros. Those accounts were modified following findings of stock exchange regulator CONSOB as well as auditors and prosecutors.

Tuesday's meeting had been scheduled for November 23 but was pushed back just over a week before the board announced its decision to step down.

Chairman Andrea Agnelli was among those to resign,

bringing to an end a 12-year reign which brought a host of trophies and for a period re-established Juventus as one of Europe's best teams.

However, Juve's run of nine straight league titles came to an end in 2021 and their performances plummeted after they spent more than 100 million euros to sign Cristiano Ronaldo from Real Madrid three years before.

Juve are accused of artificially inflating transfer values and also lying to the stock market

Ronaldo's arrival coincided with an increase in salary costs which combined with the COVID-19 pandemic led to two capital increases worth 700 million euros from parent company Exor, controlled by the powerful Agnelli family.

Juve are accused of artificially inflating transfer values and also lying to the stock market when announcing at the height of the pandemic that players would help the club save 90 million euros by giving up their salaries for March, April, May and June 2020.



Fabian O'Neill

Fabian O'Neill, hailed by Zidane as 'most talented player ever', dead at 49

Montevideo, Uruguay - Former Uruguay international midfielder Fabian O'Neill, once hailed by Zinedine Zidane as "the most talented player" he'd ever seen, died Sunday after a long battle with alcoholism. He was 49.

"Goodbye Wizard," tweeted O'Neill's formative club Nacional after he passed away due to chronic cirrhosis in a Montevideo hospital where he had been rushed on Saturday suffering from a hemorrhage.

"The most talented player I've ever seen," was how French World Cup winner Zidane, a

teammate at Juventus, described O'Neill.

After making his debut for Nacional at the age of 18 in 1992, O'Neill was transferred to Cagliari in Italian Serie A three years later.

In 2000, he moved to Juventus but after playing for the Turin giants for just one season, he was farmed out to Perugia.

He then returned to Nacional before quitting in 2003.

O'Neill earned 19 caps for Uruguay and scored two goals. He was part of the squad that was eliminated in the first round

of the World Cup in South Korea and Japan in 2002 although he did not feature in any of the group games due to injury.

"Uruguayan football is in mourning. One of the best players to emerge in recent decades and who knew how to shine on the field with his talent and magic has left us," wrote the El Pais newspaper.

El Observador said that "Fabian O'Neill was one of those great talents wasted.... his career was marked by alcohol and excesses."

AFP

Struggling Wolves sign Matheus Cunha from Atletico on loan

Madrid, Spain - Atletico Madrid striker Matheus Cunha on Sunday agreed a loan deal with rock-bottom English Premier League side Wolves, the Spanish club announced.

The 23-year-old Brazilian moved to Spain from Hertha Berlin in Germany in 2021 for a fee of 26 million euros but struggled to make any significant impact with the Madrid club.

He scored seven goals last season but hasn't found the net in 17 appearances in the current campaign.

"From Atletico Madrid we wish Matheus Cunha the best of success," said the Spanish league club.

Cunha will join Wolves from January 1 subject to work permit approval with a permanent deal - reportedly worth a club-record £43million (48.5 million euros) - an option.

"Matheus Cunha will become Julen Lopetegui's first signing as Wolves head coach, joining on loan from 1st January, subject to



Matheus Cunha

work permit," said a Wolves statement.

"The Brazilian international flew to the UK and completed his medical earlier in the week, finalising a loan move which will automatically become a permanent deal until 2027, should certain

clauses be triggered."

Cunha helped Brazil win gold at the Tokyo Olympics last summer and has since won eight senior caps, but missed out on the squad for the World Cup in Qatar.

AFP

'Disaster' for Newcastle not to have 'unique' Saint-Maximin

London, United Kingdom - Newcastle boss Eddie Howe hailed French winger Allan Saint-Maximin as "unique" on Sunday, insisting it was a "disaster" when he was unavailable.

The 25-year-old has been sidelined since August with a hamstring injury but his team have hardly missed him.

Backed by the deep pockets of their Saudi owners, Newcastle have racked up seven wins and are 12 games unbeaten in all competitions.

They sit third in the Premier League table heading into Mon-



Allan Saint-Maximin

day's trip to Leicester.

"For me if he is unavailable at any time, it is a disaster because he's unique and he's got those skills that any defender doesn't want to play against," said Howe.

"He's a real character and we love him for that. He's got a really nice personality, he's really good to work with.

"But like every player, he'll want to play, I've got no doubt about that, and he'll be pushing to play. But that's a great thing for us."

AFP

Klopp discusses movies, singing and 2022 in Christmas video

London, United Kingdom - Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp refused to sing this year in his annual seasonal message to fans but he did reveal on Sunday that his favourite movie for the holidays is "Love Actually".

Klopp has sung "Last Christmas" by Wham! and German carol "O du froehliche" in previous years but said he did not "want to bother you with my

voice" this time. In video on the club website he revealed he had "special movies I like to watch in that period" and 2003's star-studded British romantic comedy "Love Actually" was one of them. He said he was "pretty sure we will watch it again this year".

"In the crazy world we are living in at the moment, it's really nice to see these kind of moves where the subjects aren't as se-

rious," he said.

He said the year, in which Liverpool won the League Cup and FA Cup and came agonisingly close to a quadruple, had been "pretty special" from "a sport point of view".

Liverpool missed the Premier League title by a point.

"The league was obviously pretty spectacular as well," he said. "I know that's not that much

appreciated, I get that, when you come close. But from a coach's point of view I'm proud."

He said he had less good memories of the Champions League final which Liverpool lost to Real Madrid while their fans were caught up in chaos outside the Stade de France.

"It was a special night for all the absolute wrong reasons."

AFP

HAND TRANSPLANT

HAND IN HAND

10 years after UK's first hand transplant, the patient and surgeon meet again to recount the surgical success

On December 27, 2012, the UK's first hand transplant took place at Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust (LTH). A decade on, the patient and his pioneering surgeon together examine the outcome and how it affected the quality of life of the former.

"Many patients say after surgery it is the small things that are the most significant to them," says Prof Simon Kay OBE, a consultant plastic surgeon.

"Being able to brush their daughter's hair, take money out of a purse or turn on the tap and fill a glass of water, and to feel complete again." Or, in the case of former West Yorkshire pub landlord Mark Cahill, save his wife's life, after she suffered a heart attack.

Leeds, the home of the UK Hand Transplant Unit, is the UK's only provider of this type of complex surgery. It is also now considered one of the leading hand transplant services in the world. It's an area of medicine that would have seemed implausible just a few decades ago.

Cahill is the poster boy for this unit. In 2012, his right hand had become so badly infected following years of gout that it required amputating. He addresses Prof Kay as "Prof", revealing a familiarity forged through years of interaction. Some patients who have walked these corridors over the past decade lost their hands or limbs due to accidents.

Others lost theirs to medical conditions such as sepsis or scleroderma.

"My mother had seen Professor Kay on the television saying he was going to do hand transplants," recalls Mr Cahill, of Greetland near Halifax. "I managed to get to see him, and he said I was an ideal candidate. I talked it over with my family and thought I may as well go for it, it's got to be better than what I've got, which it turns out it has been."

Only after intense psychological interviews, did he go under the surgeon's knife. "They test your psychological being to see if you're suitable," he says.

On Boxing Day, the call he and his family had been waiting for finally came. "They said, 'can you come across?' They said you might spend a while in hospital while we do the tests to see if you're suitable. All sorts run through your mind - will it be successful, will I like it? You don't know these things until after the operation."

To him, the decision to have the transplant was a no-brainer. The surgical team liaised with surgeons in France who performed the first hand transplant in 1998.

"They put me to sleep and I woke up with a new hand," says Mr Cahill, who underwent the transplant the following day. "I remember waking up in the high dependency unit afterwards and Prof came in and said, 'let's have a look'.

(Source: Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust)



Key facts about hand transplant

- Very few donors or their families agree to donate their hands.
- Hand donation is not an option that can be selected from the donor register.
- Finding a match is more complex than for other organs as physical look and psychological acceptance play a key role in transplant success
- A one-year assessment of the patient is key and includes psychological as well as immunological assessment
- Recovery and full usage of the new transplants can take between one and three years
- Hand transplant is not yet available for children, but this is an area the team aims to develop.

CLASSIFIEDS

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WINTER TRAINING

Don't give up your regular fitness regime during winter when the temptation to stay curled up in your bed is at its peak every morning. Get up and exercise your will to workout. But be wary of winter training guidelines.

Regular exposure to the cold when training causes your metabolism to switch from burning carbohydrates for energy to burning fat. This is because your blood vessels narrow in the cold, making your heart and lungs work harder, while increasing the amount of oxygen your body can consume during physical exertion. This means you can burn more fat during winter.

In a recent article published by Nuffield Health, clinical fitness lead Adam Byrne has put together some of his top tips for exercising in cold weather.

WARM UP

Cold weather lowers the body temperature and affects the nervous system, which can impact your performance. Your reactions start to slow as it becomes harder to generate a muscle contraction, and your body finds it harder to keep everything firing on all cylinders.

However, when you warm up properly, oxygenated blood starts flowing around the body, joints start to loosen, and muscles start to activate. Body and muscular temperature raises, which increases your flexibility and decreases your risk of injury, preparing you for exercise.

Keep in mind that the colder the weather, the longer you may need to warm up. Make sure you mobilise every area such as limbs, abs, back and shoulders before going into the main phase of your workout.

STAY HYDRATED

Hydration in winter is so important. When it's cold and wet outside, many people think that they don't have to drink as much, but that's not true.

During the colder months, our thirst response is reduced, which means we are less likely to feel thirsty naturally due to our blood vessels narrowing, which keeps our body heat closer to our core. If we don't drink enough water, we are



WILL TO WORK OUT



likely to become dehydrated, which in turn leads to a drop in training performance and risk of injury.

There are other contributing external factors as to why we need to drink water and stay hydrated. We wear more layers in winter, making us sweat more. We are more likely to lose water when we're breathing through vapour (when you can see your own breath). Sweat also evaporates quicker in cool air, so we think we aren't sweating when we actually are.

STAY MOTIVATED

When setting goals, make sure that they aren't just measurable, but also realistic. Identify both short and long-term goals to help keep you motivated. Setting some short-term targets, which could be achieved in one, two or three months, will provide a sense of achievement as you work towards your longer-term goals.

Avoid doing activities you find boring. Try a new exercise class or train with a friend to provide that added social element to your routine. Seek professional advice – personal trainers have the knowledge and expertise to guide you to achieve your goals quicker and more efficiently.

Remember to celebrate your achievements. When you've done something you didn't think you could, or reached one of your targets, make sure you acknowledge it.

MAKE EXERCISE A WAY OF LIFE

There are many things you can do in your day-to-day life to increase your fitness levels. Small changes can make a big difference. An easy rule to follow is to get up every 90 minutes and stretch your body by heading to the kitchen to make a cuppa or nip outside to get some fresh air. Your body will thank you.

This year, Nuffield Health has been encouraging everyone to find five minutes a day where you can take time out to concentrate on your physical and mental health. Whether that's doing quick five-minute exercise routines in the living room or some vigorous hoovering, it will all contribute towards your overall wellbeing.



DR UMER FAROOK
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Joint ventures – quicker options

Knee joints are the most commonly injured and affected joint in the human body, and while youngsters are more affected with traumatic pathology, older patients usually suffer from degenerative conditions.

Our knee joints connect the thigh bone with the lower portion of the limb together with some ligaments, soft tissues, and some 'washers' called meniscus which act as shock absorbers and increase the surface area of the joint. Every joint is washed in a fluid, called synovial fluid, which gives nutrition to the joint and decreases friction in between.

Fractures commonly occur after traumatic events, RTAs etc, and with

advancement in trauma management, patients are now brought back to normal life in a very short span of time. Fractures often require immediate mode of treatment, whether it is surgical or conservative with slabs, casts etc.

As with the advancement in traumatic management and implant selection, many of the fractures can be treated surgically with minimally invasive procedures, with very minimal stitches, and early rehabilitation. With titanium implants, minimal incision techniques, use of X-RAY imaging at the time of surgery, etc, complex fractures can be treated and patients are brought back to normal life in a short span of time.

Key hole procedures using

arthroscope and other instruments, have also facilitated fracture management. In comparison with fracture management, that occurs usually with high velocity trauma, sports injuries usually result in ligament injuries and need special attention.

ACL injuries are the commonest ligament injury in the knee joint, and the diagnosis is confirmed with MRI investigation which brings light into the assessment of soft tissue structures. In ACL tear cases, definitive surgical treatment is delayed up to 6 weeks.

Keyhole surgeries are preferred for the treatment of ACL – this involves surgical incisions around 1-2 cm, and bio screws which get absorbed into the bone once the ligament is healed. Keyhole surgeries also require shorter hospital stay.

An important part is played by the physiotherapist, who helps the patients in early rehabilitation, enabling a range of movements to avoid stiffness in joints. After surgery, patients are advised physiotherapy at the earliest to speed up recovery.

In moderate to severe cases of degenerative diseases, surgical treatment becomes mandatory. Total knee replacement is one such surgical option, besides other minimally invasive procedures.



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