

'Youth at forefront of govt concerns'

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik delivered a speech on Tuesday on the occasion of the second anniversary of his accession to the throne | See Page 02

We have placed youth at the forefront of our government's concerns. We have followed up on the efforts made to engage youth in the nation-building process. We will ensure that this partnership is more comprehensive and more effective

Our economic and fiscal performance has improved, and we started to accomplish for you and with you the march of growth and prosperity

Sustaining the State's ability to meet its financial obligations has been the prime aim of the current stage. We feel satisfied with the positive change in fiscal performance which, thanks be to the Almighty Allah, has improved fairly well



Royal Decree establishes Royal Administration Academy

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday issued a Royal Decree establishing the Royal Administration Academy, specifying its prerogatives and approving its organisational structure.

The Royal Decree stated that the Royal Administration Academy should be headquartered in Muscat governorate. The Board of Trustees of the academy may establish branches in other governorates. The decree also stated that the academy should have a Board of Trustees under the chairmanship of the Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court. ONA (Log on to muscatdaily.com for full report)

Based on our keenness to provide the maximum level of protection and care for citizens and residents, we hereby direct the government to speed up the rate of support and development of the early warning system and to endorse the best urban planning programmes

We will offer necessary support and incentives to small and medium enterprises, given their vital role in stimulating economic activity and employment opportunities

We are impressed by the achievements made in the field of recruitment during this year, which saw the employment of a good number of Omani jobseekers, despite the difficulty of this stage

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'Employment the cornerstone of development'

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday gave a speech on the occasion of the day on which he assumed the reins of power in the country, January 11, reading as follows:

"Almighty Allah, thanks be to You for bringing back this blessed occasion at a time when our march of development is forging ahead and our renaissance is renewed and deriving impetus from a glorious history. It is in anticipation of the future with a strong will based on the solidarity of its citizens.

No efforts spared

"To safeguard our gains and the accomplishments made on this benign land and, to establish a prosperous future for our young generation in all parts of this country, we will spare no effort in utilising all means to realise the objective.

We are confident that you all perceive the volume of challenges that we have been through, that we have tackled with tact and patience, and then, with the Almighty's divine support, proceeded with the implementation of our social and economic plans and programmes, guided by Oman Vision 2040. Our economic and fiscal performance has improved, and we started to accomplish for you and with you the march of growth and prosperity.

Sustaining the State's ability to meet its financial obligations has been the prime aim of the current stage. We feel satisfied with the positive change in fiscal performance which, thanks be to the Almighty Allah, has improved fairly well.

This has been further consolidated

by the expansion in economic stimulus policies and the establishment of a social protection scheme catering to the welfare of citizens, thus giving this improvement a humanitarian dimension.

Youth in focus

"We have placed youth at the forefront of our government's concerns. We have followed up the efforts made to engage youth in the nation-building process. We will ensure that this partnership is more comprehensive and more effective. The State's institutions and officials are endorsing a sustainable course of action focusing on highlighting the salient contributions of youth in this auspicious march and organising their roles in serving society.

We are impressed by the achievements made in the field of recruitment during this year, which saw the employment of a good number of Omani jobseekers, despite the difficulty of this stage. We look forward with hope, combined with determination, that all sectors of the State and the private sector will play the role expected of them in promoting employment, it being the cornerstone of the economy and development. The aim is to provide jobs for our qualified sons and daughters and to qualify those who require necessary skills to join the labour market. As for our sons and daughters from among entrepreneurs who wish to establish their private projects, we are resolved to lend them our support and encourage their entrepreneurship programmes. We will offer necessary support and incentives to small and medium enterprises, given their vital



role in stimulating economic activity and employment opportunities.

Investment destination

"Local investment constitutes one of the basic pillars of diversification of the national income. After we launched a set of national programmes and fur-

nished proper and suitable grounds, we hereby urge all to invest funds locally. We have lucrative investment opportunities at hand in all fields, and we look forward to seeing our country as a destination for pioneering investments, notably in spheres that consolidate our approach to expand the

volume of the national economy and diversify the sources of income. Our country, thanks be to the Almighty Allah, boasts a wide range of competitive incentives, great potentials and promising opportunities that need to be utilised. The government will exert all efforts and capacities for cooperation and integration to ensure channeling development to the governorates. This will enhance their preparedness for investment and develop their role based on the comparative advantage of each governorate in a manner that creates development models. This will be substantiated by a set of strategic goals to be executed by the government within the context of Five-Year plans. Thus, the march of development can be perfected and empowered to cover all parts of this dear homeland.

Over the next stage of the Renewed Renaissance, we will take action to transform government performance from the level of emergency solutions to a more sustainable level having a set of lasting and comprehensive solutions that place economic growth, fiscal sustainability and social welfare at the forefront of its priorities.

Early warning system

"It was the Almighty Allah's will that our country was subjected to adverse climatic conditions. Based on our keenness to provide the maximum level of protection and care for citizens and residents, we hereby direct the government to speed up the rate of support and development of the early warning system and to endorse the best urban planning programmes to curb the impact of such climatic conditions.

Our identity, our pride

"Elevating Oman to the higher strata of progress that it deserves is a national duty and a responsibility to be shouldered by each and every citizen.

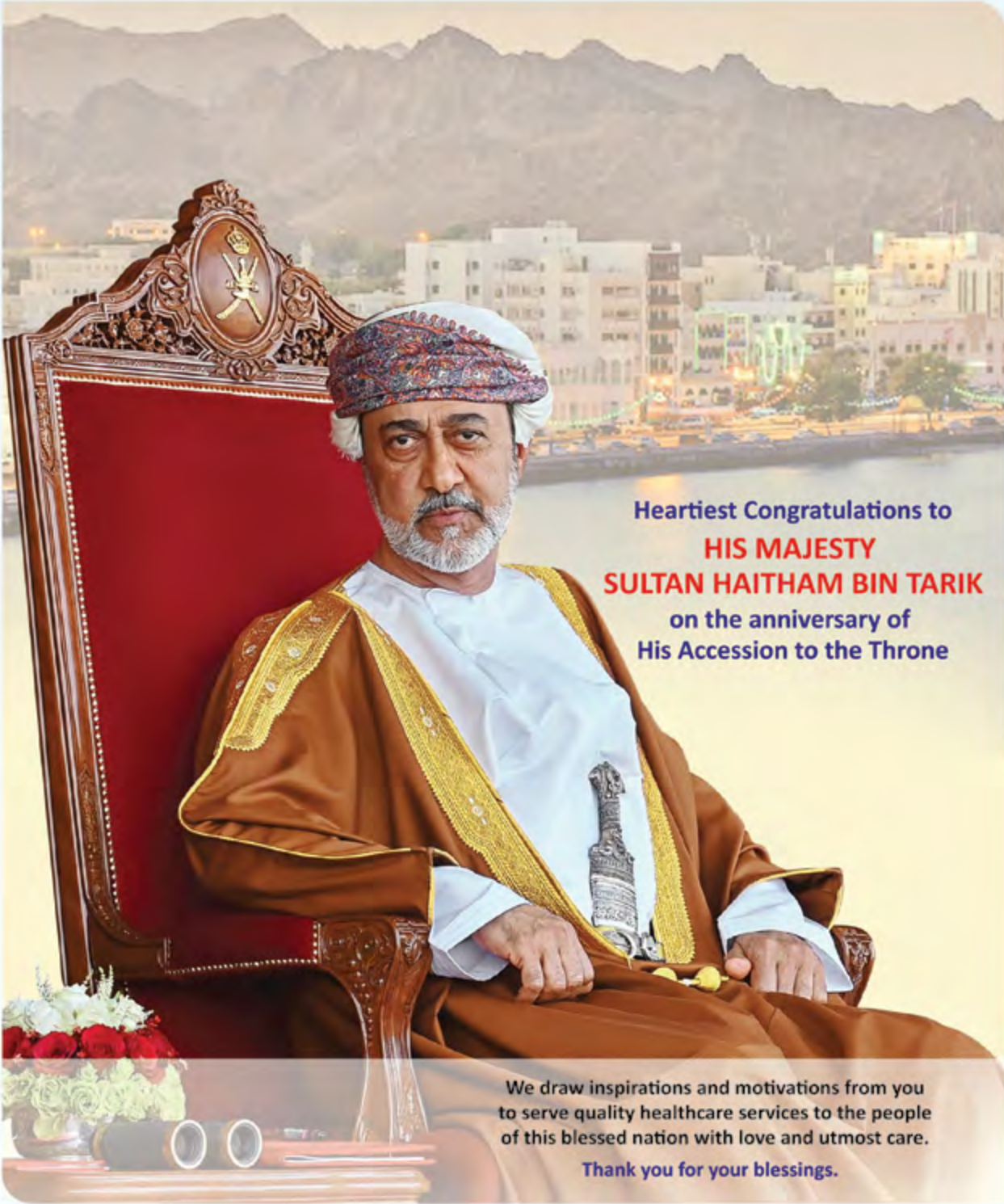
We hereby urge all our sons and daughters to stick to the values and principles emanating from our glorious history. Let's take pride in our identity and the core essence of our personality, while at the same time opening up to the world in a balanced and objective manner and with a positive stance that does not compromise our originality or identity or make us lose or forget either of them.

Salute to armed forces

"Sincere national efforts have always been the object of our appreciation and pride. In this context, we would like to register an expression of commendation for our military and security services. We salute them for the honourable national role they have undertaken in protecting the nation and defending its interests and sovereignty, at every time and place, willing to offer their lives in sacrifice for every inch of this dear homeland. To you, armed and security services, we proclaim our deep thanks and praise for your valuable contribution towards building the dear homeland and elevating its status. We pray to the Almighty Allah to lend us all support to bear this great responsibility. We pray to Him to grant us success to realise the good of the nation and its citizens.

May the Almighty Allah protect Oman. May He protect you all, loyal citizens of Oman!"

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on the anniversary of

His Accession to the Throne

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HM the Sultan confers Order of Royal Commendation on eight

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has conferred the Order of Royal Commendation, 2nd Class, on eight Omani individuals in recognition of their scientific and research achievements, as well as their contribution to society. The orders were presented by Sayyid Khalid Hilal al Busaidi, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, when he received them

in his office on Tuesday.

During the meeting, Sayyid Khalid affirmed that the orders were granted by His Majesty the Sultan in appreciation of their efforts. He wished them success in their current and future endeavors in serving the homeland.

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Prof Sabah Ahmed al Sulaiman,
for research and innovation in Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies.

Dr Abdullah Mohammed al Sa'adi,
for research and innovation in Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies.

Prof Khalifa Saif al Jabri,
for work in the health sector.

Sheikh Suhail Salim al Mukhaini,
for work in civil initiatives, social responsibility, economy, labour market and recruitment. On his behalf, the order was received by his son Sheikh Ahmed Suhail al Mukhaini.

Dr Mohammed Ali al Barwani,
for work in the fields of labour market, recruitment and economy.

Saleh Mohammed al Shanfari,
for work in the fields of environment and natural resources (food security).

Hareb Abdullah al Kitani,
for work in the fields of environment and natural resources (liquefied gas).

Hunaina Sultan al Mughairy,
for work in the field of administrative and institutional development (diplomatic work).



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Initial Public Offering of 30,208,800 Offer Shares
at a price range of Bzs 115 to Bzs 145 per Offer Share

Inclusive of Offer Expenses of Bzs 2 per Offer Share

Phase I Offer Opens
30 January 2022

Phase I Offer Closes
3 February 2022

شركة بركاء لتحلية المياه
Barka Desalination Company



This summary has been extracted from the unofficial translation of the original Prospectus prepared in Arabic and approved by the CMA in accordance with Administrative Decision No. KH/5/2022 dated 6 January 2022. This does not constitute an offer to sell or an invitation by or on behalf of the Issuer to subscribe to any of the Shares in any jurisdiction outside of Oman where such distribution is, or may be, unlawful.

General Information on the Offer and the Company

Name	Barka Desalination Company SAOG (under transformation)
Commercial registration number	1242376
Date of registration	25 January 2016
Registered office	P.O. Box 252, PC 103, Al Qurm, Boushahr, Muscat Governorate, Sultanate of Oman
Principal place of business	Barka, South Al Batainah Governorate, Sultanate of Oman
Duration	Unlimited
Issued and paid-up share capital	QMR 7,552,200 divided into 75,522,000 Shares with a value of 100 Bzs per Share
Issue Manager	Bank Muscat SAOG P.O. Box 154, Postal Code 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman Tel: +968 2476 8888; Fax: +968 2479 8220 URL: www.bankmuscat.com

Articles of Association

The principal objectives for which Barka Desalination is established are development, financing, procurement, construction, ownership, operation and maintenance of seawater desalination plant at Barka in the South Al Batainah Governorate, together with all associated water extraction, pumping, storage and distribution systems, equipment and associated electrical sub-systems and the delivery and sale of potable water by the Company in the Sultanate of Oman.

A copy of the Memorandum and Articles is available for perusal at the registered office of Barka Desalination during business hours on any business day.

Shareholding Pattern

Name of Shareholder	Number of Shares held	% of Total	Aggregate Value of Shares held (QMR)
IE HE	27,387,920	36.0	2,718,792
SUEZ ME	20,390,940	27.0	2,039,094
Kahrabat FZE	20,390,940	27.0	2,039,094
W.J. Towell & Co. LLC	7,552,200	10.0	755,220
Total	75,522,000	100.00	7,552,200

Brief profile of the Selling Shareholders:

Environmental Investments Middle East Limited (IE HE)
IE HE, a wholly owned by ITOCHU Corporation (ITOCHU), has been established solely to invest in water and environment-related business in the Middle East area.

Further information about ITOCHU is available at <https://www.itochu.co.jp/en/index.html>

SUEZ Group S.A.S (SUEZ)
SUEZ Group is a direct and wholly owned subsidiary of SUEZ S.A. SUEZ S.A. is a world leader in the whole value chain of the environmental services.

Further information about SUEZ S.A. and SUEZ group companies is available at: <https://www.suez.com>.

W.J. Towell & Co. LLC
Established in 1986, W.J. Towell is one of the largest groups of companies in Oman.

Further information about W.J. Towell Group is available at www.wjowell.com.

Kahrabat FZE

Kahrabat is owned by IPGA a part of Energy Group ENGIE, a global reference in low-carbon energy and services with a 2020 turnover of EUR 58.8 billion and 170,000 employees.

Further information about ENGIE is available at www.engie.com.

Anchor Investors

The Company has received irrevocable commitments from the Anchor Investors to subscribe to the Offer at the highest and of the Price Range. The following table provides details of the Offer Shares to be allotted to each Anchor Investor:

Name of Anchor Investor	Number of Shares Allocated	% of Offer	% of total Issued Share Capital
National Power & Water Co LLC	3,020,800	10%	4%
Bank Muscat SAOG	3,020,800	10%	4%
Total	6,041,600	20%	8%

Please refer to Chapter VII - Shareholding Details for more details on the Anchor Investors' of the Prospectus.

Description of Barka Desalination and Business Overview

The Company's core business activity is to develop, own and operate the Barka Independent Water Project, a sea water reverse osmosis (SWRO) plant with a production capacity of 280,000 m³/day (16.8 MGD) located in Barka, South Batainah Governorate, Sultanate of Oman. The Plant has been in commercial operation since 13 June 2018.

Competitive Strengths

The Company's competitive strengths include:

- Largest operating SWRO desalination plant at a single location in Oman and one of the largest independent Water Project in the GCC
- Well-established contractual framework with long term water purchase agreement, ensuring cash flow protection against adverse events such as buyer risk events and force majeure
- Stable and predictable cash flows, resilient to potential shocks in electricity prices and water demand during the term of the WPA
- State-of-the-art technologies ensuring a reliable and long-term performance of the plant
- Experienced Project Founders with an established track record of ensuring transfer of skills and know-how
- Fully operational Project
- Experienced Operator comprising of skilled operational personnel
- Continuous demand for water, with opportunities for incremental growth in revenue after the expiry of the current off-take contract

Risk Factors

Prior to investing in Offer Shares, prospective Applicants should carefully consider the risk factors relating to Barka Desalination's business and industry described in Chapter XII - Risk Factors and Methods of Mitigation' together with all other information contained in the Prospectus, including the financial statements set out in Chapter XIII - Historical Financial Statements' of the Prospectus, before making any investment decision relating to the Offer Shares. These risks and uncertainties are not the only issues that Barka Desalination faces; additional risks and uncertainties not presently known to Barka Desalination or that Barka Desalination currently believes to be immaterial may also have a material adverse or beneficial effect on its financial condition or business success. The occurrence of any or a combination of the events mentioned in Chapter XI - Risk Factors and Methods of Mitigation' of the Prospectus could have a material adverse or beneficial effect on Barka Desalination's business, results of operations, financial condition and prospects and cause the market price of the Shares to fall significantly and investors to lose all or part of their investment. Unless otherwise stated in the relevant risk factors set out in the Prospectus, Barka Desalination is not in a position to specify or quantify the financial or other risks mentioned therein.

Board of Directors

The current composition of the Board of Directors, in accordance with Article 6 of the Articles is as follows:

Name	Representing	Independent/ Non-Independent
Mr. Murtadha Ahmed Sultan (Chairman)	Personal capacity	Non-Independent
Mr. John Brian Marshall (Deputy Chairman)	Personal capacity	Non-Independent
Mr. Tsunenaru Hibino	Personal capacity	Non-Independent
Mr. Tomas Henrique Quadragini	Personal capacity	Non-Independent
Mr. Didier Pierre-Marie Paul Sachot	Personal capacity	Non-Independent
Mr. Charles Cham	Personal capacity	Non-Independent
Mr. Willem Van den Abeele	Personal capacity	Non-Independent
Dr. Mohammed Zahir Al-Abr	Personal capacity	Independent
Dr. Harib Abdullah Al Kitani	Personal capacity	Independent
Mr. Khalid Hassan Al Lawati	Personal capacity	Independent
Mr. Mohammed Salim Nasser Al Wahibi	Personal capacity	Independent

Senior Management Team

The current composition of the Management is as follows:

Name	Position
Patrick Theropont	Chief Executive Officer
Pranod Ralekar	Chief Financial Officer
Mehesh Patel	Finance Manager

The key members of the Operator who are active in operation and maintenance activities for the Project are set out below:

Name	Position
Samah Moktar	Facility Manager
Azzin Bin Kasman	Operations Manager
Kirill Sergeyev	Maintenance Manager

Subscription Conditions and Procedures

The Offer entails a two phased process, i.e. (a) Phase I Offer; and (b) Phase II Offer. Phase I Offer is being offered to investors through a book-building mechanism with the primary objective to discover the price of the Offer Shares based on the bids received from Phase I Applicants through which the Offer Price is determined. The Offer Price shall be based on the highest bid price which covers the total Offer Shares, amongst the bids received which are at or higher than the Offer Price. The Offer Price will be announced on the MSX website (www.msx.om) on the day of the Phase I Offer Period. This announcement is expected to be followed by the Phase II Offer to Phase II Applicants through a fixed price offering at the Offer Price. The subscription conditions and procedures applicable to both the Phase I Offer and Phase II Offer are set out in Chapter XX of the Prospectus. An overview of the Phase I Offer is summarised below:

PHASE I OFFER

Offer Structure

	Phase I Offer
Proposed allocation of the number of Offer Shares	16,104,400 Shares (out of which 6,041,600 Shares have been reserved for Anchor Investors)
Proposed allocation of the percentage of Offer Shares	50 %
Basis of Pricing and Allotment	Book building mechanism
Minimum Subscription	250,100 Shares and thereafter in multiples of 100 Shares
Maximum Subscription	3,020,800 Shares equivalent to c. 10% of the Offer Shares
Terms of Payment of Application Money	100% of the Phase I Application Money to be paid at the time of submission of the Application or at the time of allotment described in more detail in the Prospectus under the heading "Terms of Payment"
Offer Subscription Period	30 January 2022 to 3 February 2022

Subscription Conditions and Procedures Applicable to Phase I Offer

Eligibility for the Subscription of Offer Shares

The subscription for Phase I Offer Shares will be open to Oman and non-Omani individuals and juristic persons who have their accounts with MCDC. All GCC individuals and juristic persons are treated as Oman individuals and juristic persons for the purpose of owning shares in Oman SAOGs.

No single person shall by himself, or through a related person up to the second degree, hold or purchase 25 percent or more of the shares of an SAOG, except with the explicit written approval of the CMA as per the applicable regulations.

Prohibitions with Regard to the Applications for Subscription
In accordance with the Capital Market Law, the following persons shall not be permitted to subscribe to the Offer:

- Sole proprietorship establishments - The owners of sole proprietorship establishments may only submit Applications in their personal names.
 - Trust accounts - Applicants registered under trust accounts may only submit Applications in their personal names (except as detailed below).
 - Joint Applications - Applicants may not submit more than one Application.
 - Joint Applications - Applicants may not submit applications in the name of more than one individual (including on behalf of legal heirs).
 - Founding Shareholders - The founding shareholders of the Company may not submit any Applications.
 - Related Parties - The related parties of the Company may not submit an Application in the Phase I Offer.
- All such Applications will be rejected without contacting the Applicant. As an exception, the Applicants by the Trust Accounts may be accepted in the Offer, at the discretion of the Issue Manager, if the Collection Agent is satisfied that none of the underlying subscribers applying through such Trust Accounts have also applied through their names or their personal establishments. The Issue Manager may reject such Application if it becomes aware that there are multiple applications from such investors applying through Trust Accounts. The Collection Agent accepting Applications by the Trust Accounts will need to get an undertaking signed by the Applicant providing further details of the underlying investors / beneficiaries on whose behalf the Application has been made. The Collection Agent will clearly communicate to Applicant that in case of multiple Applications by the Trust Account and the underlying investor in their or their personal establishments, one or both the Applications are liable to be rejected at the discretion of the Issue Manager.

Subscription on Behalf of Minor Children

For the purpose of this Phase I Offer, any person under 18 years of age on the date of submission of an Application will be defined as a minor. Only a father may subscribe on behalf of his minor children.

If an Application is made on behalf of a minor by any person other than the minor's father, the person submitting the Application will be required to attach a valid Shariah Legal/Power of Attorney issued by the competent authorities authorizing him or her to deal in the funds of the minor through sale, purchase and investment.

Applicant's Number with MCDC

Any Applicant who subscribes for the Phase I Offer Shares must have an account and investor Number with the MCDC. In order to open an account with the MCDC, Applicants should contact the MCDC, Muscat Clearing & Depository Co. SAOG, P.O. Box 952, Postal Code 112, Ruwi, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman - Tel: +968 2482 2222; Fax: +968 2481 7401 - www.mcd.gov.om

Offer Period

The Phase I Offer Period will commence on 30 January 2022 and end on 3 February 2022 at 2 PM Oman Time.

Subscription and Application Process for Phase I Applicants

- Applicants who wish to subscribe for Phase I Offer Shares may do so by completing an Application. Applications for Phase I will be available at the head offices of the Collection Agents and can be submitted at the head offices of the Collection Agents. The list of name, address and contact details of Collection Agents for Barka Desalination IPO are provided in the Prospectus. The Application must be completed in full in accordance with the instructions contained in the Prospectus. Incomplete Applications may be rejected. Applicants may only use the specified Application for the purpose of making a subscription for the Phase I Offer.
- Each Applicant may only submit one Application. Phase I Applicants may place an Application with a Collection Agent from 30 January 2022 to 3 February 2022. Along with the Application, all Phase I Applicants must make a payment equal to the Phase I Application Money in the manner described under the paragraph "Terms of Payment".
- Each Applicant may make up to three (3) separate bids (with different Bid Price or Total shares demanded at the Bid Price) in the Application and will need to specify in the Application the price applicable to the Shares that are the subject of each bid, which is within the Price Range (each "a Bid Price"), accompanied with the number of Phase I Offer Shares bid for at that Bid Price.
- Employees of the Issue Manager and anchor's/portfolio/funds managed by the Issue Manager can submit their Application only on the Phase I Offer Closing Date.
- Related parties of the Company cannot participate in Phase I Offer except where such relationship is due to common shareholding or control exercised by the administrative apparatuses of the Government.
- The bids must be listed in descending price order on the Application, starting with the highest Bid Price and ending with the lowest Bid Price. For each Phase I Application, the quantity of Offer Shares bid for at the highest Bid Price must be the minimum number of Offer Shares bid for in the Application. Subsequent bids at lower Bid Price levels in the application must contain a bid for an equal or higher number of Offer Shares than the preceding price point. No Phase I Applicant would be allowed to withdraw their Application after it is submitted to the Collection Agent.
- The Phase I Application Money represents the highest value single bid in Omani Rials on an Application
- Each Phase I Applicant, who has placed his bid and would like to revise his Application should do the following:
 - Submit an Application Revision Form in the last 2 working days before the end of the Phase I Offer Period i.e. 2 February 2022 and 3 February 2022, for those who have applied in the first 3 days of the Phase I Offer Period only
 - Applicants would be allowed to make revisions in relation to both the desired number of Shares and the Bid Price, but only once, by filing out the Application Revision Form;
 - Only upward revision of Bid Prices or number of Shares or both is allowed, subject to payment of the Additional Application Money to the respective Collection Agent. For the sake of clarity, an Applicant cannot make any downward revision of Bid Prices or number of Phase I Offer Shares or both; and
 - The Applicant will not be able to increase or decrease the number of bids using the Application Revision Form. For example, if an Applicant submitted 2 bids in the original Application, the Applicant must submit 2 bids in the Application Revision Form as well.
- The Applicant who submits the Application within the last two days before the end of the Phase I Offer Period, i.e. 2 February 2022 or 3 February 2022, may not submit the Application Revision Form.

Indicative Price Determination and Allocation Process

The price determination and allocation for the Phase I Offer Shares shall be determined by the MCDC in consultation with the Issue Manager and the CMA, according to the conditions set out in the Prospectus.

1) Indicative Price Determination Process

- In Phase I Applications for Offer Shares at each Bid Price mentioned in the Applications will be grouped together to determine the total demand at each Bid Price;
- In respect of the Offer Shares that the Issuer will issue, the Bid Price shall be accepted in descending order until aggregate demand for Offer Shares at a certain Bid Price is equal to, or more, than the total Offer Shares, the Bid Price so accepted shall be the Offer Price;
- The Offer Price shall be based on the bid which covers the total Offer Shares amongst the bids which are at or higher than the Offer Price.

2) Indicative Allocation Process

- Each Applicant will be allotted Offer Shares at the Offer Price regardless of whether it bids at a higher Bid Price than the Offer Price;
- Bids in Applications for Shares at a Bid Price lower than the Offer Price will not receive any allocation; and
- MCDC will refund all amounts to unsuccessful Applicants at a Bid Price in the Application are less than the announced Offer Price, within three working days from the end of the Phase I Offer Close Date. Such Applicants shall also be entitled to submit Application for the Phase II Offer Shares in accordance with the conditions mentioned in the Prospectus.

MCDC will refund the book building amount at the Offer Price.

MCDC will require an Applicant to provide explanation or clarification on the calculation of the Phase I Application Money, or the allocation procedure, following the individual should be contacted:

Mr. Jignesh Dharwal - bank muscat SAOG - email: jignesh@bankmuscat.com - Tel: 2480 1165

Minimum Subscription Limit for Phase I

The minimum number of Shares for Phase I Applicants will be 250,100 Offer Shares and in multiples of 100 Offer Shares thereafter.

Maximum Subscription Limit for Phase I

The maximum number of Shares that can be applied for by a Phase I Applicant is 10 per cent (10%) of the total Offer size which equates to 3,020,800 Offer Shares. It is not permissible for an Applicant to subscribe for more than this amount.

Applicants who submit an Application for Offer Shares at a Bid Price falling outside this Price Range will not be considered and any Applications made containing any a Bid Price(s) outside of this Price Range may be rejected without contacting the Applicant.

Applicants should refer to the Prospectus will be available to the Applicants at the head offices of the Collection Agents, at the Company's offices or can be downloaded from the websites of the CMA and MSX, as follows: www.cma.gov.om & www.msx.om.

Terms of Payment

- The Collection Agents will open escrow accounts entitled the "Barka Desalination IPO - Phase I" for the collection of the Phase I Application Money. The Applicant will be required before completion of the Application, to carefully read the Prospectus, including the conditions and procedures governing the Application.
- The Applicant will be required to fill in the Application and furnish copies of all particulars as noted on the Application.
- The Applicant will be required to submit the Application at the head offices of the Collection Agent, together with the Phase I Application Money and the documents that may be required in support of the Application.
- Demand draft for the Phase I Application Money will be in favour of Barka Desalination IPO - Phase I.

Collection Agents Receiving the Applications

The Phase I Applicants' Applications will be accepted at the head offices of the Collection Agents from 10 AM to 2 PM except for the Phase I Offer Closing Date when they will be accepted from 10 AM to 2 PM. The Collection Agent receiving the Applications is required to accept the Application, after confirmation of compliance with the procedures for Applications set out in the Prospectus. The Collection Agent must instruct the Applicants to comply and fulfill any requirements set out in the Application.

Applicants must submit an Application to one of the Collection Agents on or before the closing of the Phase I Offer Period. The Collection Agent shall refuse any Application received after 12PM on the Phase I Offer Closing Date.

Payment Into Escrow Account for the Offer

- All Applicants must, with the submission of the Application, pay the Application Money by demand draft, instruct an account transfer or pay through his/her brokerage account with a licensed broker (provided the broker has been appointed as a Collection Broker for Barka Desalination IPO).
- Where an Applicant has been allocated fewer Offer Shares than indicated in the Application or at an Offer Price lower than the Bid Price at which the Phase I Application Money was calculated, the excess amount, if any, paid on the Application, will be refunded to the Applicant.
- After the receipt of the valid Application along with receipt of the Phase I Application Money, the Collection Agent must enter the bids contained in the Application into the MSX OFTC System.
- Each Collection Agent must transfer the aggregate of the Application Money against all of the Applications they have received and entered in the OFTC System of the MSX to the common escrow account held by the MCDC on the next working day after the day of receipt of the Application.

Acceptance of the Applications

- The Collection Agent will not accept Applications in the following circumstances:
 - If the Application does not bear the signature of the Applicant.
 - If the Application Money is not paid by the Applicant in accordance with the conditions set out in the Prospectus.
 - If the Bid Price and Offer Share combination in the Application is not as per the instructions in the Prospectus.
 - If the Application does not include the Applicant's investor Number registered with the MCDC.
 - If the Application Money is submitted in joint names.
 - If the Applicant is a sole proprietorship or trust account.
 - If the Investor Number furnished in the Application is incorrect.
 - If the Applicant submits more than one Application in the same name, all of them will be rejected.
 - If the supporting documents are not enclosed with the Application.
 - If the Application does not comply with the legal requirements as provided for in the Prospectus.
 - If the power of attorney is not attached to the Application in respect of an Applicant who subscribes on behalf of another person (with the exception of fathers who subscribe on behalf of their minor children).

- If appropriate documentation confirming the authority of a signatory to sign an Application is not included with an Application by juristic persons (non-individuals) who are signed by a person in his or her capacity as an authorised signatory.
- If the Application does not comply with the legal requirements as provided for in the Prospectus.
- If the Application is received after 12PM on 3 February 2022, the Phase I Offer Closing Date.
- If the Collection Agent receives an Application that does not comply with the procedures set out in the Prospectus, due effort will be taken to contact the Applicant so that the mistake may be corrected. If the Applicant does not rectify the Application within a specified period, Collection Agent may return the Application together with the Phase I Application Money to the Applicant.

Refund of Applications

The Collection Agent, Issue Manager may reject any Application under any of the conditions referred to above, subject to securing the approval of the CMA and submission of a comprehensive report furnishing the details of the Applications that are rejected and the reasons behind the rejections.

Enquiry and Complaints

Any Applicant, who intends to seek clarification or file complaints with regard to issues related to the allotment or rejection of Applications or refund of the Application Money in excess of the subscription, may contact the head office of the Collection Agent where the subscription was made. In case there is no response, the Applicant may contact the person whose details are set out in the Prospectus.

Disclosure of the bids

- The bids may be displayed on the website of the MSX www.msx.om during the Phase I Offer Period
- The Company and the Issue Manager will not be responsible for the availability, quality, accuracy, completeness or suitability of the information provided by the MSX.

Determination of the Offer Price

- MCDC will collect the bids entered into the FPM system by the Collection Agents.
- Any bid which does not meet the conditions specified in the Prospectus will be rejected.
- MCDC will subsequently prepare a cumulative demand schedule at various Bid Prices and also determine the cut-off price or the highest Bid Price at which the Company has received sufficient demand to sell all Offer Shares in the Offering. MCDC to provide a report with aforementioned details to the Issue Manager who in turn should submit the report to the CMA for approval.
- The cut-off price or the highest Bid Price will be determined to include the issue expenses of Bzs 2 per Offer Share.
- The CMA, in consultation with the Issue Manager, will approve the Offer Price and the Offer Price will be disclosed through an announcement on the website of the MSX i.e. www.msx.om and newspaper advertisements within approximately two working days after the close of the Phase I Offer Period.

PHASE II OFFER

Offer Structure

	Phase II Offer
Proposed allocation of the number of Offer Shares	16,104,400 Shares
Proposed allocation of the percentage of Offer Shares	50 %
Basis of Pricing and Allotment	Fixed price and pro-rata allotment
Minimum Subscription	1,000 Shares and thereafter in multiples of 100 Shares
Maximum Subscription	250,000 Shares
Terms of Payment of Application Money	100% of the Phase II Application Money to be paid at the time of submission of the Application

Subscription Conditions and Procedures Applicable to Phase II Offer

Eligibility for the Subscription of Offer Shares

The subscription for Phase II Offer Shares will be open to Oman and non-Omani individuals and juristic persons who have their accounts with MCDC. All GCC individuals and juristic persons are treated as Oman individuals and juristic persons for the purpose of owning shares in Oman SAOGs.

No single person shall by himself, or through a related person up to the second degree, hold or purchase 25 percent or more of the shares of an SAOG, except with the explicit written approval of the CMA as per the applicable regulations.

Prohibitions with Regard to the Applications for Subscription

In accordance with the Capital Market Law, the following persons shall not be permitted to subscribe to the Offer:

- Sole proprietorship establishments - The owners of sole proprietorship establishments may only submit Applications in their personal names.
 - Trust accounts - Applicants registered under trust accounts may only submit Applications in their personal names (except as detailed below).
 - Joint Applications - Applicants may not submit more than one Application.
 - Joint Applications - Applicants may not submit applications in the name of more than one individual (including on behalf of legal heirs).
 - Founding Shareholders - The founding shareholders of the Company may not submit any Applications.
 - Related Parties - The related parties of the Company may not submit an Application in the Phase II Offer.
- All such Applications will be rejected without contacting the Applicant. As an exception, the Applicants by the Trust Accounts may be accepted in the Offer, at the discretion of the Issue Manager, if the Collection Agent is satisfied that none of the underlying subscribers applying through such Trust Accounts have also applied through their names or their personal establishments. The Issue Manager may reject such Application if it becomes aware that there are multiple applications from such investors applying through Trust Accounts.

Subscription on Behalf of Minor Children

For the purpose of this Phase II Offer, any person under 18 years of age on the date of submission of an Application will be defined as a minor. Only a father may subscribe on behalf of his minor children.

If an Application is made on behalf of a minor by any person other than the minor's father, the person submitting the Application will be required to attach a valid Shariah Legal/Power of Attorney issued by the competent authorities authorizing him or her to deal in the funds of the minor through sale, purchase and investment.

Applicant's Number with MCDC

Any Applicant who subscribes for the Phase II Offer Shares must have an account and investor Number with the MCDC. In order to open an account with the MCDC, Applicants should contact the MCDC, Muscat Clearing & Depository Co. SAOG, P.O. Box 952, Postal Code 112, Ruwi, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman - Tel: +968 2482 2222; Fax: +968 2481 7401 - www.mcd.gov.om

Offer Period

The Phase II Offer Period will be announced on the MSX website (www.msx.om) and through newspaper advertisement after completion of Phase I with approval of the CMA.

Subscription and Application Process for Phase II Applicants

Mode of Application

Phase II Offer will be conducted only through the E-IPO Mechanism. The Applicants will be able to submit Applications either through Collection Banks or through Collection Brokers:

1) Application through Collection Banks

- E-IPO channel through the Collection Banks**
 - The Applicant will need to get in touch with their respective bank which has been appointed as a Collection Bank for Barka Desalination IPO for further guidance on the E-IPO channel provided by the respective bank.
 - The Application Money will be paid by the Applicant as per the terms of the Phase II Application process utilised by each Collection Bank in turn after verifying the supporting documents and confirming the receipt of the Phase II Application Money will validate the E-IPO Application in the E-IPO platform and share a copy of the acknowledgment of the E-IPO Application with each Applicant. The Applicant needs to ensure that they receive a copy of the acknowledgment from the Collection Bank as a valid proof of their Application.
 - Each Applicant can make payments through the following routes: (i) by cash or (ii) by cheque or demand draft in favour of Barka Desalination IPO - Phase II; or (iii) instruct their bank to debit their bank account (provided the bank has been appointed as a Collection Bank for Barka Desalination IPO) for the Phase II Application Money at the time of submission of the Application.

2) Application through Collection Brokers

The Applicants will provide instructions along with supporting documents and Phase II Application Money to their brokers (provided the broker has been appointed as a Collection Broker for Barka Desalination IPO) to apply in the IPO on their behalf. The Collection Broker on receipt of such instructions along with supporting documents and upon confirmation of the receipt of Phase II Application Money will create an E-IPO Application on behalf of the Applicant on the E-IPO Broker Platform. The Collection Broker who issues the Application on behalf of the Applicant will download and share a copy of acknowledgment of the E-IPO Application to each Applicant. The Applicant needs to ensure that they receive a copy of the acknowledgment from the Collection Broker as a valid proof of their Application.

Each Applicant can make payments through the following routes:

"All personnel of the Armed Forces pledge loyalty and allegiance to Your Majesty and they vow to be the defenders of this great renaissance. They pray to the Almighty Allah to protect Your Majesty and for the return of the occasion at a time Your Majesty enjoys good health and happiness."

ONA

The opening ceremony was attended by the Secretary-General of Royal Court Affairs, the Governor of Dakhliyah, walis of Manah and Adam, and sheikhs and members of the Municipal Council of the two wilayats.

ONA

The ministry has invited all to use the platform by downloading the Ayn app in their smart devices or through the website and give feedback that will contribute to developing and enhancing the provided services.

ONA

<http://mascate.itamaraty.gov.br/en-us/News.xml>

جينتكو
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TUV

ISO 14001:2015 Certified
TUV

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Major Hypermarkets & Electronics Retailer

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79011363

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Muscat Daily now offers free classified listings for individuals in the following categories:
Situations Wanted/Accommodation Wanted or Available/Sale of Household Items/ Car for Sale or Wanted/Matrimonial Alliances (Word limit is 35)
 Please email your listing to dailyclassifieds@apexmedia.co.om or call 99104346

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Tuesday reported 609 new COVID-19 cases, the highest single day count since July. There were no related deaths in the last 24 hours.

‘The total number of cases registered in Oman has now reached 308,870, including 4,119 deaths,’ an MoH statement said. Nineteen patients were admitted to health-care institutions in a 24-hour period on Tuesday, accounting for a total of 50 COVID-19 inpatients, including four in ICUs.

Fajr	5.31am
Sunrise	6.51am
Duhr	12.20pm
Asr	3.23pm
Maghrib	5.44pm
Isha	6.59pm



Barka Desalination Company to launch IPO

Muscat - Barka Desalination Company (BDC), owner of Oman's largest operating water desalination plant Barka IWP, today announced its intention to launch its initial public offering (IPO). The company will offer 40 per cent of its share capital to the public through an IPO. Accordingly, BDC will offer 30,208,800 shares to the public through listing on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX).

As anchor investors in the IPO, National Power & Water Co (an investment arm of Bahwan Engineering Group), and Bank Muscat have committed to invest upto 10 per cent of the IPO at 145bz per share i.e. the highest end of the IPO price range.

Barka Desalination generates its revenues pursuant to a twenty year contracted water purchase agreement (WPA) until 2038 with the government of Oman owned Oman Power & Water Procurement Company (OPWP), ensuring stable and predictable cash flows. Backed by this contracted WPA, the company plans to offer the shares in the IPO on book-building basis in a price range of 115bz to 145bz, which translates into an attractive dividend yield of 8.4 per cent per annum to 10.6 per cent per annum to IPO investors.

Commenting on the proposed IPO, Patrick Thienpont, CEO of BDC said, "Barka Desali-



Murtadha Sultan



Patrick Thienpont

nation Company officially commenced commercial operations in June 2018 after the remarkable construction of the Barka IWP plant, which was completed in less than 30 months. The IPO is a unique opportunity to invest in a strategic asset that will continue to be held and managed by the marquee founders. We look forward to welcoming new partners in our future journey."

BDC's chairman Murtadha Sultan said, "Water is an essential commodity and a precious resource that forms the foundation of economic and social development in Oman. As the largest water supplier to the sultanate's desalinated water production, we are proud of our contribution to Oman. Investors have a rare opportunity to invest in the water sector in Oman through BDC's IPO. We are confident that both institutional and retail investors will make the best of this opportunity".

The IPO of Barka Desalina-

tion Company is going to be the first IPO in Oman under the Rules for Pricing Mechanism in Public Offering of Shares introduced by the Capital Market Authority (CMA) last year. The IPO of BDC will adopt several recent mechanisms in Oman, including a two-phased approach. Phase I will be an offer to large and institutional investors through a book-building method which is aimed at finding a fair value for the offer shares. This will be followed by a Phase II offer to the retail investors which is based on a fixed price and E-IPO for investor convenience. The CMA has designed the new rules with the aim of providing clear legal framework for determining fair offer price objectively and transparently.

Barka IWP uses proven and reliable Sea Water Reverse Osmosis (SWRO) desalination technology providing environmentally friendly and sustained supply of high-quality drinking

water at a record low electrical energy consumption. The plant has achieved excellent operating performance with over 99 per cent reliability in the last twelve months. It is worth noting that the Plant uses SeaDAF technology, which helps it deliver water even in 'algae bloom' phenomena wherein other water desalination plants in Oman typically face technical complexities with respect to operations of their plants.

BDC has been promoted by global leaders with vast experience in water industry: ITOCHU Corporation from Japan, ENGIE and SUEZ from France along with WJ Towell Group from Oman. Barka Desalination caters to 23 per cent of water demand in the Oman. BDC-owned plant with proven desalination technology is a strategic asset located close to Muscat and is thereby a key water supply unit for Muscat city and northern part of the sultanate.

Bank Muscat Investment Banking, Oman's largest and most experienced investment banking team, is the financial advisor and sole issue manager for the IPO transaction. BDC has also appointed a large collection syndicate for the IPO, consisting of five banks and two prominent brokerage firms who would be accepting application forms from potential investors in the IPO.

CBO issues RO313mn worth treasury bills

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A tender of government treasury bills, (issue number 553) was announced by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) this week.

The value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO313mn, for a maturity period of 91 days, from January 12, 2022 until April 13, 2022.

The average accepted price reached RO99.821 for every RO100 bill and the minimum ac-

cepted price arrived at RO99.820.

The average discount rate and the average yield reached 0.71781 per cent and 0.71910 per cent, respectively.

The interest rate on the repo operations with the CBO is 0.5 per cent while the discount rate on the treasury bills discounting facility with the CBO is 0.75 per cent.

Treasury bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of

Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the opportunity to invest their surplus funds. The CBO acts as the Issue Manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities.

Treasury bills promote the local money market by creating a benchmark yield curve for short-term interest rates. Additionally, the government may also resort to this instrument whenever felt necessary.



جامعة التكنولوجيا والعلوم التطبيقية
University of Technology and Applied Sciences

Local Auction Announcement

The University Of Technologies Applied Sciences announces the auctions shown in the following table :

Tender No.	Tender Subject	Establishments eligible to bid and registered with the Tender Board	Document's Price	Purchase, submit Tender Documents	Last date bid submission
01/2022	Provide gardening services and plant care" for the buildings of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (Shinas College of Technology)	Companies and institutions specialized in this field and entrepreneurs/ owners of Small and Medium business owners	RO 25/-	(Department of Financial Affairs) at Shinas College of Technology	Wednesday 26/01/2022 at 10:00 am
01/2022	(Providing gardening services" and plant care" for the buildings of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (Salaah Technical College)		RO 25/-	Office of the Assistant Dean for Administrative and Financial Affairs (Salaah College of Technology)	Wednesday 20/02/2022 at 10:00 am
01/2022	Provide gardening services and "caring for Plants" for the buildings of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (Ibra Technical College)		RO 25/-	(Administrative Affairs Department) at Ibra College of Technology	Wednesday 26/01/2022 at 10:00 am

- Establishments specialized in the above-mentioned works can obtain auction documents from **Wednesday 12/01/2022**
- All bidding companies must attach with their bids a temporary tender bond in the form of a bank guarantee or a cheque certified by one of the banks operating in the Sultanate, not less than (1%) of the bid value, addressed to the name of the Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee, and valid for a period of (90) days from the date of bid submission. Any bid that does not meet the required temporary tender bond shall not be considered.
- Bids shall be submitted, signed and stamped on the form prepared for this purpose and on the accompanying category table, in closed envelopes sealed with red wax, addressed to the Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, bearing the auction number and subject with no indication to the name of the bidder.
- Bids must be placed in the sub-tender box in the office referred to above before 10 a.m. of the day specified in the table above. Bids submitted after this date will not be considered, regardless of the reasons for the delay. Preference will be given to companies or institutions whose bids include the biggest Omanisation and biggest purchase percentage of national products.

The University shall not be bound to accept the highest or any other bid



جامعة التكنولوجيا والعلوم التطبيقية
University of Technology and Applied Sciences

Local Bidding Announcement

The University Of Technologies Applied Sciences announces the bidding shown in the following table :

Bidding No.	Bidding Subject	Establishments eligible to bid	Document's Price	Purchase , submit Tender Documents	Last date bid submission
01/2022	Management and operation of a coffee shop to serve (coffee and hot drinks) in the English Language Center building, University of Technology and Applied Sciences (Higher College of Technology)	Companies and institutions specialized in this field and entrepreneurs/ owners of Small and Medium business owners	RO 25/-	(Department of Financial Affairs) at Higher College of Technology	Monday 20/02/2022 at 10:00 am
01/2022	Management and operation of the restaurant at the Ibra College of Technology		RO 25/-	(Department of Administration and Financial Affairs) at Ibra College of Technology	
01/2022	Management and operation of restaurant of English language centre at Ibra College of Technology		RO 25/-	(Department of Administration Affairs) at Ibra College of Technology	
02/2022	Management and operation of the main restaurant at the Ibra College of Technology		RO 25/-	(Department of Administration Affairs) at Ibra College of Technology	

- Establishments specialized in the above-mentioned works can obtain auction documents from **Wednesday 12/01/2022**
- All bidding companies must attach with their bids a temporary tender bond in the form of a bank guarantee or a cheque certified by one of the banks operating in the Sultanate, not less than (1%) of the bid value, addressed to the name of the Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee, and valid for a period of (90) days from the date of bid submission. Any bid that does not meet the required temporary tender bond shall not be considered.
- Bids shall be submitted, signed and stamped on the form prepared for this purpose and on the accompanying category table, in closed envelopes sealed with red wax, addressed to the Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, bearing the auction number and subject with no indication to the name of the bidder.
- Bids must be placed in the sub-tender box in the office referred to above before 10 a.m. of the day specified in the table above. Bids submitted after this date will not be considered, regardless of the reasons for the delay. Preference will be given to companies or institutions whose bids include the biggest Omanisation and biggest purchase percentage of national products.

The University shall not be bound to accept the highest or any other bid

Supreme Sharia'a Supervisory Board established at CMA

Muscat - H E Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance and chairman of the board of directors of the Capital Market Authority (CMA) on Tuesday issued Decision No 171/2021 establishing the Supreme Sharia'a Supervisory Board (SSSB) in the CMA and issued its Articles of Association pursuant to Article 5 of the Takaful Insurance Law promulgated by Royal Decree 11/2016.

According to a press release from CMA, the SSSB was established to enhance the legislative and regulatory processes for the companies operating in the Takaful insurance business based on best international practices. The SSSB will put in place



(Supplied photo)

the general policies regulating such types of companies and advise the CMA on the Sharia'a aspects related to Takaful insurance. It will also contribute to developing the legislations related to the Sharia's beside advising on the compatibility of the products, services and contracts of the Takaful insurance compa-

nies. The SSSB will decide on issues of Fiqh disputes among the members of Sharia'a supervisory committees in Takaful insurance companies.

The Articles of the SSSB state that the board must be constituted by the board of directors of the CMA comprising five members including the chairman of

SSSB and at least three members must have bachelor's degree in Islamic Sharia'a or an equivalent degree beside knowledge of Islamic transactions (Fiqh Al Muamalat) or Islamic banking or Islamic finance or capital market or insurance in addition to ten years experience.

The establishment of the SSSB comes in line with the evolution in the Takaful insurance market in Oman during the past years as the volume of the market reached about RO64.8mn representing 14 per cent of the total insurance portfolio with two companies specialised in providing Takaful insurance products out the 20 insurance companies operating in the sultanate.

Get set, get driving with Bank Muscat Sayyarati vehicle finance facility

In line with its customer-centric vision ‘To serve you better, everyday’, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the sultanate, has evoked a strong response for its attractive vehicle finance which offers some of the most competitive rates in the market.

This product is designed to help customers who are looking forward to buying new or pre-owned vehicles at low interest rates (starting from 3.25 per cent and available until January 31, 2022) and absolutely no need for post-dated cheques. With its fast turnaround time, the feature-rich Sayyarati finance can be obtained within the shortest possible time. Options available include a loan tenure up to 8 years for new and used vehicles, the lowest monthly payment op-



Abdullah Tamman al Mashaani

tions in the country and on-the-spot approvals. Unique in all aspects with unparalleled benefits, Sayyarati is the preferred vehicle finance in Oman.

Speaking about the popular Sayyarati package, Abdullah Tamman al Mashaani, general manager - Products, Bank Muscat, said, “In line with our com-



mitment to provide the best services possible to our valued customers and meet their aspirations and needs, Bank Muscat is constantly developing products and services that can further enhance customers’ experience with their trusted banking partner. We are glad to see the

positive feedback from our customers and we thank them for their strong confidence and trust in our products.”

“With its longstanding experience in the banking sector of about four decades, Bank Muscat has the widest network across Oman with 174 branches

and more than 800 ATMs and CDMs. Sayyarati is one of the most popular products from Bank Muscat and we hope that it will help make people’s dreams of owning their very own cars come true. Bank Muscat reiterates its commitment to making vehicle purchases easy and

affordable through its excellent financing facilities, which can be tailored according to each customer’s unique needs,” Mashaani said.

The hassle-free Sayyarati finance can be obtained from Bank Muscat branches spread across Oman. Loans up to RO60,000 will be offered for new vehicles and used vehicles.

It is important to note that customers availing the Sayyarti offer can enjoy fast processing without any unnecessary paperwork and signing of cheques.

Only the following documents are needed to process the loan facility: Buyer’s ID card, salary assignment letter, quotation / car valuation from the approved valuator, driving license, Mulkiya (for pre-owned cars only) and seller ID card (for pre-owned

cars only).

The monthly loan installments are automatically deducted from the customer’s account once the mandate to do so is provided to the bank.

With some of the world’s best and safest vehicles available for purchase in the Sultanate, the bank aims to do its part to improve road safety and the security of all road users. It is noteworthy that loans are disbursed within 24 hours subject to applicants meeting the concerned requirements.

For more details regarding Bank Muscat’s Sayyarati auto finance, please go to <https://www.bankmuscat.com/en/loans/Pages/details.aspx#sayyarti>, or visit any Bank Muscat branch, or Sayyarati Centers at Wattayah and Salalah.

Bait Al Zubair signs MoU with University of Technology and Applied Sciences



The University of Technology and Applied Sciences (College of Applied Sciences in Nizwa) and Bait Al Zubair Foundation signed a joint memorandum of understanding (MoU) aimed at cooperation in several cultural, cognitive, and skill fields.

It also aims to exchange training and practical experiences between the university

and the Bait Al Zubair Foundation and to encourage cultural projects, research, incubators, and student companies. In addition to mutual sponsorship of exhibitions and scientific research, training, and cultural events, the MoU will pave the way to promote the culture of entrepreneurship through training courses and workshops, mutual visits, and joint arbitra-

tion in competitions.

The signing of this MOU comes in line with the implementation of the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik - may God protect him - continuing to pay attention to education, training, care for heritage, and cultural and tourism components. In addition to harnessing all possibilities to achieve sustainable develop-

ment, and a desire to enhance integration between the public and private sectors in the field of cultural industries.

The memorandum was signed by Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Shibli - director-general of the Colleges of Applied Sciences, and the Honourable Al Zubair bin Muhammad al Zubair - vice chairman of the board of directors of Al Zubair Foundation.



NBO extends remittance services to Bangladesh Embassy

Continuing to make banking ever more accessible and convenient, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has introduced remittance services to the Embassy of Bangladesh in Muscat. Taking advantage of the bank’s secure and approved international transfer network, the new service will help the Bangladesh community to make affordable and fast transfers to friends and family in their native language.

With competitive exchange rates in several currencies, NBO customers can also instantly send funds of up to RO7,500 from their account using the

bank’s digital remittance service available anywhere at any time through the award-winning NBO Mobile App.

Tariq Atiq, chief retail and digital banking officer at NBO, said, “At NBO we know how vital sending money home is to our expatriate customers, and so we are always trying to find ways to make it even easier. Adding to the growing number of affiliations with embassies, we are proud to partner with the Embassy of Bangladesh to provide our customers working and visiting there with greater access to our services. At the same time,

we continue to strive to deliver seamless, convenient and flexible banking experiences that are accessible to all.”

NBO’s remittance service continues to offer convenient, fast and easy way to send money abroad. Meanwhile, the bank encourages its customers to take advantage of its digital banking App, which allow them to remit safely and securely, any time of the day or night, to Bangladesh as well as India, Pakistan, Egypt, Philippines, Indonesia and the UAE. The beneficiary will then receive the money on the same day.

A’Safwah fresh yogurt: The healthy ingredient everyone needs

A’Safwah, one of Oman’s largest integrated dairy companies, has become the preferred companion for family meals.

The brand’s extensive experience in the local market, and the ability to deliver Made in Oman, fresh products, makes it a convenient choice for those looking for wholesome nutrition for family meals, kids’ tiffin, and even on-the-go snack options. For local-taste lovers, A’Safwah offers innovative ideas for healthy and delicious recipes with its fresh yogurt.

A’Safwah yogurt is produced from pure cow’s milk and contains a variety of health benefits. It can be eaten directly or by adding it to a mild and tasteful recipe.

In order to meet the needs of all categories of customers, A’Safwah yogurt comes in packets of different sizes ranging from 90g to 10kg including various family size packs.

Confirming the distinctive

taste of a chicken dish with the marinade of A’Safwah yogurt, an Omani homemaker and A’Safwah customer, said, “A’Safwah yogurt is freshly-flavoured and rich with beneficial nutrients. I mix it with lemon juice, garlic powder, onions, spices and salt - a marinade recipe I find perfect for grilled chicken with vegetables. I rely on A’Safwah products to add a good and fresh taste when preparing the meals that my family loves.”

Yogurt is generally known for its effectiveness in improving body health and enhancing immunity. It is very beneficial to the heart. The probiotic element in yogurt also promotes digestive health.

Some consumers like to make yogurt smoothie by blending it with different types of fruits, such as strawberries, pomegranates and bananas.

The way it is prepared is very easy, using one portion of A’Safwah yogurt, a cup of milk



and a sliced banana fruit, mixed in the blender with the addition of two cubes of ice.

Once the texture of banana smoothie with yogurt becomes soft, serve in a cup to enjoy the yummiest fresh and refreshing taste. Top it with nuts if one likes!

What more? Recipes like smoothies and yogurt with oats, are not just easy to prepare but also can be stored for up to two days in a refrigerator.

On the other hand, an Omani restaurant owner, said that she prefers to eat A’Safwah yogurt with any type of rice. She prepares a special sauce containing a packet of yogurt and a pinch of salt, mashed garlic, sumac, tahini, olive oil and lemon juice. With the ingredients well-mixed and eaten with a meat or chicken Kabsa, biryani or boiled rice, she enjoys a supreme taste.

With A’Safwah yogurt, mothers can prepare an easy and healthy meal by blending it with any kind of fruit the baby loves.

Mix a teaspoon of honey and crushed biscuits in a blender with a pack of A’Safwah yogurt and pieces of peeled and de-core guava. If the mixture is light, it is preferred to add more biscuits. Guava can be replaced by other fruits such as pears or apples, but should be boiled and mashed first, then added to other ingredients.

To motivate the child to eat this nutritious meal, the dish can be decorated with pieces of fruit.

A’Safwah dairy takes pride in having state-of-the-art processing facilities, an effective distribution network across all nook and corner of Oman with an exceptional team of experts who are committed to maintaining the highest standards of excellence.

With its experience since 1983 in dairy production, the company has demonstrated its commitment to providing high-quality local products to its customers.

Alizz Islamic Bank honoured for its humanitarian efforts

In recognition of its strong commitment to sustainable social responsibility and its pioneering role in supporting people with disabilities in the sultanate, Alizz Islamic Bank was honoured by the Ministry of Social Development at an event held to mark the occasion of International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

The event was held under the patronage of H H Dr Mona bint Fahad al Said, assistant vice chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University. The award was received by Muna al Khusaibi, deputy senior manager of the Marketing and Corporate Communications Department, at Alizz Islamic Bank.

Enunciating about the honour, Murtadha Jawad al Lawati, assistant general manager and head of Marketing and Corporate Communications Department at Alizz Islamic Bank said, “We in Alizz Islamic Bank, give priority to investing in our communities, as we always seek to provide a better life for the people we serve across the sultanate. In this regard, investment in sustainable initiatives is critical to the prosperity of society, and the bank makes sure to give strong sup-



port to the national organisations that takes efforts effective to build strong and flexible communities. Moreover, the bank continues to contribute to the growth of non-profit social organisations. The employees have dedicated more than 1,000 hours of their time for volunteer work and fundraising to support local community organisations. The bank has been supporting

these efforts through employees’ community programmes.”

He added, “The secret of a happy life is not to achieve individual success. There is nothing more beautiful than helping others to achieve success. When we live for ourselves only, life seems too short and shallow, but when we live for others, life becomes longer and deeply meaningful. Alizz Islamic Bank is committed

to being at the forefront of banks that launch sustainable initiatives in the community as it firmly believes in the importance of community investment, and accordingly, it is keen to engage the community as a partner in all its business.”

Alizz Islamic Bank seeks excellence in providing humanitarian initiatives that best serve the society. These efforts seeking to care for people with disabilities and orphans in the sultanate are driven by the government’s interest, represented by the Ministry of Social Development, in ensuring that such individuals obtain all rights, on equal footing with all other citizens of the sultanate, including their right to be rehabilitated in different rehabilitation institutions, so that they can be easily integrated into the society to play their role in its prosperity alongside all Omanis.

Previously Alizz Islamic Bank and the Ministry of Social Development launched the website www.crowdfunding.alizzislamic.com as a crowdfunding project aiming to raise RO2mn to build the Centre of Excellence for Children with Disabilities.



OCCI signs agreement for development of Omani SMEs

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) and Business Gateways International LLC (BGI), which manages IT strategic platforms in Oman, signed a memorandum of cooperation (MoC) aimed at providing joint support and promoting growth of Omani SMEs by taking advantage of the available opportunities related to the In-country value on the Joint Supplier Registration System (JSRS) in Oman and supporting expansion of these businesses in global markets.

JSRS is an ICV platform to certify suppliers and utilise their services, initiated by the Oman Ministry of Energy and Minerals who launched JSRS on www.businessgateways.com.

JSRS connects the community of Buyers, which include all oil and gas operating companies in the energy sector and many large institutions and companies from other sectors - with thousands of certified suppliers on JSRS Certified Suppliers Network (CSN), to source and award procurement related opportunities with specific emphasis on SME obligation contracts and sub-contracts to Omani SMEs.

JSRS CSN includes many Omani service providers, including SMEs, companies approved by Riyadh, Local Community Contractors (LCCs) and large corporate in addition to international companies from more than 100 countries that benefit from the procurement opportunity offered by the JSRS Buyers Community.

Based on this MoC, BGI will implement a special OCCI SME platform for Omani SMEs registered with OCCI on JSRS, integrate the OCCI SME Committee on JSRS and provide business-related support services exclusively to JSRS certified SMEs through the OCCI SME platform.

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry recommends that all Omani SMEs register in JSRS and obtain the JSRS Supplier Certification in order to benefit from the upcoming services that will be offered on OCCI SME Platform. You can register in JSRS through www.businessgateways.com

Bank Nizwa recognised as Best Wholesale Banking Service Provider – Oman 2021

As the sultanate’s first Islamic bank, Bank Nizwa has played a pivotal role in creating a strong Islamic finance ecosystem in the country. Its wholesale banking group, in particular, has achieved significant milestones in the past years and has been a vital contributor to the bank’s success.

Recognising the bank’s initiatives and the role its wholesale banking group has played in effectively contributing to the economic growth in the sultanate, the Global Business Outlook (GBO) awarded Bank Nizwa the coveted title of the Best Wholesale Banking Service Provider – Oman 2021. The winners of the annual awards were announced on GBO’s official website.

On receiving the award, R Narasimhan, GM Wholesale at Bank Nizwa, said, “The Global Business Outlook Awards seeks to recognise and reward excellence in businesses around the world and we are extremely honored to have received this prestigious award. Over the years,



Bank Nizwa has established its leading position in the wholesale banking segment with a strong suite of innovative products, a wide range of world-class services and a keen emphasis on customer satisfaction. At the same time, we have been at the forefront of encouraging individuals to opt for Islamic finance products while organising several

seminars to promote its benefits amongst our clients. Today, we are not only a bank for our customers, we are their financial advisors and partners.”

Aligning itself to the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, Bank Nizwa played an active role in promoting government initiatives by offering Sharia’a-compliant financing solutions as well as

by extending resources to support projects of national importance. Considering SMEs as the engines of economic growth, Bank Nizwa has been committed to promoting its development by offering tailor-made solutions to SMEs. The bank’s notable increase in its SME customer base and business volume is a testament to the trust placed in the

bank’s services.

Narasimhan added, “To enable us to better serve our wholesale banking customers, our well-diversified portfolio has been segmented into government and public sector entities, financial institutions and private-sector clients. The Wholesale Banking group at Bank Nizwa is working on a Universal Banking model approach which consists of ten vertical business units. Our main objective is to provide a 360-degree solution to our clients, offering them unparalleled services and contribute to the development of each sector while simultaneously also helping the bank achieve steady growth.”

Observing utmost transparency in all its proceedings and demonstrating the highest levels of operational efficiency, Bank Nizwa’s wholesale banking unit, in the last five years, has achieved an average growth of 36 per cent in both asset and liabilities.



A'Saffa Foods signs agreement to export products to Saudi

A'Saffa Foods signed a cooperation agreement with the Saudi Arabian firm Stallions United Trading Company to export A'Saffa high-quality products and further processed products to Saudi Arabia.

The signing ceremony was held at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Water Resources (MAFWR), and was attended by H E Dr Ahmed Nasser al Bakri, Undersecretary

for Agriculture in MAFWR, and H E Abdullah bin Saud al Anzi, the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia appointed to the sultanate, together with several other delegates.

The agreement was signed by Eng Mohammed Suhail al Shanfari, chief executive officer of A'Saffa Foods Company, and Dr Essam Mohammed al Mouawad, CEO of the Stallions United Trading Company.

INFINITI Oman’s website gives convenient buying experience from home

INFINITI Oman’s value-added service features on its website (www.infiniti-oman.com) allows customers to experience the car purchase process from the comfort and safety of their home. Current and prospective customers can now book a home test drive and reserve a door-to-door pick and drop facility for service appointment. They can also register for an appointment for online video consultation with a sales consultant and make leasing enquiries through the website.

A senior spokesperson at INFINITI Oman said, “Our customers, both prospective and existing customers have benefited immensely from the value-added service features on our website. With COVID-19 cases rising once again, this facility offers convenience to customers. Many customers wish to sched-

ule online test drives at a time and place convenient to them. Some of them want pick-up and drop-off facility for service, while others want to buy a car through online video consultation. To support our progressively digital customers we are delighted to allow customers to connect with us from the comfort of their home with just a few clicks. The features on website have eased out the buying procedure for INFINITI customers by providing them an exceptional ownership experience.”

He added, “If customers don’t want to come to the INFINITI showroom for a test drive, we can arrange to bring the vehicle to their home. For online sales consultation, we can arrange for customers to receive a video call with one of our sales representatives at a time of their convenience. The pick-up and drop-off



facility includes contactless delivery, vehicle sterilisation and cashless payment. The leasing quote service enables us to offer the best options for the customers. We truly look forward to connecting with customers through these additions

in our website.”

Book your home test drive

Customers can schedule a test drive for an INFINITI vehicle from the comforts of their home or office on the company’s official

website. Customers must fill their preferred model and personal details such as name, phone number and email address. Once the booking of appointment is completed, the car will be dropped off at a preferred date and time.

Online sales consultant

To book an appointment for online video sales consultation, customers have to fill in details such as preferred model, preferred date, name, phone number and email address on the website where they also have the option of leaving a message.

Door-to-door service

Owners can get their INFINITI picked up and dropped off for service appointments from the location of their choice. Customers must share their model, preferred date, name, phone number and email address while booking the facility on the website.

Leasing quote

For a leasing quotation, interested customers must enter their personal details and pre-

ferred time of leasing and the INFINITI team will get in touch with details.

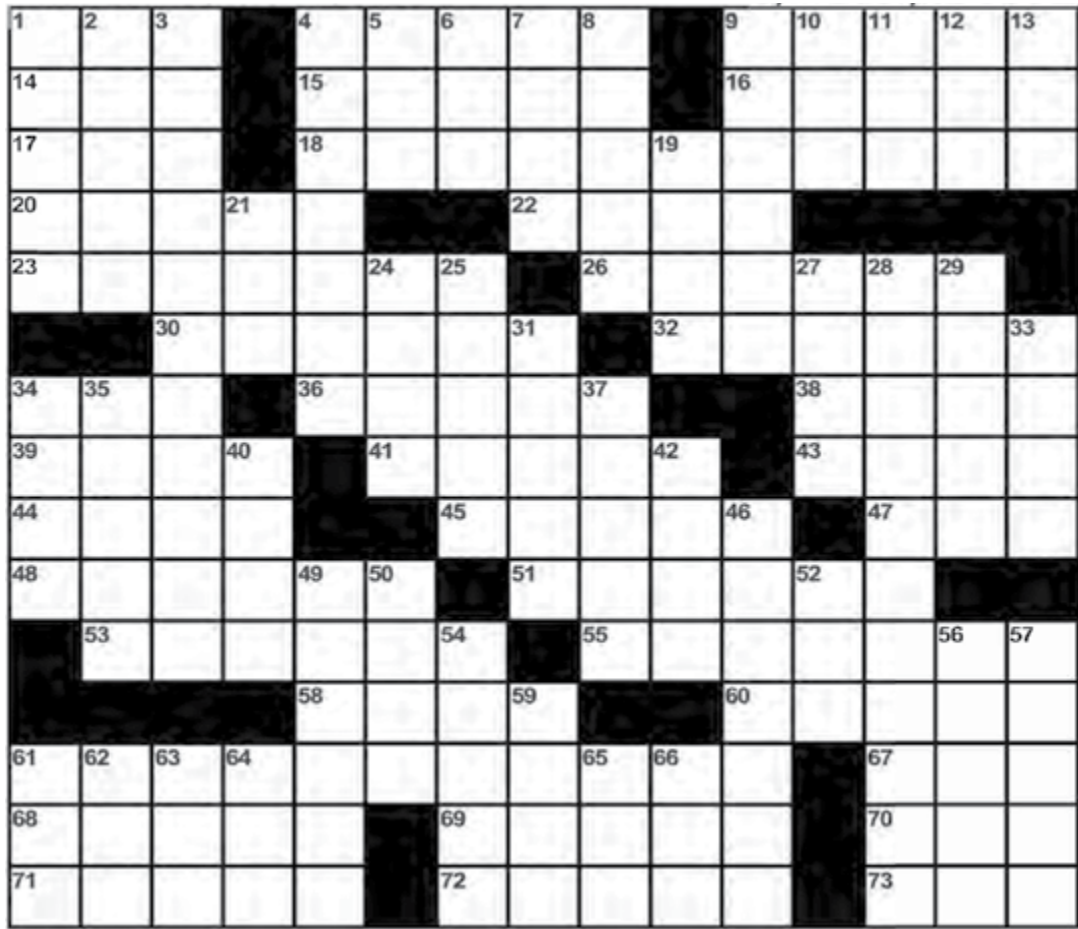
SBA commitment

SBA is largely committed to supporting INFINITI Oman’s growth in the Sultanate through major emphasis on customer satisfaction and by providing world-class after-sales services in Oman. With a national network of more than 40 showrooms, service centers and parts outlets, SBA has further built upon its legacy of trust, excellent customer service and providing value for money to each of its customers.

About INFINITI

INFINITI Motor Company Ltd is headquartered in Hong Kong with representations in 50 markets around the world. The INFINITI brand was launched in 1989.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) "Gaping" gullet
4) Robin of "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous"
9) They measure up
14) Lennon's mate
15) Pool problem
16) Slip the clutches of
17) "Neither" go-with
18) How to announce a boxing match
20) Confuse
22) Eyelid protuberance
23) Makes impure
26) Detonate
30) Complied with commands
32) Two out of 100?
34) Paddle kin
36) Tied the knot again
38) Shelter for birds
39) Stalag inmates
41) Clear, as a cloudy windshield
43) "Let it ride," to a proofer
44) Bumpy gait
45) Hindu dignitary

4 7) Govt. cosmetics watchdog
48) Undresses
51) "Holy" Ohio town
53) Cleverly skillful
55) Italian seaport
58) Conspirators' plan
60) Draw a conclusion
61) One way to keep up
67) .com relative
68) Just plain bad
69) Place to sweat
70) Cells for women only
71) Survived somehow
72) Fashioned into a sphere
73) Top of many rating scales

DOWN

1) Single-celled organism
2) Battery post
3) Verbatim
4) Name-affixing tool
5) Right-angle pipe
6) Long _ and far away ...
7) Bird sounds
8) Tests for weight

9) Cylindrical and tapering
10) Vestment for a priest
11) Afghani coin, once
12) Tokyo, way back when
13) Mend with a needle
19) Court call, if tripled
21) "Ad" or "women's" follower
24) Watched closely
25) Setting in "Les Miz"
27) Mythical monsters
28) "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand" go-with
29) Honored with a bash
31) Skim, as milk
3 3) _ new record
34) Makes a choice
35) Main blood vessel
37) Martial arts schools
40) Recipe directive
42) Elaborate party
46) Whirlybird landing place
49) Easy out, often
50) Farm storage unit
52) Bookcase locale, perhaps
54) Human trunk

56) Chicken's lack? number
57) Nose or heart, e.g.
59) Old Russian ruler
61) Sink in the middle
62) Helium's atomic number
63) Terrestrial amphibian
64) British saloon
65) Bathroom fixture
66) 67 degrees, 30 minutes

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES

MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Just this once, rather than argue about the final outcome, you'd much rather sit down and work things out peaceably. It's not exactly what others expect from you, but it might work to your advantage. In fact, they probably think you're being especially mellow because you've got this new tactic up your sleeve. Whatever helps you keep the peace is for the best, right?



LEO

JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Just because there's a wall in front of you doesn't mean your journey has ended! Hold on to your objectives and don't give in at the first sign of trouble. And don't even think about getting another person involved to help you out. Whatever obstacles you encounter today will be fun and easy to surmount. Have a good attitude, keep trying, and you'll be amazed by how quickly all those bricks come tumbling down.



SAGITTARIUS

NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Your emotions and your need to get things done are in perfect sync today, so there's not a moment to waste. Get busy doing whatever you want or need to do, and take your future exactly where you want it to go. You know where you want to be tomorrow and thereafter, so what's the holdup? Dig deep in your psyche, take time to see what's down there, and act on it.



TAURUS

APRIL 20-MAY 20

If it smacks of being cheap or shallow, you can't tolerate it now, and that goes double for people who aren't spiritually inclined. Your best bet is to surround yourself with those you know to be fond of intense, penetrating conversations. Don't let yourself settle for anyone's company if they're not willing to dive deep! Try to meditate and connect with your soul. You will feel at peace and relaxed.



VIRGO

AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Your curiosity runs high in all departments, which means you're ready to start investigating those issues you've avoided lately, consciously or unconsciously. Curiosity has its own reason for existence. In the meantime, get ready to ask hard questions of yourself and others and to be surprisingly satisfied with the answers. You're ready to make changes, so get to work! You have no time to waste.



CAPRICORN

DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

After days of mulling something over deeply, you're finally ready to tell the world about it, and your timing is perfect. The universe is on your side and ready to assist in any way it can. That means you should definitely start letting your people in on the secret. It's only fair! After all, you'd expect nothing less from them. You will free up mental capacity while building stronger relationships.



GEMINI

MAY 21-JUNE 21

No one is standing in your way anymore. It's just you in charge of your life, and it's time you realised that you have more power than ever. This could be a scary realization for you, but if you're afraid of anything, it should be inaction. Push forward in at least one area of your life today. Make a change that you never felt you could make before and you'll get a taste of what's possible.



LIBRA

SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Your daily rituals take on an entirely new meaning now. You enjoy every step you take, even those you've taken it a thousand times before. You should also be enjoying each new experience and learning new tricks. This might start out to be a rather routine kind of day, but it certainly doesn't have to end up that way. The universe is smiling on you! You are going to have a fabulous day full of excitement.



AQUARIUS

JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You may feel a small internal struggle taking place now. That doesn't mean it's unpleasant, just that what you're thinking may be at odds with what you're feeling or what you feel is necessary. There's just one thing to do: Let go and let the universe take over. Your instinct is second to none, so you should know when it's safe to come out. All this uncertainty will go away and you will soon feel relaxed.



CANCER

JUNE 22-JULY 22

Get ready to raise some eyebrows! The intensity of your feelings will undoubtedly escape from your mouth (even if it's a big secret) as soon as anyone involved comes within shouting range. The good news is that whatever you say really needs to be said, so the ends definitely justify the means. When the issue arises, be brave, be blunt, and be as gracious as possible.



SCORPIO

OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Take advantage of this great personal energy, no matter where you happen to be or who you're with. You can get busy doing exactly what you want to do, even if that means you only take one baby step today. It's a start, and you're at least on the right track, which is more than many of us can say. Let your instincts guide you. You are about to enter into a phase where you will grow positive with each step you take.



PISCES

FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Someone you may not have heard from in quite a while turns out to be in the neighbourhood, and you should both be delighted to bump into one another. Don't hesitate to make the first move. After all, good friends are hard to find, and this one is probably no exception. And isn't it wonderful to catchup and go down the memory lane? If you feel the urge to hold out, just be sure not to ignore the phone when it rings.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The significance of peace is denoted by which of the following symbol?

a. Olive branch

b. Green light

c. Lotus

d. Red flag

2. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, awards the Nobel Prize in

a. physics

b. economics

c. chemistry

d. both (a) and (c)

3. The prize winning title of Arundhati Roy for Booker's Prize in 1997 was

a. Amsterdam

b. The God of Small Things

c. Disgrace

d. Last Orders

Answers: 1. a 2. d 3. b

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

P	O	A	T
M	P	L	C
L	U	T	A
S	K	P	A

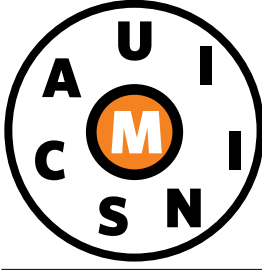
Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters.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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.
Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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



Iraqi lawmakers attend the inaugural session of the parliament in Baghdad, three months after legislative elections, on Sunday (AFP)

Divisions within make forging government a tough task in Iraq

Baghdad, Iraq - Three tense months after legislative elections, Iraq's parliament has finally held its inaugural session - but opening debates swiftly descended into furious arguments between Shiite factions.

In multi-confessional and multi-ethnic Iraq, the formation of governments has involved complex negotiations ever since the 2003 US-led invasion toppled dictator Saddam Hussein.

Parliament only met for the first time since the October 10 vote on Sunday, after Iraq's top court rejected a complaint of electoral irregularities filed by the Shiite and pro-Iran Hashed al Shaabi, a former paramilitary alliance.

Political analysts warn there are still several hard steps ahead before the formation of a new government.

Iraq is trying to emerge from almost two decades of conflict

but is mired in corruption, economic crisis, and with threats of violence lingering.

What sparked anger at opening?

The newly-elected members of parliament met for a swearing-in ceremony and to elect their speaker, but debate soon turned ugly.

Videos filmed by MPs showing lawmakers becoming verbally aggressive with each other, highlighting divisions between Shiite groupings.

Iraq's post-election period has been marred by high tensions, violence and allegations of vote fraud.

One of parliament's first tasks must be to elect the country's president, who will then name a prime minister tasked with forming a new government.

Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr, who once led an anti-US militia

and who opposes all foreign interference, has repeatedly said that the next prime minister will be chosen by his movement.

It won the largest share with 73 out of the assembly's 329 seats, more than a fifth of the total.

But the Coordination Framework, including pro-Iran groups such as the Fatah (Conquest) Alliance, the political arm of the pro-Tehran Hashed al Shaabi, insist their coalition is bigger.

The Coordination Framework claimed they can muster the backing of 88 lawmakers to make them the largest bloc.

That prompted fury from Sadr's movement. In the ensuing chaos, MP Mahmud al-Mashhadani, the oldest member of parliament who was therefore chairing the opening session, was taken ill.

One lawmaker alleged Mashhadani was 'attacked',

state media said he fainted, and he was rushed to hospital where he was reportedly in a stable condition.

When the parliamentary session resumed an hour later, lawmakers re-elected as speaker influential Sunni MP Mohammed al Halbussi of the Taqadam party.

Coordination Framework MPs boycotted the vote.

Who will be the next PM?

No single party holds an outright majority, so the next leader will be voted in by whichever coalition can negotiate allies to become the biggest bloc.

In previous parliaments, parties from Iraq's Shiite majority have struck compromise deals to work together and form a government.

But Sadr has hinted he prefers an alliance with Sunni groups in-

cluding Taqadam as well as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

"In theory, they could push through and have their president elected and their prime minister designated," said political scientist Hamza Haddad.

One leader in the Shiite Coordination Framework, speaking on condition of anonymity, admitted that if Sadr presses ahead with a coalition including Sunni parties and the KDP, they will be able to choose the government.

However, if Sadr works with Shiite parties as in past parliaments, then the Coordination Framework 'will have the upper hand', the leader added.

If the Coordination Framework had a choice, a leading contender would be ex-prime minister Nuri al Maliki, a figure close to Iran whose own group won 33 seats.

AFP

UN head 'saddened' by reports of deadly strike in Tigray

New York, US - UN chief Antonio Guterres is 'deeply concerned' over reports of a deadly airstrike in Ethiopia's Tigray region, his spokesman said on Monday, in the international body's first comment on an attack which rebels said left 56 people dead.

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) last week claimed that dozens had been killed in a drone strike on a camp for civilians displaced by the war in northern Ethiopia, in an attack that prompted aid agencies to suspend operations in the region.

Saturday's raid came only hours after the Ethiopian government had issued a call for 'national reconciliation', and sparked renewed appeals from an alarmed international community for an end to the conflict.

"The Secretary-General is deeply saddened by reports that more than 50 civilians have been killed and injured in an airstrike in northern Ethiopia at midnight on 7 January," Stephane Dujarric, spokesman for the UN Secretary-General, said in a statement.

"The United Nations and its humanitarian partners are working with authorities to urgently mobilise emergency assistance in the area, despite continuing challenges due to severe shortages of fuel, cash and supplies across Tigray," he added.

"The Secretary-General is deeply concerned about the impact the conflict continues to have on civilians in Ethiopia. He expresses his deepest condolences to the victims and their families."



UN chief Antonio Guterres

The Secretary General is deeply concerned about the impact the conflict continues to have on civilians. He expresses his deepest condolences to the victims and their families

STEPHANE DUJARRIC

AFP was not able to independently verify the various claims because access to the region is restricted and it remains under a communications blackout.

Requests for comment from Ethiopian government officials went unanswered.

The attacks came just days after UN officials reported that another airstrike in Tigray had killed three Eritrean refugees, including two children.

AFP



Displaced Yemeni children attend a tent school in the western province of Hodeidah, on Sunday (AFP)

UN voices 'concern' over key Yemen port after military claim

Dubai, UAE - The UN mission in Yemen's rebel-held port of Hodeida expressed 'great concern' on Tuesday over claims it was being used for military purposes and demanded access for an inspection.

The United Nations Mission to Support the Hodeida Agreement said the port was vital for the impoverished country, where a seven-year war has pushed millions to the brink of famine.

The Saudi-led coalition fighting alongside government forces accused the Iran-backed Huthi

UNMHA reminds the parties that Hodeida ports are a crucial lifeline for millions of Yemeni people. It has requested as part of its mandate to undertake an inspection

UN MISSION STATEMENT

rebels of militarising the Red Sea ports and threatened to attack them after the insurgents seized a United Arab Emirates-flagged ship last week.

'UNMHA reminds the parties that Hodeida ports are a crucial

lifeline for millions of Yemeni people,' it said in a statement.

The coalition says the Rwabee was carrying medical supplies but the Huthis insist it was a military ship.

The hijacking on January 3

raised fears that the conflict could spill over into the Red Sea, a vital route for Gulf oil and cargo shipments.

It could also have severe consequences for Yemen, which the UN says is facing the world's worst humanitarian crisis, if it draws attacks on Hodeida.

'UNMHA has requested as part of its mandate to undertake an inspection,' the statement said, adding that protecting the ports was 'in the interest of the Yemeni people'.

AFP

Poet Maya Angelou becomes first Black woman to appear on US coin

New York, US - Poet and activist Maya Angelou has become the first Black woman to appear on the US quarter, in a new version of the coin unveiled by the US Mint on Monday.

Angelou, author of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, will also be the first figure commemorated through the American Women Quarters Programme, which was signed into law in January 2021.

The US Mint 'has begun shipping the first coins' with Angelou's likeness on the American quarter, a 25-cent piece, according to a press release from the agency.

"It is my honour to present our nation's first circulating coins dedicated to celebrating American women and their contributions to American history," said Mint Deputy Director Ventris Gibson.

"Each 2022 quarter is designed to reflect the breadth and depth of accomplishments being celebrated throughout this historic coin programme. Maya Angelou, featured on the reverse of this first coin in the series, used words to inspire and uplift."

The programme directs the US Mint to issue quarters each year between 2022 and 2025 featuring five different female trailblazers who have contributed to the country.



A new version of the US quarter honouring the poet (AFP)

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said she was "proud that these coins celebrate the contributions of some of America's most remarkable women."

"Each time we redesign our currency, we have the chance to say something about our country - what we value, and how we've progressed as a society," she said in a statement.

The quarter has for the last 90 years shown the nation's first president, George Washington, on one side and an eagle on the other.

The new quarters - which have been minted in Philadelphia and Denver - show Washington on one side and Angelou on the other.

The other figures set to appear on the coin in 2022 are: Sally Ride, the first American woman in space, Wilma Mankiller, the first female principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, Nina Otero-Warren, a New Mexico suffrage leader and Anna May Wong, a Chinese American film star.

Angelou, who was born in Missouri in 1928, was an essayist and poet who worked with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X during the Civil Rights Movement.

Angelou, who delivered the poem at former President Bill Clinton's first inauguration, died in 2014.

Treasury Secretary Yellen has also signaled support for recognizing former slave and abolitionist Harriet Tubman on US currency.

Former president Barack Obama launched a project to put Tubman's face on the US\$20 bill but it stalled under the administration of Donald Trump.

Putting Tubman, a Black woman who escaped slavery and became a leader of the pre-Civil War abolitionist movement, on the bill would be an 'honour' but designing banknotes takes time, Yellen said in September.

AFP

Taiwan grounds F-16 fighters as search continues for downed jet

Taipei, Taiwan - Taiwan grounded its F16 fleet as a search was underway to locate a fighter jet that plunged into the sea, the air force said on Tuesday.

The F-16V, one of Taiwan's most advanced fighter jets, disappeared from radar screens around half an hour after taking off for a routine training flight from a base in the city of Chiayi, the air force said.

The pilot was identified as 28-year-old captain Chen Yi, who joined the air force in 2020.

Taiwan's national rescue centre reported that people saw the jet 'crashing into the sea', which

the air force confirmed at a press briefing.

The F-16V "rapidly fell into the sea at a large angle and there's no sign that the pilot parachuted out," said air force inspector-general, Major General Liu Hui-chien, adding that all F-16 fighters had been grounded.

The incident came less than two months after Taiwan commissioned its first squadron of US-made F-16V fighters in an effort to upgrade its ageing fleet as tensions with China spike.

Beijing claims self-ruled Taiwan as part of its territory and has vowed to take it one day, by



This file photo shows Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen gesturing from an upgraded US-made F-16 V fighter during a ceremony at the Chiayi Air Force in southern Taiwan on November 18, 2021 (AFP)

force if necessary.

President Tsai Ing-wen has ordered an all-out rescue effort and asked for clarity around the cause of the incident, her office said.

At least three helicopters and five coastguard vessels had been dispatched to find the jet.

"The air force and coastguard are making our best efforts to continue the rescue mission... but it's difficult at night with choppy sea," Liu said.

The F-16V is an upgraded and much more sophisticated version of the island's other F-16 fighters, which date back to the 1990s.

Taiwan also has French-made Mirage jets and its own war-planes.

The air force has suffered a string of fatal accidents in recent years as it faces growing pressure from China.

Last March, Taiwan grounded all military aircraft after a pilot was killed and another went missing when their fighters collided mid-air in the third fatal crash in less than six months.

Eight senior officials, including the chief of general staff, were killed in a helicopter crash in January 2020.

AFP

Kazakhstan President fires rare criticism at predecessor



President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev during a video conference with the European Council President Charles Michel in Brussels, on Monday (AFP)

Almaty, Kazakhstan - Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev issued rare criticism of his long-ruling predecessor on Tuesday, and said he expected Russian-led forces to leave the troubled Central Asian country in the next ten days.

The oil-rich country's descent into chaos has laid bare infighting at the top of a government once dominated by Tokayev's mentor, 81-year-old Nursultan Nazarbayev.

The older man retains the constitutional status of 'Leader of the Nation' despite stepping down from the presidency in 2019.

Addressing lawmakers in a video conference broadcast live, Tokayev fired an eyebrow-raising

broadside at Nazarbayev as the post-Soviet country reels from unprecedented violence that began with peaceful protests over an energy price hike.

Tokayev (68) said Nazarbayev's rule had created 'a layer of wealthy people, even by international standards'.

"The time has come to pay tribute to the people of Kazakhstan and help them on a systematic and regular basis," Tokayev added, noting that 'very profitable companies' would be asked to pay money into a state fund.

"The current system is oriented towards major structures and is based on the principle: 'everything for friends and laws

Nazarbayev's rule had created a layer of wealthy people. The time has come to pay tribute to the people of Kazakhstan and help them on a systematic and regular basis

KASSYM-JOMART TOKAYEV

for everyone else'," he said.

Both Kazakhstan and Russia have framed last week's unrest that left dozens dead and almost 10,000 people arrested as a coup attempt assisted by foreign 'terrorists', but have provided little supporting evidence.

Phased withdrawal

Following a request from career diplomat Tokayev, the Moscow-

more than 2,000 troops was deployed at the peak of the crisis, after armed clashes between government opponents and security forces and a looting spree trashed parts of Almaty.

The decision was a first for the CSTO, often touted by Moscow as a NATO equivalent but previously reluctant to interfere in unrest in Central Asia, a region with long historical ties to Russia.

Concern has mounted that Moscow could leverage the mission to entrench its influence in Kazakhstan and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned that 'once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave'.

First family thirst

Tokayev appeared to further bolster his position by backing acting prime minister Alikhan Smailov to take on the job permanently on Tuesday - a nomination that won the unanimous support of lawmakers.

Former national security committee chief Karim Masimov - a key Nazarbayev ally viewed as perpetuating the retired president's influence over the government - was arrested on treason charges on Saturday in connection with the unrest.

Even if Nazarbayev - the son of shepherds who rose through the communist party's ranks - is now being sidelined politically, dislodging his family's extensive interests in Central Asia's largest economy may take time.

In a significant move on Tuesday, Tokayev announced plans to bring an end to a widely criticised private recycling monopoly linked to Nazarbayev's youngest daughter, Aliya Nazarbayeva (41).

AFP



Mafe appears at the Court in Cape Town on Tuesday (AFP)

Parliament fire suspect charged with terrorism in South Africa

Cape Town, South Africa - A South African court charged a man suspected of starting a devastating fire that gutted South Africa's parliament with terrorism, adding to robbery and arson accusations, as he made his second appearance in court on Tuesday.

Zandile Christmas Mafe (49) was arrested around the parliament complex after the fire broke out on January 2 and appeared in court three days later.

He was initially charged with breaking into parliament, arson and intention to steal property, including laptops, crockery and documents, before the new terrorism charge was added on Tuesday.

was bearded and dressed in a grey shirt with knee-length denim shorts, on Tuesday he came in clean shaven in a light blue shirt and a dark jacket.

Since his arrest, debate has raged in South Africa over whether Mafe, described in the local media as homeless, was responsible for setting the building on fire.

A group of around 30 people, picketed outside the Cape Town magistrate court demanding Mafe be freed, brandishing handwritten signs such as 'Free Mafe', 'He is in-

The accused is guilty of the offence of contravening the provisions of...the protection of constitutional democracy against terrorist and related activities

COURT DOCUMENT

nocent' and 'He is not guilty'.

One homeless person recounted the events of the night the fire started.

He was sleeping on a street near the parliament complex and heard a sound like a car collision. He later suspected that was the break-in before the fire started.

A preliminary report by the city of Cape Town last week said the fire detection system appeared 'faulty', that 'sprinklers did not activate' and that they were last serviced in 2017, missing a February 2020 scheduled service.

It took scores of firefighters more than two days to extinguish the blaze, which tore through the wood-panelled assembly chamber where parliamentary debates are held.

AFP

'He is innocent'

In stark contrast to his first court appearance where he

EU flags at half-mast after death of parliament speaker

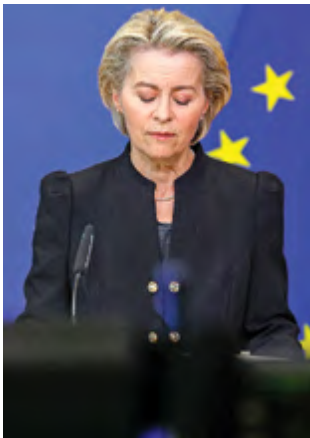
Brussels, Belgium - EU flags were flown at half-mast in tribute to European Parliament speaker David Sassoli, who died on Tuesday aged 65, as tributes flowed in from leaders and officials from around the 27-nation bloc and beyond.

"Today is a sad day for Europe," European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said, referring to the Italian former journalist and longtime MEP whose 2.5-year term presiding over Europe's legislature was to end this month.

Sassoli died in the early hours of Tuesday in the hospital where he had been admitted on December 26 for what his spokesman had said was 'a serious complication due to a dysfunction of the immune system'.



This file photo (left) shows David Sassoli after being elected president of the European Parliament in Strasbourg on July 3, 2019; Ursula von der Leyen (right) makes a statement on Sassoli's death in Brussels on Tuesday (AFP)



"David Sassoli passed away at 1.15am (0015 GMT) on 11 January at the CRO in Aviano, Italy, where he was hospitalised," the spokesman, Roberto Cuillo, tweeted.

The parliament's acting speaker is now its highest-ranking vice-president, Roberta Metsola, a Maltese politician who was already tipped to succeed Sassoli.

'Passionate European'

The 705-seat European Parliament is one of the more important of the EU's main institutions.

But the work of the European Council, which represents the 27

member states' governments, and of the European Commission, which serves as the EU executive, is seen as more influential outside Brussels.

Under the EU treaties, the official seat of the parliament is in the French city of Strasbourg, but its MEPs spend most of their time and do much of their work in Brussels, where they have offices and use another chamber.

While the members of the European Parliament are elected for five-year terms, the speaker usually gets a mandate for half that period under a power-sharing arrangement between the parliament's biggest political groups.

The current members took up their mandates in July 2019.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Half of Europe on track to catch Omicron as millions face fresh lockdowns in China

Copenhagen, Denmark - More than half of people in Europe are projected to catch Omicron in the next two months, the WHO said on Tuesday, as millions in China faced fresh lockdowns on the two-year anniversary of the world's first COVID-19 death.

The highly-transmissible variant has ripped through countries at breakneck pace, forcing governments to impose fresh measures and scramble to roll out booster shots.

Europe has been at the epicentre of alarming new outbreaks - hospital admissions and deaths are creeping up as well - and the World Health Organization said on Tuesday Omicron could infect half of all people in the region at current infection rates.

"The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) forecasts that more than 50 per cent of the population in the region will be infected with Omicron in the next six to eight weeks," said Hans Kluge, regional director for WHO's European office.

The WHO's European region covers 53 countries and territories including several in Central Asia, and Kluge said 50 of them had Omicron cases.

Kluge confirmed that Omicron is more transmissible than previous variants, but stressed 'approved vaccines do continue to provide good protection against severe disease and death, including for Omicron'.

The warning bell came exactly two years after the first person died of a virus only later identified as COVID - a 61-year-



Pupils take their swab samples for a rapid test as they attend their first lesson after Christmas holidays amid the pandemic, at the Freiherr-vom-Stein secondary school in Bonn, western Germany, on Monday (AFP)

old man in Wuhan, China, where the virus was first detected.

Since January 11, 2020, known fatalities in the pandemic have soared to nearly 5.5mn.

China lockdown

China largely tamed its initial outbreak with a mix of lockdowns, border closures and mass testing, but flare-ups in some major cities are testing that Zero COVID strategy just weeks before the Beijing Winter Olympics.

The city of Anyang in Henan province on Monday night told



A resident gets his nucleic acid test done in Huaxian county, Anyang city, in China's central Henan province on Saturday (AFP)

its 5mn residents to not leave their homes or drive cars on the roads, China's official Xinhua

news agency said. Last week, the 1mn people in Yuzhou - also a city in Henan -

were told to stay at home. Xi'an, home to 13mn people, is in its third week of lockdown.

China reported 110 new local virus cases on Tuesday, a tiny figure compared with the hundreds of thousands emerging daily in global hotspots such as the United States.

But they are a cause of alarm for Chinese authorities as Beijing prepares to host the Winter Games, with the event already expected to have tight coronavirus safety protocols.

Hong Kong, which has some of the toughest coronavirus border restrictions in the world,



The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) forecasts that more than 50 per cent of the population in the region (Europe) will be infected with Omicron in the next six to eight weeks

HANS KLUGE

also ramped up its curbs on Tuesday to fight an Omicron outbreak, shutting kindergartens and primary schools until early February.

The same day, Japan extended until the end of next month a strict COVID border policy that bars almost all new foreign arrivals.

Japanese authorities also announced the reopening of mass vaccination centres as they fight an Omicron-fuelled surge.

'Pretty angry'

Health experts maintain vaccines are among the most po-

tent tools available against the pandemic.

But the deep scepticism and often violent opposition to jabs in many countries dramatically came into focus last week when Australia cancelled the visa of the world's top men's tennis player over COVID-19 shot requirements.

The unjabbed, vaccine-sceptic Novak Djokovic won a legal challenge against the government on Monday, however, and is looking to defend his Australian Open title despite an outpouring of anger in the country over his exemption.

"I can imagine some people will be pretty angry about it," said 22-year-old fan Harrison Denicolo, who felt Djokovic should be allowed to play.

In Italy, however, Prime Minister Mario Draghi urged people to get shots as new restrictions came into force on Monday, barring the unvaccinated from a large number of public transport and venues such as restaurants, gyms and cinemas.

"Most of the problems we are facing today depend on the fact that there are unvaccinated people," he said.

The known COVID-19 death toll in Poland, where the government has also urged people to get vaccinated, crossed 100,000, Italy's Health Minister Adam Niedzielski said on Tuesday.

France on Monday said COVID-19 rules would be eased for schools as record-high case numbers shut down thousands of classes and sparked concern among parents and teachers.

AFP

UAE to jail anyone mocking precautionary measures

Dubai, UAE - The United Arab Emirates has threatened to jail people who make fun of its anti-COVID measures after mocking photos and videos appeared online.

Federal prosecutors said social media users could be punished under new laws which allow at least two years' jail and AED200,000 fines for sharing misleading

information.

The warning followed 'the recent circulation of photos and videos on social media... accompanied by comments and songs mocking the precautionary measures and calling on others to flout them', said a Federal Emergency Crisis and Disasters Prosecution statement.

AFP

Poland records 100,000 virus-linked deaths

Warsaw, Poland - More than 100,000 people have died in from COVID-19 in Poland, the government said on Tuesday, with the mortality rate rising to one of the world's highest.

"It's another sad day but particularly so today because we have crossed the threshold of 100,000 deaths," Health Minister Adam

Niedzielski told news channel TVN24.

The Health Ministry said 493 people had died in the last 24 hours, bringing the total to 100,254 deaths since the start of the pandemic.

The ministry said there were also more than 18,000 people currently in hospital in the country of 38mn.

AFP

Bulgarian leaders go into quarantine after contact

Sofia, Bulgaria - Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, President Rumen Radev and other officials went into quarantine on Tuesday after being in contact with the parliamentary speaker, who tested positive for COVID-19.

Bulgaria has the lowest vaccination rate in the Euro-

pean Union, with experts blaming low trust in the authorities and widespread conspiracy theories.

"Prime Minister Kiril Petkov is self-isolating ... he continues to work remotely," the government press service said.

AFP

'Vaccine access must to tackle climate change'

Paris, France - Unequal access to COVID-19 vaccines is widening the gap between rich countries and the developing world, threatening the cooperation needed to tackle common challenges such as climate change, the World Economic Forum warned on Tuesday.

In its annual Global Risks Report, the Swiss foundation behind the annual Davos gathering of the rich and powerful warned that vaccine haves and have-nots were increasingly on divergent paths.

'A greater prevalence of COVID-19 in low-vaccination countries than in high-vaccination ones will weigh on worker



A man tends to chicken in one of the classrooms of a school following the closure of learning institutions in Uganda. According to WHO, 98 countries are yet to vaccinate 40 per cent of their population (AFP)

availability and productivity, disrupt supply chains and weaken consumption,' the 17th edition of the report, which surveys global experts, warned.

'Moreover, a lower post-pandemic risk appetite in the vaccinated world - comprised mostly of advanced economies - could weaken their investment in the non-vaccinated world,' it added.

According to the World Health Organization, 98 countries are yet to vaccinate 40 per cent of their population - a stark contrast with the situation in many Western countries, where vaccination rates hover around the 70-80 per cent mark.

AFP

UK's Johnson faces fresh scandal over lockdown party breach

London, UK - British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was embroiled on Tuesday in another scandal over his government's alleged lockdown breaches, as police said they were investigating a Downing Street gathering to which over 100 people were invited.

In the latest in a string of such accusations, Johnson and others allegedly held a drinks party in the garden of his official residence in May 2020 when socialising was outlawed.

An email leaked late on Monday indicated that Martin Reynolds, a senior civil servant, invited more than 100 Downing Street colleagues to 'bring your

own booze' to the event, which Johnson and his wife Carrie allegedly attended.

The potentially highly damaging revelations follow a series of similar claims which emerged last month about Downing Street parties held during later lockdowns in the run-up to Christmas in 2020.

They prompted Johnson to appoint another senior civil servant, Sue Gray, to investigate and she is now expected to expand her probe to cover the new allegations.

Meanwhile in a statement late on Monday, London police said they were also making enquiries over potential breaches



Boris Johnson speaks during a virtual press conference to update Britain's status of the pandemic, in the Downing Street last week (AFP)

of the lockdown laws in relation to the May gathering.

"The Metropolitan Police Service is aware of widespread reporting relating to alleged

breaches of the Health Protection Regulations at Downing Street on May 20, 2020 and is in contact with the Cabinet Office," the force said.

'Socially distanced drinks'

Johnson has previously denied knowledge that any rules were broken in Downing Street during the pandemic, as he faced weeks of excoriating headlines over the previous allegations before Christmas. But the latest accusations appear to directly contradict those claims.

In the May 2020 email sent by Reynolds, he wrote: 'After what has been an incredibly busy period it would be nice to make the most of the lovely weather and have some socially distanced drinks in the No10 garden this evening.'

AFP

French far-right Zemmour struggling before vote

Paris, France - Having entered France's presidential race full of sound and fury, far-right TV pundit Eric Zemmour risks seeing his campaign amount to nothing because of a widely contested clause of electoral law.

Like all candidates in the race, Zemmour needs to muster 500 endorsements from elected figures around the country by the middle of March in order to have his name on the ballot paper for the polls in April.

His dramatic entrance into front-line politics after a career spent in the media sent waves through the French ruling class in September, making him briefly the most talked-about challenger to President Emmanuel Macron.

But the anti-Islam populist has admitted he risks being excluded unless more mayors and other elected figures agree to back him under a system he has denounced as discriminating against political outsiders.

"The endorsement system is there to prevent far-fetched candidates from running," Zemmour said on Monday. "It's not there to enable established parties to monopolise the election and block rivals."

He said that he had secured only 300-350 pledges so far, but stressed that these are 'at the moment only promises', suggesting some of them will not materialise.

Securing 500 signatures



Eric Zemmour (left) greets supporters during a political meeting at Les Sables d'Olonne, Western France, on Saturday (AFP)

The endorsement system is there to prevent far-fetched candidates from running. It's not there to enable established parties to monopolise the election and block rivals

ERIC ZEMMOUR

from a pool of 42,000 elected French figures that includes mayors, MPs and local councilors sounds an easy task, but

other veteran candidates are also reporting difficulties. These include longstanding far-right leader Marine Le Pen,

who has an established grass-roots party unlike Zemmour, and hard-left leader and MP Jean-Luc Melenchon, who heads the France Unbowed movement.

'Real problem'

A large part of the explanation is that, since a reform under former President Francois Hollande in 2016, endorsements are now made public.

This means many mayors are reluctant to back controversial and divisive figures such as Zemmour, who has two hate crime convictions, because they fear pushback from their local communities.

Others fret about backing someone from outside their party, which might cause them problems with their own political family - something they could avoid under the previously

anonymised system.

Stephane Zumsteeg, a political analyst at the Ipsos polling firm, said that 'creating suspense' about the endorsement system was an 'old classic' in French politics, used repeatedly by Le Pen and her father Jean-Marie in the past.

"It keeps them in the public eye and enables them to present themselves as victims of the system," he told AFP.

"That said, in the particular case of Eric Zemmour, there's a real problem, unless he is given help," he added. "Fewer and fewer mayors are agreeing to endorse candidates."

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin ruled out any change to the law on Tuesday, saying "you don't change the rules a few days before the match."

Helping hand?

Le Pen, who has most to lose from a Zemmour candidacy, has said in private that she believes her 63-year-old rival will not go the full distance and compete in the two-round election which begins on April 10.

Beyond the short-term challenge of gathering endorsements, surveys of voters currently put the best-selling author and commentator behind Macron, Le Pen and right-winger Valerie Pécresse in fourth, with about 13 per cent.

He is also trending downwards, polls show, having been pictured giving the middle-fin

ger to a protester in December and seeing his first major political rally overshadowed by a brawl involving a far-right gang.

His lack of momentum has made it difficult to lure big-name talent to his team, although the defection of the former number two in the mainstream right-wing Republicans party, Guillaume Peltier, represented a small victory at the weekend.

If he were to pull out, analysts wonder who would benefit most on the right: Pécresse from the Republicans, who is running a campaign focused on law and order, or Le Pen?

"It's difficult to say categorically," said Zumsteeg. "Roughly, you could imagine it splitting with two-thirds of votes going to Le Pen and a third to Pécresse."

As a result, many observers suspect Pécresse's deep-rooted Republicans party might lend a helping hand to Zemmour behind the scenes to keep him in the race in order to draw votes away from Le Pen.

Macron remains the favourite overall, polls show.

Zemmour sounded resolute and confident on Monday as he addressed a New Year's press conference - which consisted of a diatribe against the 'politically correct' media which he said the public was 'right to be angry at'. "In exactly a year, I will invite you to the presidential palace and our relationship will not be the same," he said.

AFP

Too much meat? Spain factory farming debate creates beef

Madrid, Spain - Debate over the environmental impact of Spain's huge factory farming sector is heating up in the country, Europe's biggest meat consumer, and splitting its ruling coalition.

In an interview published in British daily *The Guardian*, Consumer Affairs Minister Alberto Garzon lashed out against Spain's 'so-called mega-farms', calling them unsustainable.

"They find a village in a depopulated bit of Spain and put in 4,000, or 5,000, or 10,000 head of cattle," he said.

"They pollute the soil, they pollute the water and then they export this poor quality meat from these ill-treated animals."

Garzon is the coordinator of the tiny United Left party, a junior member of the minority coalition government led by Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, and his comments angered farmers. "There are no mis-treated animals in Spain, minister," the UPA union, which represents small producers, said in a statement.

It said Garzon's statements were 'based on falsehoods, clumsy, nearsighted and could have harmful effects on Spanish meat exports'.



This file photo shows activists with placards reading 'meat is the first cause of climate change', during a protest called by animal rights organisation AnimaNaturalis, in Madrid on December 1 last year (AFP)

Pablo Casado, the leader of the conservative main opposition Popular Party (PP) which is strong in some rural areas, also weighed in, calling Garzon's words 'an attack against ranchers and farmers and the image of

our country'.

Government spokeswoman Isabel Rodriguez said Garzon was speaking in a personal capacity. She added that the government "supports the livestock sector, which contributes deci-

sively to our exports."

The debate risks deepening the divide between the Socialists and left-wing coalition partner Podemos ahead of an election in the Castile and Leon region north of Madrid as the PP rides high in



They find a depopulated bit of Spain and put in 4,000, or 5,000, or 10,000 head of cattle. They pollute the soil, they pollute the water and then they export this poor quality meat from these ill-treated animals

ALBERTO GARZON

the polls.

'Bigger and bigger'

Garzon had already come under fire in July for urging Spaniards to reduce their meat consumption, prompting Sanchez to say that

for him 'there's nothing that beats a well done steak'.

For Salvador Calvet, a University of Valencia professor who studies the sector, the outcry over Garzon's comments is due to the cultural and economic weight of livestock farming, which provides a living for 'many families'.

It is responsible for some 2.5mn jobs in the country and accounts for €9bn (US\$10bn approx) in annual exports, according to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

And it is booming. Meat production has increased ten-fold in Spain over the past 60 years, a larger increase than in most other European nations, according to a University of Oxford database.

Although there are fewer farms, their size is getting 'bigger and bigger', said Calvet.

The growth of the sector is fuelled by external demand, especially from China, as well as within Spain, where ham, chorizo sausages and other animal products are a key part of many people's diet.

Each Spaniard eats an average of 98.8kg of meat per year, com-

pared to the worldwide average of 42kg, according to FAO figures.

That makes Spain Europe's biggest meat consumer, ahead of Portugal at 98.7kg and Poland at 88.5kg.

'Legitimate debate'

This level of consumption amounts to more than 270 grams per day, 'when international scientific recommendations recommend 300 grams of consumption per week', environmental group Greenpeace said in a statement.

It warned that the consequences of this overconsumption are 'devastating'.

Greenpeace was one of several environmental groups which backed Garzon, who has also come under fire for banning adverts for sugary foods aimed at children and a crackdown on the betting industry.

"There is a legitimate debate' over the environmental impact of livestock breeding but the reality is 'complex and nuanced', said Calvet. Breeders have 'improved' their practices in recent years but they could still do more, he added.

AFP

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THREATS AND THEFT

The wretched life of C. Africa's peanut growers

Hunching over her work, Marissa shells peanuts under a blazing sun, sweat dripping down her face.

Growing peanuts is a mainstay activity in the Paoua region in the Central African Republic, about 500km northwest of the capital Bangui.

But for many growers, life is a daily battle.

First, they have to coax the plants from the ground, harvest the nuts and shell them.

And then they have to survive theft, extortion or worse, in a region where rebels and pro-government forces are at war.

The town of Paoua is regularly targeted by armed groups, notably the powerful 3R movement (Return, Reclaim, Rehabilitation), among several in the region that are seeking to control the peanut business.

The rebels that have ravaged the deeply poor, landlocked country for years have adopted guerrilla tactics after being driven back from large towns.

For the past several months, they have been planting explosive devices along the main roads to delay the advance of pro-government forces.

"There are too many threats and thefts," says Celestine Inforo (33), shelling peanuts along with Marissa and a dozen others on the outskirts of Paoua.

"We had to sell our production very quickly and at a low price."

The women separate the nuts' fine skins by pouring them onto the ground from shoulder height.

Inforo and her co-workers each fill several sacks in a few hours, then a pair of oxen haul the day's production to a secure storeroom loaned by the Oxfam non-governmental organisation.

Outside the storeroom, each bag is weighed and recorded at between 35 and 45 kilograms.

In the town, a sack of shelled nuts fetches around 10,000 CFA francs (US\$17 approx).

This is a far cry from the prices in distant Bangui, where a sack can sell for between 20,000 and 30,000 CFA francs, says Jean-Paul Ndopaye, president of the Paoua Rice Growers Union.

Production greatly exceeds demand in the region, bringing down prices. The impact is dramatic in a town of some 40,000, since '80 per cent of the population of Paoua has an activity related to peanuts', according to

Food Security Phase Classification (IPC).

"Sixty-one per cent of the population is in phase 3 of crisis and in phase 4 of food emergency," states Mahoua Coulibaly, local manager of the UN agency.

In the shade of a mango tree, three women turn peanuts into oil, butter and 'kuli-kuli' sticks, which have a high nutritional content thanks to the natural proteins and fibres.

Marie roasts the nuts, stirring them while taking care not to burn herself. Kneeling beside her, Lena kneads peanut butter on a wooden board.

"Extracting oil with this method is physically exhausting, it can take hours," says Moussa Issoufou, Oxfam's food security manager.

"We must find modern equipment to facilitate their work," he adds, convinced that this is the only way for the women to earn more from their labour.

"The problem is processing. This is what must be invested in for the wellbeing of the population, but for the moment the funds are lacking," Coulibaly says.

80% of the population of Paoua has an activity related to peanuts

NOEL ZINGANI

Noel Zingani, head of the local Oxfam office.

When low prices affect the entire industry in Paoua, Marissa barely gets 250 CFA francs, around 43 cents, for each bag she fills.

Unprecedented malnutrition

The CAR is one of the poorest countries in the world, in the grip of a civil war since 2013. The conflict has diminished in intensity in recent years, but it flared up again during the last presidential election a year ago.

In the greater Ouham-Pende region, the World Food Programme (WFP) says malnutrition is at unprecedented levels, measured on the Integrated

AFP

This file photo shows a man dehulling peanuts as part of the artisanal transformation process in Paoua, northwestern Central African Republic, on December 1, last year (AFP)



Women threshes peanuts as part of the transformation process in Paoua (AFP)



A woman is torrefying peanuts in Paoua, Central African Republic (AFP)



The majority of the local population depends on peanut farming for survival (AFP)

Taylor ends Test career with final wicket as Kiwis square series

Wagner and Jamieson share seven wickets in an innings win inside three days in the second Test

BANGLADESH VS N ZEALAND
Christchurch, New Zealand - New Zealand gave Ross Taylor a memorable farewell from Test cricket with an innings-and-117-run win against Bangladesh in Christchurch inside three days. That helped the home side square the series after they had lost the first Test by eight wickets. Taylor, with his family in attendance at Hagley Oval, took the last wicket of the Test when Tom Latham held his sixth catch of the match, which gave him his second Test hundred, that was one of the highlights of the day. Not that Bangladesh ever really looked like they would make New Zealand bat again, as the next best individual score for them was Nurul Hasan's 36, and the best partnership the 101 Litton and Nurul put up for the sixth wicket. Bangladesh were quite a way from even dreaming of replicating their win in the Mount Maunganui Test last week.



New Zealand's Ross Taylor walks from the field for the last time in a Test match after the second Test against Bangladesh on Tuesday (AFP)

Nonetheless, they will go back home proud of the result - a 1-1 draw topped everything they had done in the country previously. The fight was on show after tea on Tuesday. Litton, who took 46 balls to score his first boundary, had reached 33 off 64 balls when he changed the mood. He struck 17 runs off Jamieson in the 59th over, hitting him for two fours and an upper-cut six. Both

fours were pulled, dissecting a packed on-side field. He then struck four boundaries off Trent Boult with some delightful shots. After getting to his half-century off a guided four through point, he drove Boult through mid-off, cover and straight down the ground, arguably his best shot of the innings. Litton had taken 35 runs off 12 balls in that period, and the sixth-

wicket partnership had crossed the 100 mark. Nurul only needed to hold one end up. Instead, he holed out to mid-off where Wagner took a diving catch to his left. Mehidy Hasan Miraz followed after seven overs, when Latham took his fifth catch in the slips in the Test, off Jamieson. Litton, however, continued towards his second Test hundred, hammering Wagner with the last of his

pulled fours. He then swatted Wagner over the covers, soon after Wagner had a few words to say to him. Another ramped four and a quickly run two, off Jamieson, took Litton to the three-figure mark. He saluted his dressing room a la Ebadot in celebration. Jamieson, however, got Litton in the end, getting one to slip past his straight bat, to get him lbw.

SCOREBOARD			
New Zealand 1 st Innings 521/6d			
Bangladesh 1 st Innings (f/o) 126			
BANGLADESH 2 nd INNINGS			
S Islam	c Blundell b Jamieson	21	
M Naim	c Latham b Southee	24	
N H Shanto	c Boult b Wagner	29	
M Haque	c Taylor b Wagner	37	
Litton Das	lbw b Jamieson	102	
Yasir Ali	c Latham b Wagner	2	
Nurul Hasan	c Wagner b Mitchell	36	
M H Miraz	c Latham b Jamieson	3	
T Ahmed	not out	9	
S Islam	c Southee b Jamieson	0	
E Hossain	c Latham b Taylor	4	
Extras:	(b 4, lb 1, nb 4, w 2)	11	
TOTAL:	278 in 79.3 overs		
Fall of wickets: 1-27, 2-71, 3-105, 4-123, 5-128, 6-229, 7-244, 8-269, 9-269, 10-278			
Bowling: T Southee 17-6-54-1, T Boult 16-6-42-0, K Jamieson 18-4-82-4, Neil Wagner 22-7-77-3, D Mitchell 6-1-18-1, Ross Taylor 0.3-0-0-1			



Chris Morris

Chris Morris retires from all forms of cricket at 34

Johannesburg, South Africa - South Africa allrounder Chris Morris has announced his retirement from all forms of cricket. While declaring his decision to hang his boots after a 12-year career, the 34-year-old Morris also said that he would be taking up a coaching role with South African domestic side Titans. 'Thanks to all who have played a part in my journey whether it be big or small... it's been a fun ride!' Morris' instagram caption read. Morris last represented South Africa during the 2019 ODI World Cup, a tournament where he was South Africa's highest wicket-taker. He turned out for his country 69 times across the three formats, taking 94 wickets in all. An allrounder bowler who often sent the speedgun beyond 140kph, Morris was also a hard-hitting lower-order batter. Morris made his international debut in a T20I in December 2012, and an ODI debut followed next year, in June 2013. He had to wait for his Test debut though, finally earning the first of his four Test caps in January 2016. Cricinfo

Tata replaces Vivo in IPL

New Delhi, India - Tata Group is the Indian Premier League's new lead sponsor, an official confirmed Tuesday - a deal that replaces a smartphone maker embroiled in an anti-China backlash prompted by a deadly border clash. IPL chairman Brijesh Patel told AFP that Tata - one of India's biggest and oldest industrial groups - will sponsor cricket's most lucrative tournament through to 2023. In doing so it will complete the remaining two-year deal of China's Vivo, which had returned to sponsor the cash-rich league in 2021 after a one-year pause. Vivo had paid US\$330mn for a five-year deal up to 2022. But the Board of Control for Cricket in India suspended Vivo's deal in 2020, soon after a high-altitude border confrontation with the Chinese People's Liberation Army that left 20 Indian soldiers dead and a surge of local anti-China sentiment. The upcoming season of the IPL will have 10 teams. AFP

Kohli resolute as S Africa claim first day

Cape Town, South Africa - Indian captain Virat Kohli made a resolute 79 but bowlers dominated the first day of the series-deciding third Test against South Africa at Newlands on Tuesday. India were bowled out for 223 but hit back when Jasprit Bumrah claimed the wicket of South African captain Dean Elgar shortly before the close. South Africa finished the day on 17 for one. The Indian batsmen struggled after Kohli won the toss and decided to bat under an overcast sky on a well-grassed pitch which offered seam movement for the South African fast bowlers. Kagiso Rabada, playing in his 50th Test, took four for 73 and eventually won an enthralling duel with Kohli when the Indian captain was ninth man out. Left-arm fast bowling discovery Marco Jansen took three for 55. Kohli defied the bowlers for more than four hours in facing 201 balls. He was involved in the only significant partnerships of the innings, 62 for the third



India's Virat Kohli watches the ball after playing a shot during the first day of the third Test against South Africa, in Cape Town on Tuesday (AFP)

wicket with Cheteshwar Pujara (43) and 51 for the fifth wicket with Rishabh Pant (27). Without a century in his previous 14 Tests, Kohli was clearly determined to make a major contribution on a day when most of his teammates struggled. Refusing to be tempted into playing any rash shots, Kohli was content to leave the majority of the balls he faced early in his innings. It took him 15 balls to score his first runs, a sweetly-timed

cover drive for four off Marco Jansen. Kohli contributed only 14 runs off 80 balls to the partnership with Pujara and needed 158 balls to reach his half-century. When he was reduced to batting with the tail, Kohli became more adventurous and he fell to Rabada when he was caught behind playing a ball well outside his off stump. Kohli hit 12 fours as well as a hooked six off Rabada.

SCOREBOARD			
INDIA 1 st INNINGS			
KL Rahul	c Verreynne b Olivier	12	
M Agarwal	c Markram b Rabada	15	
C Pujara	c Verreynne b Jansen	43	
Virat Kohli	c Verreynne b Rabada	79	
A Rahane	c Verreynne b Rabada	9	
Rishabh Pant	c Petersen b Jansen	27	
R Ashwin	c Verreynne b Jansen	2	
S Thakur	c Petersen b Maharaj	12	
Jasprit Bumrah	c Elgar b Rabada	0	
Umesh Yadav	not out	4	
M Shami	c Bavuma b Ngidi	7	
Extras:	(b 5, lb 1, nb 7)	13	
TOTAL:	(77.3 Ov, RR: 2.87)	223	
Fall of wickets: 1-31, 2-33, 3-95, 4-116, 5-167, 6-175, 7-205, 8-210, 9-211, 10-223			
Bowling: K Rabada 22-4-73-4, D Olivier 18-5-42-1, M Jansen 18-6-55-3, L Ngidi 14.3-7-33-1, K Maharaj 5-2-14-1			
SOUTH AFRICA 1 st INNINGS			
Dean Elgar	c Pujara b Bumrah	3	
A Markram	not out	8	
K Maharaj	not out	6	
TOTAL:	(8 Ov, RR: 2.12)	17/1	
Fall of wickets: 1-10			
Bowling: J Bumrah 4-4-0-1, U Yadav 2-0-10-0, M Shami 2-0-7-0			

His battle with Rabada provided the most compelling cricket of the day with the South African fast bowler beating him outside the off stump on several occasions and inducing an edge which fell just short of Aiden Markram at second slip. AFP



Djokovic trains as Australian Open dream hangs in balance



Serbia's Novak Djokovic takes part in a training session in Melbourne ahead of the Australian Open tennis tournament on Tuesday (AFP)

Melbourne, Australia - Tennis superstar Novak Djokovic trained at the Australian Open venue on Tuesday for his attempt to win a record 21st Grand Slam but his dream hung in the balance as the government pondered cancelling his visa, again.

The world number one had scored a surprise courtroom victory the day before, overturning the Australian government's decision to cancel his visa on COVID-19 vaccination grounds.

But the immigration minister said he may annul Djokovic's visa once more.

The unvaccinated 34-year-old Serbian ace says he is now deter-

mined to stay in Melbourne and compete in the Australian Open, which starts in six days.

"I flew here to play at one of the most important events we have in front of the amazing fans," Djokovic said on Instagram Monday.

Wearing a T-shirt and shorts, he limbered up in a gym on Tuesday accompanied by coach Goran Ivanisevic before heading to centre court.

Television cameras filmed him from helicopters as he played.

Djokovic, a nine-time Australian Open champion, jetted into the country six days ago car-

rying a medical exemption from vaccination due to a positive coronavirus test on December 16 last year.

After overnight questioning at Melbourne airport, border officials decided the exemption was not valid, cancelled his visa and transferred him to a detention centre pending deportation.

"I am not vaccinated," Djokovic told the official.

'Biggest victory'

He expressed bewilderment that his exemption, approved by two medical panels in Australia, was

not accepted. The limited number of foreigners allowed into Australia must be fully vaccinated or have a medical exemption. The government insists that a recent infection does not count as an exemption.

Federal circuit court judge Anthony Kelly dramatically reversed the visa decision on Monday, ordering the cancellation be 'quashed', that the player be released immediately and that the government pay his legal costs.

The government had surrendered after conceding that Djokovic had not been given the promised time to respond.

AFP

Australian Open: Men's seeds

Men's singles seeds announced on Tuesday for the Australian Open, the first tennis Grand Slam tournament of the year, which starts on January 17 at Melbourne Park:

1. Novak Djokovic (SRB), 2. Daniil Medvedev (RUS), 3. Alexander Zverev (GER), 4. Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE), 5. Andrey Rublev (RUS), 6. Rafael Nadal (ESP), 7. Matteo Berrettini (ITA), 8. Casper Ruud (NOR), 9. Felix Auger-Aliassime (CAN), 10. Hubert Hurkacz (POL), 11. Jannik Sinner (ITA), 12. Cameron Norrie (GBR), 13. Diego Schwartzman (ARG), 14. Denis Shapovalov (CAN), 15. Roberto Bautista Agut (ESP), 16. Cristian Garin (CHI), 17. Gael Monfils (FRA), 18. Aslan Karatsev (RUS), 19. Pablo Carreno Busta (ESP), 20. Taylor Fritz (USA), 21. Nikoloz Basilashvili (GEO), 22. John Isner (USA), 23. Reilly Opelka (USA), 24. Dan Evans (GBR), 25. Lorenzo Sonego (ITA), 26. Grigor Dimitrov (BUL), 27. Marin Cilic (CRO), 28. Karen Khachanov (RUS), 29. Ugo Humbert (FRA), 30. Lloyd Harris (RSA), 31. Carlos Alcaraz (ESP), 32. Alex de Minaur (AUS)

AFP



Aryna Sabalenka hits a return against Kaja Juvan during women's singles match at the Adelaide International, on January 5 (AFP)

Tearful Sabalenka's serve melts down in warm-up disaster

AO WARM UP

Adelaide, Australia - World number two Aryna Sabalenka's Australian Open preparations were in tatters on Tuesday when she self-destructed for the second week in a row and was almost unable to serve at an Adelaide warm-up event.

A week after her delivery deserted her at the first of two Adelaide lead-in tournaments, Sabalenka suffered the same fate as she was stunned in three sets by world number 93 Rebecca Peterson 5-7, 6-1, 7-5.

Sabalenka dished up 21 double faults and was reduced to serving underarm in the second and third sets in a desperate effort to get the ball into play.

She took so much pace off her first serves that at one stage they were barely clearing the net.

The 23-year-old Belarusian became distressed in the third set and, after being asked by the umpire whether she was all right, broke down in tears during her next service game.

Her only consolation was that she was still hitting her groundstrokes with power and placement, but it was no surprise when she bowed out at the first hurdle.

"That was definitely the

weirdest match I've ever played," Swedish qualifier Peterson said. "It was tough staying focused. I know she was struggling a lot."

"I just had to stay in my own world - it was really difficult."

American teenage sensation Coco Gauff blasted her way to the second round with an impressive 6-1, 6-2 win over Czech player Katerina Siniakova.

The 17-year-old Gauff took just over an hour to dispose of Siniakova and set up a second round clash with fellow teenager Marta Kostyuk of Ukraine.

Fourth-seeded Slovenian Tamara Zidansek progressed when she saw off British qualifier Heather Watson 2-6, 6-2, 7-6 (7/4).

Seventh seed Jill Teichmann fell to US qualifier Lauren Davis 1-6, 7-6 (7/3), 6-4.

Australian wildcard Maddison Inglis beat Montenegro's Danka Kovinic 6-4, 1-6, 6-2, while other winners were American Madison Brengle, who downed Russia's Anastasia Potapova 7-5, 4-6, 6-1 and Czech player Tereza Martincova, a 6-4, 3-6, 6-3 winner over Ukraine's Dayana Yastremska.

AFP



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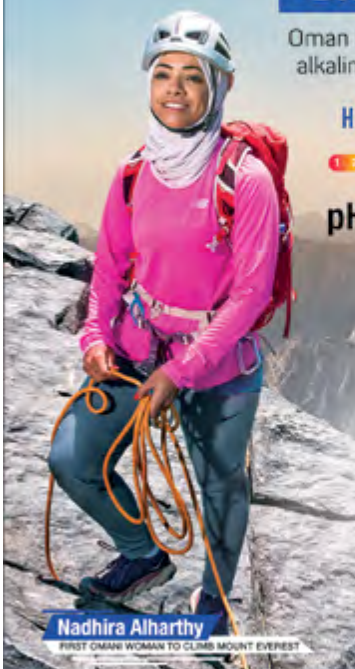
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Raducanu suffers humiliating loss

Sydney, Australia - US Open champion Emma Raducanu's Australian Open warm-up tournament lasted just 55 minutes after she was thrashed 6-0, 6-1 by Elena Rybakina at the Sydney International on Tuesday.

The 19-year-old Raducanu took the tennis world by storm in September when she won the US Open as a qualifier.

She opted not to play last week's Melbourne Summer Set tournament after recovering from COVID-19, meaning her last chance for some match practice ahead of the Open was at this week's Sydney Tennis Classic.

But she was blown off court by the powerful Rybakina, who finished runner-up to Ashleigh Barty at last week's Adelaide International.

The 1.80m tall Rybakina was superior in every department and had far too much firepower for Raducanu. Rybakina raced through the first set in 24 minutes without dropping a game and won the first three games of the second set before her opponent at last held serve.

But that was simply a tempo-



Emma Raducanu during her match against Elena Rybakina in Sydney on Tuesday (AFP)

rary reprieve, with Rybakina winning the next three games to underline her total dominance.

Earlier, Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Belinda Bencic said she felt 'a little bit wobbly' in her first match after COVID-19 as she began her warm-up for the Australian Open with a low-key win.

The 24-year-old Swiss cruised into the second round with a 6-3,

6-2 victory over Brazilian qualifier Beatriz Haddad Maia.

But Bencic, who contracted COVID-19 in mid-December after competing at an Abu Dhabi exhibition, admitted she had not been at her best, with the first Grand Slam of the year starting on Monday.

"I was struggling a little bit, getting to practice after COVID because the pulse was getting up and the fatigue was still there," said Bencic, a former world number four but now ranked 23rd.

"I think I still have room to feel better and my fitness has to get better. I still feel a little bit wobbly and so I think there is still potential, but I'm happy that I can play this tournament."

She will now take on Oceane Dodin of France in the next round. Dodin, a lucky loser from qualifying, beat Mexican doubles specialist Giuliana Olmos 6-4, 6-1.

World number 20 Elise Mertens also moved through the first round with a comfortable 6-2, 7-6 (7/5) win over France's Fiona Ferro.

AFP

Women's seeds for AO

1. Ashleigh Barty (AUS), 2. Aryna Sabalenka (BLR), 3. Garbine Muguruza (ESP), 4. Barbora Krejickova (CZE), 5. Maria Sakkari (GRE), 6. Anett Kontaveit (EST), 7. Iga Swiatek (POL), 8. Paula Badosa (ESP), 9. Ons Jabeur (TUN), 10. Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova (RUS), 11. Sofia Kenin (USA), 12. Elena Rybakina (KAZ), 13. Naomi Osaka (JPN), 14. Simona Halep (ROM), 15. Elina Svitolina (UKR), 16. Angelique Kerber (GER), 17. Emma Raducanu (GBR), 18. Coco Gauff (USA), 19. Elise Mertens (BEL), 20. Petra Kvitova (CZE), 21. Jessica Pegula (USA), 22. Belinda Bencic (SUI), 23. Leylah Fernandez (CAN), 24. Victoria Azarenka (BLR), 25. Daria Kasatkina (RUS), 26. Jelena Ostapenko (LAT), 27. Danielle Collins (USA), 28. Veronika Kudermetova (RUS), 29. Tamara Zidansek (SLO), 30. Camila Giorgi (ITA), 31. Marketa Vondrousova (CZE), 32. Sara Sorribes Tormo (ESP)



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