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Royal Decree ratifies maritime pact with Iran

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has issued Royal Decree No 29/2022 on the ratification of an agreement of cooperation between the government of the Sultanate of Oman and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran on maritime transport. It was signed in Tehran on December 8, 2019, after presentation before the Shura Council.

Article 1 ratifies the aforesaid agreement as per the version attached to this decree.

Article 2 states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

ONA



COMEX 2022 to showcase government tech innovations



OCCE reveals its plans for H2 2022

Six out of ten black fungus patients died in June 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman reported the first three cases of the fatal fungal infection mucormycosis - commonly known as black fungus - on June 15, 2021. A recently published study in *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* by Omani researchers has now reported that ten cases were diagnosed in the sultanate in the month of June in 2021. Of these, six died.

All patients were known to have poorly controlled diabetes mellitus or newly diagnosed with high blood sugar.

A surge in COVID-19 associated mucormycosis cases were observed during the second wave of COVID-19 in the summer of 2021. The majority of cases were



reported from India. The Delta variant (B.1.617.2) was the most common variant circulating at the time.

Mucormycosis, which is an angio-invasive fungal infection with high morbidity and mortality, proved to be deadly in the sultanate too, the study titled 'COVID-19 Associated Mu-

cormycosis: Opportunistic Fungal Infection. A case study and review,' found.

'We present ten cases of COVID-19 associated rhino orbital and rhino orbital cerebral mucormycosis managed in a secondary hospital in Oman. The median time for developing mucormycosis was two weeks from

A surge in fatal COVID-19 associated mucormycosis cases were observed during the second wave of COVID-19 in the summer of 2021

the COVID-19 diagnosis,' the study said.

'Five patients received corticosteroid therapy for COVID-19. Three patients had severe COVID-19 infection and died due to severe Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS) and septic shock. Three other patients died with advanced rhino orbital

cerebral mucormycosis. Despite aggressive medical and surgical intervention, the mortality rate was 60 per cent.'

Those who died had poor blood sugar control and four of them had severe diabetic ketoacidosis.

The study concluded that mucormycosis is an aggressive opportunistic infection with high morbidity and mortality that requires prompt recognition and urgent intervention. 'Uncontrolled blood sugar, the use of corticosteroids and immune dysfunction in COVID19 patients all are important risk factors for development of mucormycosis. Worse outcomes are associated with poor glycemic control despite aggressive medical and surgical interventions.'

Continued on Page 03

Khareef season preparations reviewed

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Authorities in Dhofar governorate have started preparations to welcome tourists for the khareef season, which officially starts on June 21 and continues till September 21 each year.

The Office of the Minister of State and Governor of Dhofar



held a meeting on Wednesday to determine readiness of all departments to receive tourists. The meeting was held under the chairmanship of H E Sayyid Mohammed Sultan al Busaidi, Minister of State and Governor of Dhofar.

A statement issued by the Office of the Governor said that the meeting looked into securing

all needs of visitors, including presence of appropriate number of policemen and regulation of traffic on all roads leading to the governorate. Updates were sought on securing beaches and sites visited by tourists for nature and greenery with rescue teams and for maintaining security and safety.

Discussions were also had on

reviewing health services, including extending working hours at certain health centres, increasing medical staff in Salalah, especially at emergency centres in the wilayat.

Additionally, the presence of ambulances on the Adam-Thumrait road and at the governorate's border posts has been ensured.

One month jail, fine of RO1,000, for tax evasion

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A Court of First Instance has issued a judicial order against an expatriate employee, who was arrested for violating the Income Tax Law, sentencing him to one month's imprisonment and a fine of RO1,000.

A statement issued by the Tax Authority recently said, 'The Court of First Instance in the wilayat of Buraimi has issued a court ruling against a company for violating the provisions of the Income Tax Law issued by Royal Decree No 28/2009.'

Abdul Hakim bin Salim al Harthy, director of Legal Department, Tax Authority, said, 'The Anti-Tax Evasion Department was notified of the company that did not submit tax returns and violated Article 140 of the Income Tax Law.'

'Judicial control officers conducted investigations and collected evidence, following which the case was referred to the Public Prosecution for completion of legal procedures and the accused referred to the competent court.'

The court also sentenced deportation of the accused following the jail term.

Taiwan is an indispensable partner on the path to global postpandemic recovery

Support Taiwan's regular participation in all WHO meetings, mechanisms, and activities

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began over two years ago, it has wreaked havoc across the globe. With still no end in sight, it is all the more crucial that we work together to face the challenges arising from the pandemic. For the past two years, Taiwan's antipandemic efforts, its contributions to the international community, and its cooperation with partners worldwide have demonstrated that Taiwan is a force for good. It has also shown that Taiwan is willing and able to join global efforts to combat the pandemic and tackle the myriad challenges of the post-pandemic era.

A leader in global public health, the World Health Organization (WHO) is the most important organization dedicated to safeguarding the right to health. However, due to political considerations, WHO has been unable to uphold professionalism and neutrality. By continuing to exclude Taiwan, WHO is severely jeopardizing global health. Taiwan calls on every nation to support its bid to attend the World Health Assembly (WHA) as an Observer in 2022 and endorse Taiwan's regular participation in all WHO meetings, mechanisms, and activities.

- Taiwan can help, and Taiwan is helping
- Taiwan's health care capabilities have received international praise

In 2022, Taiwan topped global database Numbeo's Health Care Index for the fourth year in a row. In January 2022, Bloomberg's Covid Resilience Ranking placed Taiwan eighth worldwide, based on such factors as vaccine coverage rates, cross-border virus control, and health care quality.

- Taiwan recognized by WHO IPPR for taking lead in reporting COVID-19

The WHO established the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response (IPPR) in 2020, which incorporated

feedback from a wide range of experts and stakeholders to evaluate antipandemic responses worldwide. The IPPR's main report, published in May 2021, noted that Taiwan's disease surveillance systems picked up a notice issued by China about pneumonia of unknown origin in December 2019 and reported it to WHO. This important report was one of the first that WHO received about COVID-19, and it highlights Taiwan's contributions to global antipandemic efforts.

- Taiwan has utilized digital technologies to combat pandemic

Taiwan has leveraged smart technologies, such as apps, web-based tools, and other information technologies, and integrated them with the National Health Insurance database to develop innovative antipandemic policies and measures. This approach has benefited the COVID-19 vaccination registration platform, the COVID-19 Vaccination Record, and rapid antigen and PCR testing. Taiwan's antipandemic efforts have made it possible to efficiently monitor and control domestic outbreaks. Moving forward, Taiwan will continue to share its experience and success in utilizing technology to help the world jointly combat the pandemic.

- Taiwan has leveraged medical research and development strengths to contribute to global anti-pandemic efforts

Taiwan would be pleased to enhance cooperation and exchanges with international research teams and further its contributions to the global fight against COVID-19.

- Taiwan is actively developing COVID-19 antiviral drug candidates that inhibit viral replication and have conferred protection against COVID-19 in animal studies.
- To strengthen its vaccine research and development capabilities, Taiwan is actively pursuing research in key vaccine manufacturing processes and establishing an innovative technological platform for mRNA



Shih-Chung Chen - Minister of Health & Welfare

vaccines. In addition, one of Taiwan's domestically produced vaccines has already been granted emergency use and production authorization. It is recognized by a number of countries, including Belize, Estonia, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Palau, Paraguay, Somaliland, and Thailand.

- The Taiwan Food and Drug Administration (TFDA) is a full member of the Pharmaceutical Inspection Co-operation Scheme (PIC/S), the International Council for Harmonisation of Technical Requirements for Pharmaceuticals for Human Use (ICH), and the International Pharmaceutical Regulators Programme (IPRP). The international recognition afforded the TFDA demonstrates the technological advancement of Taiwan's pharmaceutical industry and the maturity of Taiwan's pharmaceutical regulations.

- Taiwan's participation in WHO has significant room for improvement
- IHR

The International Health Regulations (IHR) set a legal framework for handling cross-border public health events and emergencies. Through an exchange of letters, the Taiwan Centers for Disease Control (Taiwan CDC)

established a Point of Contact (PoC) to report and communicate disease information to the WHO Contact Point under the IHR mechanism, as well as to engage in the international referral of communicable disease cases (including contact cases). However, Taiwan's PoC contact information has not been included on the IHR intranet, namely the Event Information Site (EIS). This has prevented other countries from accessing Taiwan's contact information through regular IHR channels and exchanging disease development reports with Taiwan in a timely manner. It has even led to the erroneous communication of such reports to China's National Focal Point (NFP) instead of Taiwan's PoC, gravely impacting the efficacy of international health cooperation.

- WHO WPRO

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of global cooperation and regional support to combat disease. WHO regional offices, which implement the WHO Health Emergencies Programme, serve as important platforms for conducting medical and health care work. Taiwan is located within the geographical scope of the WHO

Western Pacific Regional Office (WPRO), which covers East Asia and the Western Pacific. Although Taiwan is a major regional transportation and travel hub, it is unable to directly contact the WPRO. It is also unable to interact with or engage in exchanges with health authorities in the region under the WPRO framework. This has seriously impeded Taiwan's efforts to consult with these countries on pandemic developments and coordinate antipandemic border control policies. Furthermore, it has hindered Taiwan's ability to share its advanced technologies and experience with the region.

- COVID-19 surveillance

Viral genome sequencing provides important data for the identification and tracking of variants. While Taiwan has continued to conduct influenza surveillance and implement prevention and control measures, WHO has yet to recognize Taiwan's competent agency as a national influenza center under the Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS). Taiwan is also unable to provide virus surveillance information to other countries through GISRS. Nonetheless, the government of Taiwan proactively shares data on influenza virus strains each year with GISRS members through related countries. For instance, when Taiwan discovered its first case of swine influenza (H1N2v) infection in humans, it promptly reported the incident to WHO, which published the information on the IHR EIS. GISRS is currently seeking to share COVID-19 genome sequencing information. If Taiwan is unable to directly report COVID-19 variants and other surveillance data through GISRS, global public health will be undermined and efforts to effectively prevent the spread of similar variants will be hindered.

- COVID-19 technical meetings

Taiwan actively seeks to be invited to all WHO technical meetings, activities, and mechanisms to facilitate international antipandemic efforts and technical exchanges. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan's participation has continued to be sporadic and on a case-by-case basis. Taiwan received invitations to only 13 of the 21 technical meetings it applied for in 2021. WHO has made slight improvements in facilitating Taiwan's regular participation. However, these continue to be insufficient to meet Taiwan's global public health system participation needs and do not allow Taiwan to fully and professionally contribute through WHO.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded the world that disease knows no borders. Having been left isolated and unsupported during previous epidemics, Taiwan deeply understands the importance of mutual assistance and strengthening resilience to creatively meet challenges. Taiwan is an indispensable partner on the path to global postpandemic recovery and hopes to work with WHO and nations worldwide to jointly overcome this crisis. Taiwan stands firm in its commitment to engage in international health care cooperation and once again calls on WHO to maintain a professional and neutral stance, repudiate inappropriate political interference, and invite Taiwan to the WHA as an Observer. Only the popularly elected government of Taiwan can represent its 23.5 million people at WHO and protect their right to health. WHO must seek appropriate methods for Taiwan's institutionalized and regular participation in all WHO meetings, mechanisms, and activities. Taiwan also urges its international friends and partners to continue to staunchly support its participation in the global health network to enable Taiwan to contribute even more in the postpandemic era.

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COMEX 2022 to showcase government tech innovations



Amr Baabood, CEO, OITE Group



OITE Group announced details of COMEX 2022 at an event held on Monday (Supplied photos)

Our Correspondent Muscat

The largest technology, communications and digital transformation show - COMEX - will kick off on May 23 at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre. The three-day event will showcase the government's innovation in technology geared up to meet Oman Vision 2040 goals.

The tech event will host a banking and fin-tech zone in co-ordination with Central Bank of Oman for the first time. It will also host a start-ups' conference on artificial intelligence, as well as Awards for Excellence in Technology in 20 categories for the

first time.

At a gala dinner held on Monday to announce details of the event, organisers said COMEX is making a comeback with a face-to-face event following the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. "The event is one of the leading exhibitions to highlight the digital transformation of the government by hosting a pavilion for ministries, authorities and government companies to showcase their achievements and opportunities for innovation in technology and their steps towards Oman Vision 2040," said Amr Baabood, CEO of Arabian Research Bureau (OITE Group), organisers of the event.

Baabood said COMEX is considered one of Oman's most important annual events as it provides an engaging platform for youth talent development, human resources personnel and business leaders to bridge gaps and find solutions in several areas of the digital eco system.

To be inaugurated under the auspices of Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, chairman of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow Up Unit, COMEX augurs well with the selection of Muscat as the Arab Digital Capital for 2022.

Oman's selection does not only emphasise the existing digital capabilities, but also contributes to the city's and Oman's

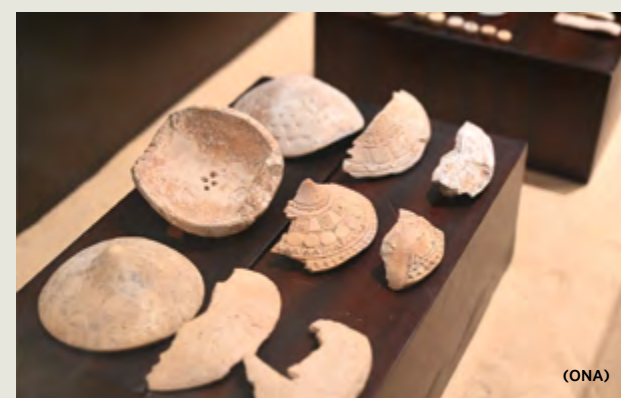
efforts in achieving digital transformation incorporating the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology's strategy for five years as well as leading into Oman Vision 2040's overall objectives.

Being the largest exhibition lining up government entities and companies showcasing their products, services and innovation in ICT, COMEX is the perfect place for technology buyers and decision makers from the public sector, especially those highlighted for growth in Oman Vision 2040, stated a press release.

Sadiq Khan, COO of OITE, said that there will be face-to-face activities from May 23 to 27 and a

programme called '3D AI METAVERSE' during the same period. "Also, other planned activities are for school and college students who will be given the opportunity to speak about their ideas through sessions called School's X and Stem, College and Universities X and Stem at Future Tech, and Individuals and Societies X Stem," he said.

According to Dr Salim al Ruzaiqi, chairman of Oman IT Society, COMEX has grown over the years to become the biggest official show in Oman for government entities and private companies to showcase their products, services and innovation in ICT.



(ONA)

Over 110,000 visited museums in 2021

Our Correspondent Muscat

Oman, represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, celebrated International Museum Day, observed annually on or around May 18, under the slogan 'The Power of Museums'.

The sultanate marked the day with the aim of attracting the world's attention to the importance of museums and their cultural and social role in the community.

A statement issued by the ministry said, 'The celebration of International Museum Day aims to raise awareness of the fact that museums are important institutions for cultural exchange, enriching cultures, and developing mutual understanding and cooperation between people.'

'Museums are important institutions for cultural exchange and enriching cultures'

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information, 113,600 people visited museums in the sultanate in 2021, of which 49 per cent visited the National Museum of Oman.

The sultanate has several popular museums, including the Children's Museum, Bait al Baranda, and the Al Saidia School Museum of Education, besides the National Museum.



New programme to train 60 employees in mining

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals, in cooperation with the Institute for Oil and Gas (instOG), has launched a two-year training programme in mining.

The programme was recently launched under the patronage of H E Salim bin Nasser al Afi, Undersecretary in the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, in the presence of executives of companies engaged in the sector and the director general of instOG.

According to a ministry official, the programme targets 60 mining employees in government institutions and mining companies in the sultanate. "It will consist of nine training programmes, each of 40 hours duration spread over five days."

The programme aims to provide participants with knowledge of the basics of the mining industry, focusing on key mining concepts and terms, geological modeling and design, knowledge about mining economics, conducting feasibility studies in mining, identifying health and safety aspects in mining, understanding methods of extraction, and processing of extracted materials.

The ministry official added that during the training programme, participants will carry out field visits to the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, the Environment Authority, Sultan Qaboos University, German University of Technology in Oman, Minerals Development Oman, Kunooz Oman Holding Company, and the Saudi Mining Polytechnic.

Six out of ten black fungus patients died in June 2021

Continued from Page 01

Out of the ten, eight patients were Omanis and two Indians. There were three female and seven male patients aged 16 to 67 years (median age 44.5 years).

Seven out of the ten patients presented to the emergency department with three to seven days' history of headache, and periorbital pain (ten days to three weeks from COVID-19 illness, except one patient who presented within three days of COVID-19 illness).

Clinical presentation included periorbital swelling, chemosis and ophthalmoplegia on examination. All seven patients had mild COVID-19 illness but two of them received one dose of dexamethasone prior to admission from another institution.

The three other patients were admitted for severe COVID-19 pneumonia/ARDS one to four weeks prior to diagnosis of mucormycosis. All three patients received a high dose dexamethasone (8mg once daily) for the duration of hospital stay despite having poor glycemic control.

Al Sahwa Schools hold students' art show

Our Correspondent Muscat

Budding artists of Al Sahwa Schools are presenting their creative expressions at the Art and Soul Gallery in Waterfront Mall till May 23.

Students from Grades VI to XII are showcasing their talent in paper sculpture, photography, digital art, mosaic creation, abstract art, one point perspective, comics and other art forms.

The exhibition was inaugurated by Hasaan Meer, prominent contemporary artist and



(Supplied photo)

curator, on May 12.

The annual event - known as Reflections - is taking place following a two-year break due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The opening was attended by art enthusiasts, parents, students and teachers.

About the event, Dr Terry Storer, director of Al Sahwa Schools, said, "It is with great excitement and anticipation that Al Sahwa Schools presents their 2022 student art show. We encourage our local community to please join us in the celebration of student achievements in the creative arts."

SalamAir launches thrice-weekly flights to Bursa

Our Correspondent Muscat

Expanding its network further, the sultanate's value-for-money airline SalamAir has announced non-stop flights from Muscat to Bursa, Turkey, starting from June 16.

Bursa becomes the third destination SalamAir flies to in Turkey after popular destinations Istanbul and Trabzon.

SalamAir will fly to Bursa thrice weekly on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Flights will take off from Muscat at 10.05am



(Supplied photo)

and arrive at Bursa at 2.05pm local time, while return flights will take off from Bursa at 2.50pm and arrive in Muscat at 8.30pm.

Bursa will now be part of SalamAir's popular summer destinations in addition to Phuket, Istanbul, Trabzon, Tehran, Alexandria, Baku and Sarajevo.

Capt Mohamed Ahmed, CEO of SalamAir, said, "We are consistently looking at destinations that pose significant interest to our adventurous customers. Customer feedback and commercial viability are at the forefront of our decisions to offer exciting destination choices."

"As such, Bursa is the third destination we are introducing in our operations in Turkey. We are sure it will appeal to our frequent passengers to Turkey, mainly Istanbul, because of the proximity between Istanbul and Bursa, which can be easily accessed with an array of ground travel options."

He added that the airline is in the process of adding more aircraft to the fleet to serve more destinations and increase frequency, thereby offering convenience and greater choice, while maintaining affordability.

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BRIEFS

Russia may cut gas supply to Finland soon

Russia may cut gas supplies to Finland soon over the Nordic country's refusal to pay Gazprom in rubles, Finnish state-owned Gasum said.

Gasum said it would take its dispute with Gazprom Export to arbitration, a move that risks angering neighbouring Russia further as Helsinki prepares to submit its NATO membership bid on Wednesday.

"Gasum considers there to be an increased risk of the natural gas supply ... being halted, and consequently the import of natural gas from Russia to Finland might end," it said in a statement.

OFC signs commercial fishing deal with Irish company

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Fisheries Company (OFC) has signed a commercial fishing agreement with Irish company Atlantic Dawn, one of the leading firms specialising in catching small pelagic fish.

'Oman Fisheries Company is pleased to announce to its shareholders that a commercial fishing agreement has been reached with Atlantic Dawn in May 2022, one of the leading companies in small pelagic, for a period of three years,' OFC said in a disclosure to the Muscat Stock Exchange on Wednesday.

As per the agreement, both partners will aim to utilise the fishing quotas granted to Oman Fisheries Company by the Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources in order to secure sustainable supplies and enhance export operations.

'Accordingly, Atlantic Dawn will bring small pelagic fishing vessel targeting 30,000 metric tonnes of small pelagic that, if achieved, will result in improvement in financial performance and margins,' Oman Fisheries



Company said.

It is anticipated that the [Atlantic Dawn] ships will start fishing in the Omani waters by the next fishing season in 2022, the company added.

Atlantic Dawn specialises in catching pelagic fish – abundant shoaling species such as herring, mackerel and sardines that swim in open seas.

The company's catching vessels engage in both mid-water trawling and purse seining techniques, as per the information on its website.

First quarter profits jump

Oman Fisheries Company reported a group net profit of RO2.324mn for the first quarter

OCCI reveals its plans for H2 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) on Wednesday announced its business plans for the second half of 2022 at Sheraton Oman Hotel.

Speaking at a press conference, OCCI chairman Redha bin Juma al Saleh said that the chamber is working earnestly to attract foreign investments.

"OCCI is currently preparing a study to raise Oman's competitiveness in various economic sectors. This will be achieved through diverse mechanism, including organising mutual visits within and outside Oman, as well as communicating directly with the investors," he said.

Redha informed that the chamber will organise a number of events this year, such as the third North Sharqiyah Economic Forum, the Knowledge and Innovation Economy Conference in Buraimi Governorate, the Economic Forum in the Governorate of Dhofar, and the Second Sohar Economic Festival.

OCCI will also host a meeting of the Federation of Gulf Cooperation Council Chambers, which supports the private sector in the GCC states and works to en-



hance cooperation between the Gulf chambers.

Redha added, "The chamber will be hosting a meeting of the General Assembly of the Islamic Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture. The meeting aims to enhance trade cooperation among the member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and facilitate business and investment exchange between them." OCCI is planning to organise a festival for SMEs and the Fine Arts Exhibition to support SMEs as well.

"OCCI contributed to the establishment of closed joint stock companies in a number of governorates, like Buraimi, Musandam, Dhahirah and South Sharqiyah. The companies aim to actively contribute to the development of these governorates and encourage Omanis to invest there," Redha said.

IndiGo airline taps KLM boss as first foreign CEO

Mumbai, India - Indian airline IndiGo said on Wednesday it has appointed Dutch flag carrier KLM's Pieter Elbers as its first foreign chief executive.

Elbers, 52, has served as President and CEO at KLM since 2014, guiding it through the COVID-19 pandemic and overseeing multiple restructuring efforts at the Dutch arm of Air France-KLM.

Low-cost carrier IndiGo is India's biggest airline for internal flights.

Air India, which this month also appointed its first foreign chief executive in Campbell Wilson, carries more passengers overall with more foreign flights.

The country of 1.4bn people was the world's fastest-growing air passenger market before the pandemic and is set to be the world's third-largest aviation market by 2024.

"What IndiGo's employees and leadership have jointly built, since its start 16 years ago, is, by



any standard, truly impressive," Elbers said in a statement.

The Dutch national was due to step down from his post at KLM in May 2023, but IndiGo said Elbers will take over on October 1, pending shareholder and regulatory approvals.

Elbers will succeed Ronojoy Dutta as chief executive officer of IndiGo when the 71-year-old retires later this year.

AFF

GCC economy expected to grow by 4.4% in 2022, GlobalData says

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The sharp rise in oil and gas prices since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in late February has been a boon to the GCC economies. Against this backdrop, GlobalData has revised its 2022 economic growth projections for GCC nations upwards to 4.4 per cent in 2022 from its earlier projection of 4.2 per cent in January 2022.

Lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, higher vaccination rates and increased mobility are expected to keep the global demand for oil and gas buoyed in the first half of 2022, GlobalData said in a report.

Meanwhile, the prices of crude oil and natural gas rose sharply since the beginning months of 2022, rising by 52.3 per cent and 107.3 per cent, respectively, on an annual basis, as of May 2, 2022.

GlobalData said that the robust demand along with a sharp



rise in the hydrocarbon prices is expected to aid the economic growth of the GCC nations in 2022.

Arnab Nath, economic research analyst at GlobalData, said, "The GCC nations are projected to grow at their fastest pace in years on higher hydrocarbon prices. Among the six GCC nations, Saudi Arabia is projected to be the fastest growing with real GDP forecast at 5.1 per cent in 2022, followed by

Qatar (4.1 per cent), Kuwait (4 per cent), the UAE (4 per cent), Bahrain (2.7 per cent) and Oman (2.7 per cent)."

The bullish sentiment for the six wealthy oil exporters is expected to sustain through the rest of 2022 with the GCC nations accounting for a quarter of the world exports of mineral fuels and mineral oils, Nath added.

Qatar holds 29 per cent of the natural gas reserves in the Mid-

dle East and 11.5 per cent of the world natural gas reserves, as of 2020.

Most European nations, which import natural gas from Russia are turning to Qatar as a replacement following the imposition of sanctions, which is expected to significantly boost Qatar's revenue.

Qatar is also expected to host the FIFA 2022 World Cup due to which it has invested US\$300bn in the infrastructure develop-

ment. GlobalData forecasts the real GDP growth rate of Qatar at 4.1 per cent in 2022, higher compared to 2.6 per cent in 2021, the highest since 2016.

Saudi Arabia recorded its highest ever growth rate since 2011 with the real GDP rising by 9.6 per cent on an annual basis in the first quarter of 2022. The kingdom's contribution of more than 8 per cent to the world oil exports is aided by higher oil prices.

Along with it, robust growth in the non-oil sector is expected to be the main economic growth drivers. GlobalData projects the Saudi Arabian economic growth to almost double from 2.6 per cent in 2021 to 5.1 per cent in 2022.

GlobalData revised up its 2022 growth forecasts for the UAE to 4 per cent in April 2022 from its earlier projection of 3.7 per cent. Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain are forecast to grow by 4 per cent, 2.7 per cent and 2.7 per cent, respectively, in 2022.

Qatar to invest extra \$5bn in Spain

Madrid, Spain - Qatar on Wednesday said it plans to invest an additional US\$5bn in Spain on the second day of a state visit by its emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani.

"The volume of investments agreed upon with the Spanish side amounts to US\$5bn in various sectors," said Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al Thani in a statement tweeted by his ministry.

Neither side gave a timetable for the investment nor did they say which sectors would benefit.

"Qatar will invest close to five billion euros in our country in the coming years," Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said during a business meeting with the Qatari delegation.

"It is a gesture of confidence in the Spanish economy and Spanish businesses which will strengthen bilateral ties," he said



ahead of afternoon talks with the emir. Before the pandemic, Qatari investment in Spain stood at US\$2.8bn, the Spanish government said, making it the country's 24th biggest investor.

To date, Qatari funding has been notably invested in several sectors: civil aviation, construction, energy and communica-

biggest exporters of liquefied natural gas (LNG), is currently Spain's fifth-largest supplier after the United States, Algeria, Nigeria and Egypt.

The country accounted for 4.4 per cent of Spain's total gas imports in April and the Spanish government hopes to increase this share.

European states are increasingly looking to other sources of natural gas as they try to wean themselves off dependence on Russia, with LNG easily shipped by boat from countries such as Qatar and the United States.

After Madrid, the Qatari leader will continue his tour of Europe, visiting Germany, Britain, Slovenia and Switzerland, where he will attend the World Economic Forum in the mountain resort of Davos which runs from May 22-26.

AFF

US recession risk low but Europe 'vulnerable': Yellen

Berlin, Germany - The United States is unlikely to fall into a recession as interest rates rise to fight soaring inflation, the US treasury secretary said Wednesday, while warning of the risks for Europe following the invasion of Ukraine.

"I really don't expect the United States to fall into a recession," Janet Yellen said at a press conference ahead of a meeting of G7 finance ministers in Germany.

Europe is "more vulnerable and of course more exposed on the energy front" as prices rise following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, she said.

The continent is highly reliant on Russian energy imports for its energy needs, with any disruption to supplies of oil and natural gas threatening stoppages for in-



dusty.

The surge in energy prices drove inflation in the eurozone to 7.5 per cent in April, an all-time high for the currency club and well above central banks' two-per cent target.

The rise has been even steeper in the US, with consumer prices at an 8.3-per cent rate in April despite greater energy independence.

The Fed has responded to the

soaring inflation by dialling up a series of interest rate hikes to try to get price rises under control.

At its last policy meeting at the beginning of May, the central bank announced an unusually large 50-basis-points increase in rates.

But the swiftness of hikes has increased fears of a hard landing as interest rate rises put the brakes on economy, pushing it into a recession, defined as two consecutive quarters of negative growth.

The Fed Chair Jerome Powell has sought to assuage such fears, saying the US is "a strong economy".

"Nothing about it suggests that it's close to or vulnerable to a recession," he told reporters after the Fed's last meeting.

AFF

China calls for urgent boost to lockdown-hit economy

Beijing, China – The Chinese Premier called for greater “urgency” in rolling out measures to support the country’s virus-battered economy, state media reported Wednesday, days after data highlighted the stark impact of COVID-19 restrictions.

China – the last major global economy sticking to a rigid zero-COVID policy – is contending with an economic slump due to prolonged virus lockdowns that have constricted supply chains, quelled demand and stalled manufacturing.

“All localities and departments should step up their sense of urgency, and new measures that can be used should be used,” Li Keqiang said at a symposium on Wednesday, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

He added that efforts to support the economy should bring it “back to normal quickly” after admitting that economic indicators have “weakened significantly” since March, with a particular dip in April.

On Monday, the country said retail sales and factory output had slumped to the lowest figures since the start of the pandemic while unemployment edged back toward its February 2020 peak. Beijing has targeted full-year growth of around 5.5 per cent.



A file photo shows employees working on assembly line producing speakers at a factory in Fuyang, China (AFP)

Li also called for support for tech companies to list domestically and abroad, a day after Communist Party leaders doubled down on support for the tech sector in a rare meeting with executives.

China’s economic woes appear to have motivated a softer approach toward the vast, money-spinning tech sector, after an 18-month crackdown driven by fears its massive internet companies control too much data and expanded too quickly.

Vice Premier Liu He and other

Communist leaders addressed executives, including Robin Li of Baidu – universally used for its search engine and mapping service – and Zhou Hongyi of internet security firm Qihoo 360, state media reported late Tuesday.

Liu offered support for “the sustainable and healthy development of the platform economy and the private economy,” CCTV said.

During the tech crackdown, overseas IPOs from Alibaba’s Ant Group and Didi Chuxing – China’s Uber – were spiked,

while millions of dollars of fines over anti-trust and data breaches were ladled out to tech giants.

Chinese tech shares surged late April after officials pledged support for internet firms at a Politburo meeting.

Tech giants including Alibaba, Tencent and Baidu were marginally lower Wednesday morning, with e-commerce behemoth JD slumping over 4 per cent after it recorded a 3bn yuan (US\$444mn) loss in first-quarter earnings.

AFP

Japan's first quarter GDP shrank as Omicron wave hit

Tokyo, Japan – Japan’s economy shrank slightly in the first quarter of 2022, official data showed Wednesday, hit by COVID-19 restrictions and higher prices.

The world’s third-largest economy shrank 0.2 per cent quarter-on-quarter in the January-March period, slightly less than the market expectations of a 0.4 per cent contraction.

It followed a modest rebound in the final three months of 2021 that proved short-lived after Japan put COVID-19 restrictions in place as an outbreak fuelled by the Omicron coronavirus variant took hold in January.

Growth was also hit by the rising cost of imports with energy prices surging and the yen falling to its lowest level against the dollar in 20 years.

Economists expect the economy to recover again in the April-June quarter now that virus restrictions have been lifted, but caution there are some caveats.

“We see three headwinds to this expected recovery,” said UBS economists Masamichi Adachi and Go Kurihara in a note ahead of the GDP data release.

“First is a rise in food and energy prices. Second is a drag from the lockdown in China,” and third is the risk of a potential resurgence in virus infections, they said.

Others point to ongoing uncertainties linked to “tensions in international relations and mili-



Cars bound for shipment are seen parked at Kawasaki Port, in Kawasaki on May 18, 2022 (AFP)

tary conflicts”, according to a survey among economists conducted by the Japan Center for Economic Research.

During the current earnings season, major Japanese firms such as Sony and Nissan have offered cautious forecasts because of the uncertainty, particularly over supply chain disruption and the effect of COVID-19 lockdowns in China.

Wednesday’s data showed the economy’s rebound in the last quarter of 2021 was 0.9 per cent, slightly weaker than an initial estimate of 1.1 per cent growth.

Japan is battling a series of economic headwinds linked to the pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which has sent energy costs soaring.

The yen has also slumped against the dollar, with a widening gap between Japan’s ultra-loose monetary policy and tightening in the United States as

the Federal Reserve attempts to combat inflation.

Rising energy prices and other hikes are squeezing Japanese consumers and businesses, with household spending dipping 2.3 per cent in March from a year earlier. Analysts have warned that the pace of nominal wage increases in Japan is unlikely to track rising prices, dampening spending appetites.

Last month, the government unveiled a 6.2tn yen (around US\$48bn) economic package that included handouts for low-income families to help cushion the impact of rising prices and energy costs.

Looking ahead, “net trade will boost growth over the coming months as supply shortages ease and the weak yen boosts exports and softens demand for imports,” Tom Learmouth, Capital Economics economist, said in a note.

AFP

Fed wants to see US growth 'moving down': Powell

Washington, US – The US central bank wants to see economic growth slowing and “clear” evidence of inflation decelerating before it pulls back on efforts to slow the economy, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said Tuesday.

The world’s largest economy is facing the fastest inflation in four decades, prompting the Fed to go to battle to try to cool price pressures, announcing earlier this month the biggest interest rate increase since 2000. Powell said policymakers agree another aggressive increase is “on the table” in June and July.

“What we need is to see... growth moving down from the very high levels that we saw last year, moving down to a level that’s still positive” but allows supply to catch up with demand, Powell said at an event with The Wall Street Journal.

Central bankers need to see “clear and convincing evidence that inflation pressures are abating and inflation is coming down. And if we don’t see that, then we’ll have to consider moving more aggressively,” he said.

But the outlook is highly uncertain, with the economy buf-



Jerome Powell

feted by unprecedented, simultaneous challenges, including the fallout from a once-in-a-century pandemic, ongoing supply chain issues, the impact on prices and commodities from the war in Ukraine, and an unexpected labor shortage, he said.

“We don’t know the path of the economy. There are many global events going on that can affect that that are really not under our control,” Powell cautioned.

The Fed slashed the benchmark borrowing rate to zero at the start of the pandemic in March 2020 and pumped cash into the financial system to prevent a severe downturn, but with the economy roaring back, helped by massive government stimulus, the central bank

started to pull back on its policies this year, including raising rates twice so far.

After plunging in the second quarter of 2020, US growth has recovered, surging 5.7 per cent last year, and despite a GDP contraction in the first three months of the year, consumer prices surged 8.5 per cent in the 12 months ended in March.

The decision on whether to slow rate hikes is “going to be a judgment call” based on incoming data in coming months, but the mission to bring down inflation is critical since price stability is the “bedrock of the economy.”

The Fed chief, who was recently confirmed for a second term at the helm of US monetary policy, said the economy is strong enough to withstand rising credit costs, but the process of getting it back into balance could involve some pain.

Officials are hoping to achieve a “soft landing” – slowing price pressures without tipping the economy into a recession – but he acknowledged that the Fed does not have “precision tools” at its disposal and some landings are “just a little bumpy.”

AFP

UK inflation jumps to 40-year peak

London, UK – Britain’s annual inflation rate surged to a 40-year high last month on rocketing energy costs, official data showed Wednesday, sparking opposition calls for the government to announce an emergency budget to combat a cost-of-living crisis.

Consumer prices index inflation hit 9.0 per cent in April from 7.0 per cent in March, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement. The ONS estimated that April was the highest level since 1982, and the fastest rate since the current data series began in 1989.

Nations across the world are plagued by decades-high inflation as the Ukraine conflict pushes up energy and food prices, in turn forcing the Bank of England, the US Federal Reserve and others to ramp up interest rates. The squeeze on UK household budgets tightened further in April due to tax hikes, while wages are failing to keep pace with inflation.

“Countries around the world are dealing with rising inflation,” said British finance minister Rishi Sunak.

“Today’s inflation numbers are driven by the energy price cap rise in April, which in turn is driven by higher global energy



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (second left), flanked by Cabinet Secretary Simon Case (left), Rishi Sunak (second right) and Work and Pensions Secretary Theresa Coffey, chairs a Cabinet meeting on May 12 (AFP)

prices.

“We cannot protect people completely from these global challenges but are providing significant support where we can, and stand ready to take further action.”

The main opposition Labour party, however, wants an emergency budget to help Britons cope with the cost-of-living crunch.

Labour finance spokeswoman Rachel Reeves described the inflation data as “a huge worry for families already stretched”.

“Today, Labour force a vote

for an emergency budget and for a plan for growth.”

Labour is also calling for a windfall tax on the energy sector, which has been boosted as gas and oil prices rocketed on supply worries following key producer Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Bank of England governor Andrew Bailey on Monday warned of an “apocalyptic” situation surrounding runaway food costs – which he said were fuelled by major wheat and cooking oil producer Ukraine finding itself unable to export its goods.

Addressing British MPs, Bai-

ley spoke also of a “very real income shock” coming from surging energy and food prices.

Britain risks falling into recession with inflation expected to top 10 percent by the end of the year, the BoE warned earlier this month.

It came as the central bank hiked its main interest rate by a quarter-point to one percent to tackle inflation.

That was the fourth straight increase by the BoE, while its key rate now stands at the highest level since 2009.

AFP

Twitter: The 'bots' at heart of Elon Musk’s buyout row

San Francisco, US – Elon Musk’s pausing of his bid to buy Twitter due to questions over “bots” has put the artificially-operated accounts at the heart of the proposed deal’s latest controversy.

The software is so commonplace and can be such a problem that tech giants such as Meta, Google and Twitter have teams devoted to banishing bots and cybersecurity firms sell defenses against them.

Here’s a closer look at bots:

Human or software?

At a basic level, “bots” are software programs that interact with online platforms, or their users, pretending to be real people, said

Tamer Hassan, co-founder and chief of cybersecurity firm HUMAN.

Malicious bots have become sophisticated and are among this decade’s top cyber threats, said Hassan, whose firm specializes in distinguishing people from software online.

The term bots at Twitter is often used to describe fake accounts, powered by some version of artificial intelligence, that can fire off posts and even react to what is posted by others, said independent analyst Rob Enderle.

Tickets and turmoil

Bots are used in more than three



This illustration photo displays Elon Musk’s Twitter account with a Twitter logo in the background in Los Angeles (AFP)

quarters of security and fraud incidents that happen online, from spreading socially divisive posts

to snapping up hot concert tickets and hacking, Hassan told AFP.

“The question is, what would you do if you could look like a million humans?” Hassan asked rhetorically.

“Across all social media platforms, bots can be used to spread content to influence people’s opinions, garner reactions and can even result in cyber-crime.”

Bots can be used on social media to widely spread false news, direct users to misinformation, steer people to specious websites and make bogus posts seem popular using shares or “likes.”

Bots on social media can also sucker people into financial scams, Hassan added.

“Social media platforms have had bots for a long time,” analyst Enderle said. “Bots have been connected to attempts to influence the US election and shape opinions about Russia’s war on Ukraine.”

The deal with Twitter

Twitter makes its money from ads, and marketers pay for reaching people, not software.

“Advertising to bots isn’t going to have a good close rate because bots don’t buy products,” Enderle noted.

If advertisers are paying Twitter fees based on how many people see ads, and those numbers are inflated due to bots in the on-

line audience, they are being overcharged, Enderle added.

If Twitter has way more bots than it is letting on, its revenue could plunge when those accounts are exposed and closed.

Twitter chief executive Parag Agrawal has said that fewer than five percent of accounts active on any given day at Twitter are bots, but that analysis cannot be replicated externally due to the need to keep user data private.

Musk posted that the real number of bots may be four times higher and has said he would make getting rid of them a priority if he owned the platform.

AFP

Nissan X-Terra available on low EMI

Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), is offering exceptionally low EMI for the patrons of off-roading capable Nissan X-Terra as part of its Ramadan promotion. Customers can now avail an exceptionally low EMI rate of RO133 (terms and conditions apply). EMIs are calculated on the price of the base model with 20% down payment, 2.75 % rate of interest for 10 years loan tenure through Bank Muscat, press release said.

With exceptional off-roading capabilities the X-Terra is a catalyst for new experiences, allowing owners to connect with the people in their lives.

The vehicle delivers a robust four-wheel drive system, including a four-wheel lock, brake limited slip differential and electronic locking rear differential – while leading the class in interior room and comfort.

A spokesperson for Suhail Bahwan Automobiles said, “With a great EMI offer, this is a good time for potential buyers to check out the Nissan X-Terra.



Designed for adventure and the outdoors with a roomy interior and advanced technologies Nissan X-Terra ensures safety and

comfort. It is equipped with an active safety suite, which comprises blind-spot warning, lane departure warning, intelligent

driver alert, and intelligent forward collision warning.

The SUV also has multiple airbags and a digital rear-view

mirror.” As part of the special scheme, customers of Nissan X-Terra can also avail free periodic vehicle service package, free in-

surance, assured gift voucher, free registration. The offer, which is available on models purchased for personal use, will go

on till May 19, 2022.

Vehicles purchased with commercial registration will not be eligible for the scheme. Vehicles bought for taxi, driving school, ministries, fleet and rent-a-car usage will not be eligible for this scheme.

Customers can avail low EMI rate as part of the offer. Starting EMI for Nissan X-Terra is RO133. EMIs are calculated on the price of the base model with 20% down payment, 2.75 % rate of interest for 10 years loan tenure through Bank Muscat. Subject to credit approvals.

All customers purchasing Nissan X-Terra during this scheme period will be eligible for free periodic maintenance service package for three years/60,000km (whichever is earlier), limited to six services only.

This offer includes only the service intervals of 10,000km. All customers buying Nissan X-Terra during this scheme will also be eligible for Value Added Service (VAS) gift vouchers up to RO100.

Buy O! Millionaire green certificates to win big

Environmental initiative O! Millionaire’s draw is set to go live on May 19. The show will be aired LIVE on O! Millionaire’s social media pages (Instagram, Facebook and Twitter) and website.

To take part in the draw, participants have to visit the website <https://omillionaire.com/> and purchase a green certificate worth RO2.5 which will entitle them to an entry for a draw which can win them prizes up to RO5mn, a press release said.

Millionaire Investment recently launched O! Millionaire with an objective to transform lives, plant trees, and make Oman a happier place. O! Millionaire green certificate will create opportunities for winning and will contribute towards the country’s efforts to reduce its carbon footprint.

A tree-planting programme which is part of the initiative will support Oman’s efforts towards climate action and food security.



To promote Oman as a natural sanctuary, the initiative will also create an Oasis Park - Middle East’s largest green park.

A spokesperson for Millionaire Investment said, “We are delighted to finally launch the much-awaited O! Millionaire draw. We will be raising funds through the green certificates available for purchase. Those purchasing green certificates can participate in the draw every Thursday. The purpose of O! Millionaire is to raise funds for

the preservation of Oman’s natural environment through an efficient, socially responsible, and ethical tree-planting programme.”

O! Millionaire has weekly prizes to motivate the green certificate buyers and owners. There will be a draw held every Thursday at 8 pm where one person can win every week the prize of RO10,000. The winner is picked by an RNG system that will randomly select one green certificate number.

CCED participates in HSE conference

CC Energy Development (CCED) took part in the 8th Global HSE Conference and Exhibition, the epicentre for global business leaders to challenge and explore advancements across the health, safety and environment industry.

Held under the patronage of H E Eng Said bin Hamood bin Said al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communication and Information Technology, at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, Global HSE brought together over 7000 global attendees and 250 companies from over 30 countries with more than 10 industries represented under the theme of HSE Excellence, Leadership, Sustainability and Technology, a press release said.

The event provided a platform for leaders to share expertise to enhance sustainable business practice. CCED was on-site for three days to showcase the company’s commitment to safety and the methods employed to perform all operations with four key values - trust, commitment,



empowerment and zero tolerance for unsafe behaviours - at its core. In addition, Mohammed Al Muati, Head of HSE at CCED participated as Steering Committee Member where participants discussed the future of HSE practices.

Walter Simpson, managing director of CCED, said, “As part of our mission to develop Oman’s rapidly-changing energy

sector and empower talented Omanis in the industry, our focus is always on workplace safety and ensuring all employees and contractors embrace a safe working culture. By being part of Global HSE we were able to share knowledge with representatives from across a spectrum of industries to drive towards the highest HSE standards.”

As a prime contributor to the

hydrocarbon sector in Oman, CCED operates a non-compromising attitude towards health, safety and environment. The company also promotes its own Life Saving Rules to build confidence in individuals to cultivate a culture of accountability stopping unsafe behaviours and acknowledging safe behaviours throughout the company’s operations.v

Milipol Qatar seminar to delve into cybersecurity

The 14th edition of Milipol Qatar 2022, the Middle East’s leading international event for homeland security and civil defence, which will be held from May 24-26 at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre (DECC), will feature a two-day seminar program centered on major event security management and solutions to combat increasing cybersecurity risks.

The seminar will feature major local and international experts, with 21 presentations probing all aspects for the safe delivery of major events.

Notably, keynote speeches will be given by a representative of the Safety & Security Operations Committee (SSOC) of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and by Major General Marc Boget, Commander in Chief of the French Gendarmerie Cyber-space.

“Qatar is the ideal venue to explore security management of large-scale events as it readies to host the world’s biggest sporting tournament – the FIFA World Cup - this November, and has a growing calendar of mega sports gatherings, including the Qatar F1 Grand Prix, which begins a 10-year run in 2023, the 2030 Asian Games,” said François Jullien,



Milipol events director.

The first day programme will include presentations from experts discussing the holistic approach to large event security, they will also examine how to build weather resilience with comprehensive meteorology AI programs, while a senior adviser from Austria’s Frequentis will deliver lessons from a control room supplier in supporting key events. May 26 will be given over

to security and cybersecurity and comes as AI-powered intelligence provider ReportLinker forecasts the Middle East cybersecurity market will grow at a compound annual growth rate from its current worth of US\$20.3bn to US\$44.7bn by 2027.

A representative from the Ministry of Communications & Information Technology will outline the impact of fifth-genera-

tion warfare (5GW), conducted primarily through non-kinetic military action, such as social engineering and misinformation, while the Arab Association for Cybersecurity will take delegates through the implementation of effective cyber diplomacy.

Experts from the National Cyber Security Agency will examine a range of issues including cyber security strategies, ways of penetrating high security net-

works and securing 5G networks. Other presentations will be made by representatives of Al Jazeera, Huawei and BeIN.

“The programme will enable local, regional and international security professionals to share advanced knowledge with the unified aim of ensuring a safer world for us all,” Major General Nasser bin Fahd al Thani, president of Milipol Qatar Committee, said.

Volkswagen Oman’s aftersales offer to end on May 21

Volkswagen Oman’s exclusive aftersales offer on the brand’s popular models ends on May 21.

Aimed at enhancing customer experience, Volkswagen Oman, represented by Premium Motors, is offering customers several benefits which include any service with 20% discount on service items, 25% discount on brake parts (brake pads, brake disk and brake oil) with free disc fitting, 25% discount on suspension parts with free alignment, 25% discount on AC filter with free AC check, full visual health check with complimentary video footage, diagnostic report health check, body shop polish and up to 60% discount on selected parts.

The offer is available on Volkswagen models Passat,

Tiguan, Touareg, Golf GTI, Teramont and T-Roc, a press release said.

Christian Nehme, general manager of Premium Motors Oman, said, “We are constantly working towards enhancing our customer experience through various offers and promotions. That is why we have put together this special aftersales scheme. We are delighted to offer a holistic purchase experience with a special focus on aftersales service. Volkswagen models stand out for their latest technology, outstanding design, connectivity, safety features and excellent German quality.”

Located at Alfardan Heights at Ghala, Premium Motors is spread across three floors and designed in accordance with global standards and corporate identity.



Renault Koleos offers to continue till May 19

Renault Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles, has announced an attractive offer on Renault Koleos as part of its exclusive promotion for the benefit of its customers which ends on May 19.

A great combination of power and refinement, the Koleos makes its presence felt with large shoulders and muscular side panels that are further enhanced by a robust frontend; broad, smart-looking tyres; and a distinctly large wheelbase.

Well-defined edges make the overall profile of the 2022 Koleos appear solid and athletic and is one of the most prominent features in this new version, a press release said.

As per the Renault Oman special scheme, customers who buy Renault Koleos can enjoy free registration, free insurance, three years/100,000km manufacture warranty, free periodic vehicle service package, AAA/road assistance card and reference programme among others. Social media users who participate in

the Ramadan promotional campaign will also be eligible for attractive prizes.

The unique Ramadan offer boasts of a host of advantages for customers purchasing Renault Koleos.

All customers purchasing Renault Koleos from Suhail Bahwan Automobiles will be eligible to participate in the Ramadan campaign scheme.

Vehicles purchased with commercial registration will not be eligible for the scheme. Vehicles bought for taxi, driving

school, ministries, fleet, and rent-a-car usage will not be eligible for this scheme.

A spokesperson for Renault Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles, said, "We are pleased to announce a special Ramadan offer on Renault Koleos.

It is engineered to demand attention and make heads turn. Offering off-road capability with its all-wheel drive transmission, Renault Koleos stands out with its assertive exterior design and enhanced interior comfort."

Trend Micro to bolster Oman's security stance at COMEX 2022

Trend Micro Incorporated, a global leader in cybersecurity solutions, is set to participate in the 31st annual COMEX Technology Show 2022, from May 23 to 25, at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre, showcasing its state of the art innovations advancing Oman's digital journeys and accelerating growth for organizations across industries.

At COMEX 2022, industry leaders and decision-makers will embrace future technologies to improve efforts on securing organisations across sectors. The event will host multiple seminars, workshops, and solutions, as enterprises explore the potential of innovations and strategies transforming Oman's digital experiences, a press release said.

Alongside industry-leading technology, Mohammed Hashim, Cybersecurity Consultant, Trend Micro Oman, will lead the discussion on the 'Machine Learning in Threat Detection and Response' session, focusing on the need for enterprises to adopt modern AI-based cybersecurity innovations that have the capabilities of deep analysis and visualisation of cyber threats. Also, a real-time demonstration of the Trend Micro Vision One - XDR (Extended Detection and Response) platform will provide a better understanding of its effects on strengthening an enterprise's infrastructure.

"We, at Trend Micro, are aligned with Oman's Vision 2040 and are honoured to support the

country with industry-leading solutions that are not only protecting digital agendas but accelerating growth for organizations throughout the digital transformation journey," said Assad Arabi, managing director, Gulf Cluster, at Trend Micro.

"Events such as COMEX 2022 are essential as they allow us to exchange insights and solutions that successfully guide enterprises through the modern threat landscape and help maintain stability in operations. We look forward to working closely with organizations in Oman from the public and private sector, and want to strengthen their digital strides as they advance the country's capabilities in a new digital era."

Floward hires new executive to accelerate growth

Floward, the go-to online flowers and gifts delivery destination in MENA and UK, announced the hiring of a new executive, Elizabeth Thomas, as head of Category to further accelerate its growth and diversify its offering.

Thomas brings over 20 years of experience across a wide range of industries in the United Kingdom. Prior to joining Floward, she held a number of senior positions from category director of Gifts & Flowers at Moonpig.com, UK's leading online card retailer, head of Fashion Trading at eBay UK, the leading global marketplace, as well as a number of category roles at Sainsbury's PLC, a UK leading supermarket.

Throughout her experience,



Elizabeth Thomas

she has been responsible for creating and delivering customer driven change strategies to achieve revenue and margin growth, while establishing strong

supplier partnerships to differentiate offerings, a press release said.

Abdulaziz B al Loughani, Floward Chairman and CEO, said, "We are thrilled to have Elizabeth join our team. As we continue to grow, we are always looking into new and innovative ways to diversify our offerings and add new verticals to our service. In addition to attracting high-caliber talents to join us and help take Floward to the next level. Elizabeth brings with her a vast experience in category management and growth that is in line with our future vision for Floward. We'd like to welcome her to our family, and we look forward to the changes she will bring to the table."

Ooredoo bags bronze Stevie Award 2022

Ooredoo was recognised for Excellence in Innovation at the 2022 International Business Awards, also known as the Stevies.

Taking the bronze award, the category recognises outstanding innovation achievements, and was given for their CSR initiative of building Sensory Rooms at social welfare centres across the country, the Ooredoo mobile app, and the introduction of the company's nationwide 4G and 5G fixed wireless (FWA) routers, to complement its rich fixed wireless portfolio, a press release said.

The Stevie Awards are widely considered to be the

world's premier business awards and last year alone received more than 3,800 nominations from 65 nations.

Ooredoo has been recognised with a number of Stevie Awards in past years, including Corporate Social Responsibility Program of the Year in 2021 and 2020.

With people at the heart of what it does, Ooredoo continues to stay ahead of the curve by introducing new ways to hone and improve communications, offer a fun and engaging digital-first customer experience, and create socio-economic value within the communities it serves.

Omantel to host third webinar on role of 5G

Omantel will host its third webinar under the theme '5G technology from consumer perspectives' on May 25.

The webinar aims at introducing 5G technology, its potentials, and its impacts on the telecom sector and consumers.

Omantel, the first to introduce 5G technology in the sultanate, is hosting a series of webinars to focus on this frontier digital technology and the benefit it will bring to individuals and corporates, a press release said.

The first webinar, '5G Beyond Speed', was held on November 23, 2021.

The second webinar was held on March 9 this year under the topic '5G...Unlocking new potentials'.

The interaction during the two webinars had been overwhelming and witnessed the participation of a large number of officials from the public and private organisations, academicians, journalists and digital



media influencers.

The 3rd webinar will host speakers who will share their ideas, strategies and experience about the latest developments

provided by 5G. Baran Yurdagül - general manager of Consumer Marketing at Omantel, will highlight the role of 5G in developing smart home technologies,

whilst Huani Yao, experienced at Ericsson Consumer Lab, will highlight the importance of 5G in providing broadband high speed for consumers. Mo-

ammed al Murshid, Zain Group network director, will present on the usage of 5G in providing on immersive experiences.

Premium Motors hosts technical training workshop

Premium Motors, official dealer for the German car brands Audi and Volkswagen in Oman, hosted a technical training virtual and on-site workshop for technicians and team leaders from both Audi and Volkswagen. The 'technical service handbook' themed workshop covered topics such as fix it right the first time, boost efficiency, most cost-effective method of repair, increase customer satisfaction and meet the standards.

The workshop focused on how technicians should think



and apprised them on systematic fault-finding technique, a press release said.

Christian Nehme, general manager of Premium Motors, said, "We pride ourselves on talented and driven professionals from all walks of life.

The automotive industry is constantly in a state of change. It is very important to us that all of our technicians are up to date in every area of a vehicle.

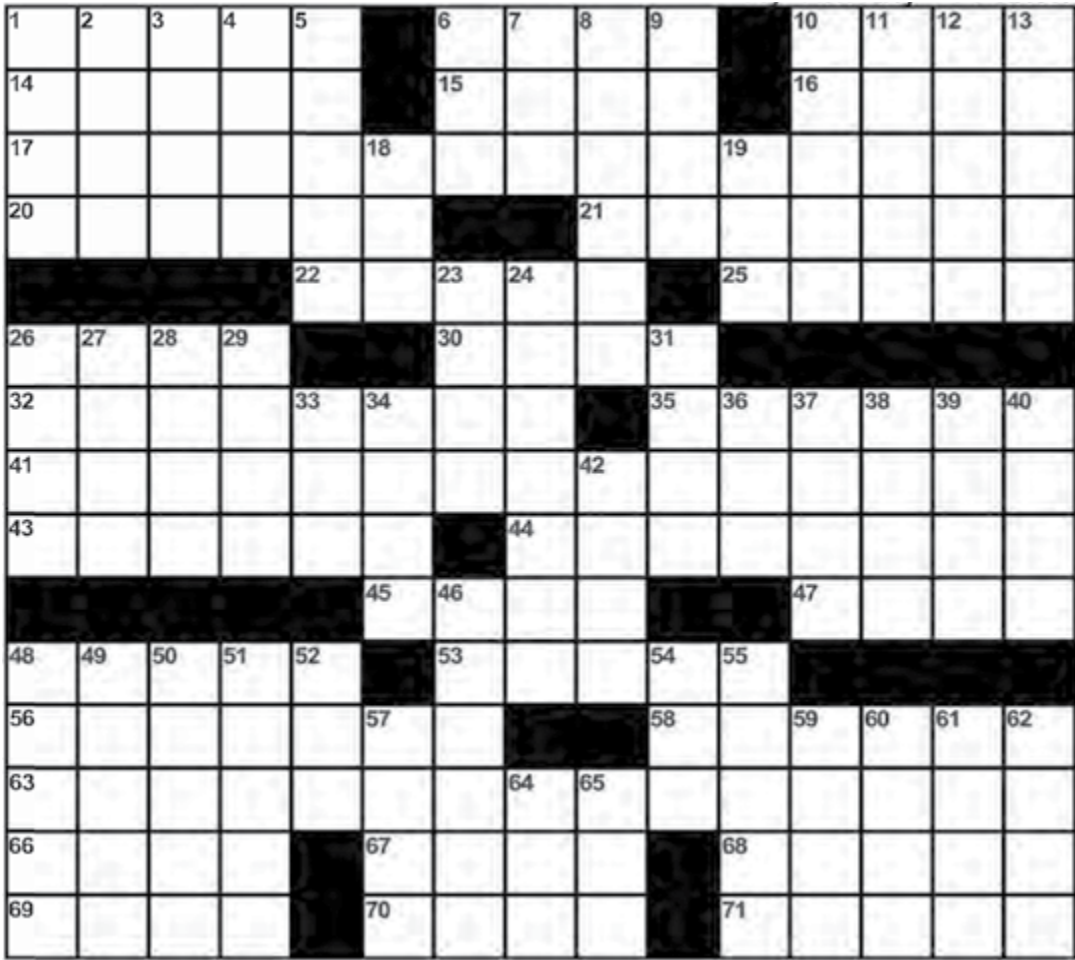
During the training workshop industry-trained instructors combined theory and hands-on

learning opportunities to help participants gain a strong foundation in automotive vehicle maintenance, diagnosis, repairs, manufacturers' specifications, customer service and communications."

Each candidate received a 'go to' document to refer to in the future if they need to review the required procedure.

This was an internal on-site training for a specific topic where evaluations were based purely on interaction and discussion.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Fable conclusion
6) Keeps having birthday parties
10) Mattress supporter
14) Flaring skirt style
15) Fourth down option
16) Animated _ E. Coyote
17) Tow trucks, e.g.
20) Oklahoma U. athlete
21) Point of view
22) Grating, voice-wise
25) Kind of cash or officer
26) Farmer, on occasion
30) Bringing up the rear
32) Major, as a highway
3 5) Go around and around
41) They are left to chance
43) Blood component
44) Place for a bell ringer
45) Badly wound
4 7) Dog show partner?
48) Beauty pageant wear
53) Remove wooden pins from
56) Zambian's neighbor

58) Biblical plague member
63) Win an election
66) Wood source
67) Food sticker
68) Control_ (obsessive type)
69) Puts in stitches
70) "I_ to recall ... "
71) Grassy plant

DOWN

1) "The War of the Worlds" planet
2) Blue Bonnet, for one
3) Puerto finisher
4) Soon, in romantic poetry
5) Part of a voting machine
6) Busy IRS mo.
7) Gal's partner
8) Diplomats
9) Kind of aerobics
10) Pigs and such
11) Allowed by law
12) Dole out
13) Itsy-bitsy
18) Victorian, in history books

19) Cool, old-school
23) Belgrade citizen
24) Traveling gunslinger of old TV
26) Large stringed instrument
27) Face-to-face exam
28) Volcano in Italy
29) 1990 World Series champs
31) Group of three
33) CD follower
34) Mosque VIP
36) Tool that makes waves
37) Cookbook abbr.
38) Kind of sax
39) High schooler
40) Catch a glimpse of
42) Cakewalk, in sports
46) Mame, for one
48) Bake sale sweets
49) Become accustomed
50) Vice president who resigned
51) Gads about
52) "Aladdin" prince
54) "Boola Boola" warbler

55) Makes silly mistakes
57) Play parts
59) Heal completely
60) Brought into play
61) Smelterly refuse
62) Little kid
64) Early afternoon
65) Deep sleep stage

NOTE PAD

B	R	A	I	D		A	S	P	E	N		L	S	D
M	O	I	R	E		C	A	S	T	E		E	A	R
W	O	R	K	A		H	O	L	I	C	S		A	C
						C	O	R	E		T	E	T	R
P	O	P	C	O	R	N		G	A	L	A	H	A	D
U	N	I	O	N	S		D	E	L	E	T	E		
L	I	E	N	S		D	I	C	E	S		R	C	A
S	O	C	K		W	O	R	K	S		G	W	E	N
E	N	E		B	I	N	G	O		A	L	O	N	G
				O	R	A	N	G	E		A	V	E	R
U	N	F	O	L	D	S		B	L	A	N	K	E	R
T	O	W	E	D		S	U	I	T					
I	T	O		W	O	R	K	S	T	A	T	I	O	N
C	U	R		I	N	U	I	T		R	O	D	E	O
A	S	K		N	E	E	D	S		S	T	A	R	R

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

That secret you've been holding on to forever?

The one you've been lugging around for what feels like most of your adult life? You're ready to let it fly. And since it's your secret and your secret alone, you're perfectly entitled. So when the endless questions start, and you feel as if the paparazzi are following you, don't hesitate to show them everything.

Why hide what you're proud of?

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You're the original party animal, always totally unable to keep quiet and always up for at least one game of anything. The good news is that even though you can't always track down someone to join you, you'll have no problem whatsoever finding other revelers now. You might end up cancelling the party and reducing the guest list to two, but that doesn't sound too bad either, does it?

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Just in time for a truly delightful day, the Universe has arranged for you to connect with someone who's every bit as reputable, diligent, and honest as you are. Does that mean you won't be having any fun? Not at all. You might, however, be hard-pressed to say goodnight, so don't. Make a pot of coffee, sit down at the kitchen table, and exchange stories about all your recent goings-on. It's all part of the delicious process of connecting.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

This might be a tough day for some signs, but you'll undoubtedly do just fine. You're no stranger to difficult terrain. In fact, you often secretly welcome the trek.

Your partner or best bud may not be quite so enthusiastic about this challenge, but if anyone can talk anyone into seeing the positive that might come from the negative, it's definitely you. Get busy.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Everyone around you is in a foul mood. They're either angry, depressed, or depressed and angry, so you need to establish some personal boundaries, and quickly. You don't need to shut the world out entirely, but you'd better think twice before you offer to do anything you can to help. They'll undoubtedly take you up on it and try to make you feel guilty if you hold anything back. Think of this as a game of chess. Make a good opening move.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You might not realize it yet, but someone's secret jealousy is taking on a life of its own, and you may well be at the heart of it. Don't feel guilty about it. You're only in control of your own actions and can't be expected to worry about someone else's. When and if something unexpected or unseemly emerges, sit tight. No one says you have to offer any comment before you're ready.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

If there's one thing you definitely don't appreciate, it's being manipulated. You can smell it a mile away and know the signs with your eyes closed. So when a dear one, probably a family member or long-time friend, starts gearing up for just that, don't just sit there and watch what they're up to. You already know. Give them your answer before they even ask the question. You'll feel so proud of yourself.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Making a fresh start with someone is proving to be much more challenging than you initially thought it would be. Moving past grudges and hurt feelings is taking longer than you'd hoped, but the reward for your efforts will be larger than you expect. Resign yourself to the fact that it's going to take time to dig through those deep feelings in order to move beyond them. This person deserves a second chance, and you need to do whatever you need to do in order to give it to them.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Okay, now we're talking. You've been waiting for days or weeks for a day like this.

Basically, what you're finally due to enjoy is a whole lot of fire, which translates into pure energy and inspiration. Prepare yourself to play, and play hard.

How nice that all this is happening now! Better take your vitamins and make sure you have plenty of coffee on hand.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Keeping things lighthearted and pleasant is your specialty, but it may not be such a piece of cake now. Someone is deliberately stirring up trouble, and doing a fine job of it. The funny thing is as good as you are at keeping the peace, you're equally good at defending it. You won't stand for this, and you shouldn't. Let all the parties concerned know you can only be pushed so far and this happens to be your limit.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Whenever people have helped you in the past, you've been thoughtful enough to thank them for their time and energy. You know how to say thanks for good deeds done on your behalf, and it's this gratitude that has endeared you to these people and made them much more inclined to help you again. So have faith that whenever you need some honest feedback, insightful advice, or even a few dollars for gas money, you have people in your fold who won't hesitate to help you out.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

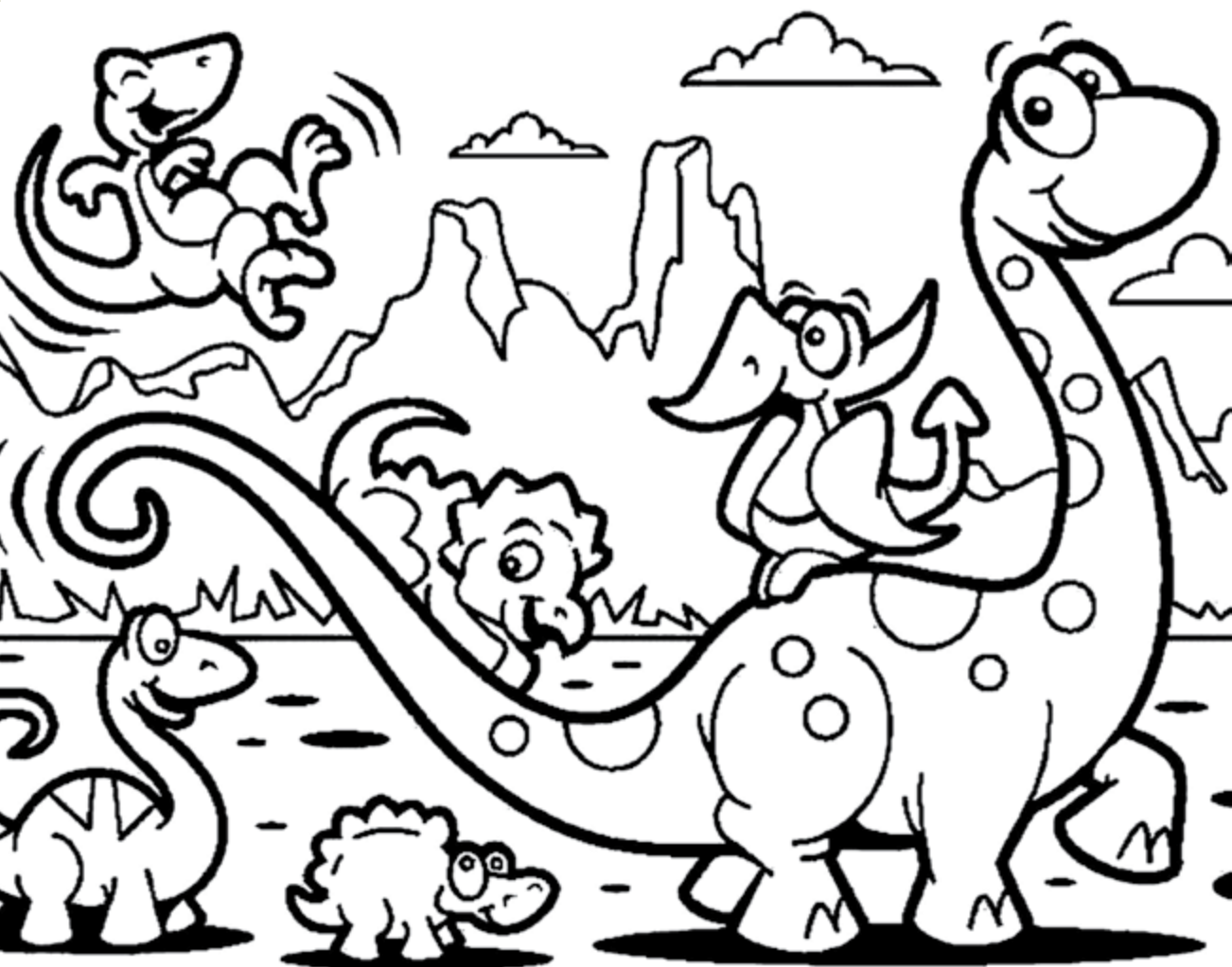
You're ordinarily a pretty sociable creature, always ready, willing, and able to mingle with others, especially if they're fun. Today, however, you won't want to be around other people, and you certainly won't want to work with anyone. The individual who's foolish enough to insist you take their advice or include them in your project won't be a happy camper once you've finished with them. But give ample warning. It's only fair.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Who, in 2004, riding the prototype KTM 250-SXF four stroke, won the MX2 World Championship?
- A. Marc DeReuver
B. Antonio Cairoli
C. Tyla Rattray
D. Ben Townley
02. In probability theory, a stochastic process is what kind?
- A. A guess, still to be proven
B. Random
C. Slow-moving
D. Interrupted
03. Drakensberg is a name for an escarpment in what area??
- A. The Swiss Alps
B. Southern Africa
C. The Balkans
D. The Maghreb

Answers: 1. D 2. B 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

N	T	E	U
R	E	R	O
P	A	E	R
S	E	K	S

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

'United States is flooded with guns'

Washington, US - US firearms makers produced over 139mn guns for the commercial market over the two decades from 2000, including 11.3mn in 2020 alone, according to a new government report.

Another 71mn firearms were imported in the same period - compared to just 7.5mn exported - underscoring how the country is literally swimming in personal weapons that have stoked a surge in gun violence, murders and suicides, according to the Justice Department report.

The report shows that while Americans have made favourites of semi-automatic assault rifles seen in many mass shootings, they have bought en masse the increasingly cheap, easy-to-use and accurate semi-automatic 9mm pistols like those that most police now use.

And, the report shows, authorities face a surge in unregistered 'ghost guns' made at home with parts that can be bought online and produced with 3-D printer, and pistols and short-barrelled rifles that are as powerful and lethal as the semi-automatic assault rifles used in mass shootings.

"We can only address the current rise in violence if we have the best available information and use the most effective tools and research to fuel our efforts," said Deputy Attorney General



This file photo shows salesman Paul Fraker showing off weapons for sale at Coliseum Gun Traders Ltd. in Uniondale, New York on October 1, 2020 (AFP)

Lisa Monaco.

"This report is an important step in that direction. The Department will continue to gather the data necessary to tailor our approach at the most significant drivers of gun violence and take shooters off the streets."

'Historic' increase

The report came out after a

shocking weekend showed how the vast surplus of guns has made its mark on US society.

In Buffalo, New York an 18-year-old white man driven by racist hate used an assault rifle to murder 10 African Americans; in Laguna Woods, California a man shot five people in a church frequented by Taiwanese with a 9mm pistol; and in Milwaukee,

Wisconsin, more than 20 people were wounded in shootings in one evening in the downtown entertainment district.

Last week the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said the number of gun deaths in the United States underwent a 'historic' increase in 2020.

The US racked up 19,350 firearm homicides in 2020, up

nearly 35 per cent over 2019, and 24,245 gun suicides, up 1.5 per cent. The firearm homicide rate stood at 6.1 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2020, the highest for more than 25 years.

The CDC said the rise might be blamed in part by the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic and poverty.

The gun industry has rocketed

in two decades. In 2000, there were 2,222 registered active manufacturers. By 2020, the number hit 16,936.

Annual commercial gun production likewise surged: 3.9mn in 2000, hitting 11.3mn 20 years later. But that was down from the peak of 11.9mn in 2016.

Of those sold in 2020, almost exactly half were pistols, doubling their share of the market since 2000: the year 2020 saw 5.5mn pistols, and nearly a million revolvers, enter circulation.

Firearms made by official manufacturers must have serial numbers that allow them to be traced by law enforcement.

But officials are increasingly worried about homemade 'ghost guns' that have no such markings and are increasingly found in crimes. In 2021, the report said, officials recovered 19,344 such guns, compared to just 1,758 five years earlier.

In April President Joe Biden announced a crackdown on ghost guns, pushing back at pro-gun advocates who called his ideas 'extreme'.

"Is it extreme to protect police officers, extreme to protect our children?... It isn't extreme, it's basic, common sense," Biden said.

The new report was the first in a four-volume study of gun markets and illegal trafficking.

AFP

Hostage taker kills 3 in Iran

Tehran, Iran - A disgruntled employee of a huge Iranian foundation killed three of his colleagues before taking his own life in a workplace hostage drama on Wednesday, state media reported.

The hostage taker struck in the western city of Ilam in the city centre offices of the Foundation of the Oppressed, a massive holding company set up to manage the assets of the shah's regime after their confiscation during the Islamic revolution of 1979. The foundation has been under US sanctions since November 2020.

"A 37-year-old employee of the Foundation of the Oppressed in Ilam, armed with a Kalashnikov rifle and two grenades, took staff hostage in one of the offices," the state broadcaster quoted provincial police commander Delavar Alqassi-Mehr as saying. "He then started shooting and threw a grenade that instantly killed two women and a man, and wounded seven others," Alqassi-Mehr said.

"The assailant committed suicide after police and security officers arrived at the scene and tightened the siege," he added, without identifying the hostage taker.

AFP



A CCTV camera is seen installed outside a shop in Srinagar on May 5 (AFP)

India turning Kashmir into surveillance state

Srinagar, India - In Indian-administered Kashmir, shopkeepers are spending hundreds of dollars each to install security cameras mandated by authorities in a move activists say is aimed at creating a surveillance state - and outsourcing the cost.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nationalist government has struggled to quell a decades-old insurgency and strengthen its hold over the Muslim-majority region, where a large number of people do not want to be part of India.

Half a million soldiers are stationed in the portion ruled by India - the rest is controlled by Pakistan - and a 2019 security crackdown has seen unprecedented restrictions on protest and press freedoms.

Already there are security cameras on almost every street in Srinagar, Kashmir's largest city, and in other towns.

But last month, local administrators instructed shopkeepers to install CCTV systems inside their premises - at their own expense - to enhance the police's ability to watch people's every move.

The orders say the scheme will 'deter criminals, (and) anti-social and anti-national elements', while outlining minimum standards for camera resolution, infrared capability and range.

Always on, the systems should record and store footage for 30 days to be produced on demand from 'police and any other law enforcement agencies' without a court order.

Failure to abide by the orders,

which took effect in April, is punishable by a fine or a month's imprisonment. Surveillance system dealers in Srinagar told AFP that meeting the CCTV standards would cost each of Kashmir's thousands of stores upwards of 40,000 rupees (US\$524).

Because of the territory's frequent power outages, shopkeepers also need to pay for battery backups to ensure uninterrupted recording.

"The specifications given in the order make it unaffordable for me at a time when business is down," Bilal Ahmed, who runs an ice cream parlour in Srinagar's main business district, told AFP.

Ahmed said he was waiting to see whether others would abide before deciding what to do, but many are already installing the systems to avoid potential punishment.

"This order is wrong. But if this is what they want, then the government should pay for it," another Srinagar shopkeeper said while begrudgingly installing a camera system, speaking anonymously for fear of government reprisals.

Rebel groups in Kashmir have waged battle against Indian forces for over three decades, seeking independence or a merger with neighbouring Pakistan, which has fought two wars with India over control of the region. The conflict has killed tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians, and also thousands of Indian soldiers. Only last week a member of the Hindu minority was gunned down.

AFP

Kabul brokers peace talks between Pakistani Taliban and Islamabad

Kabul, Afghanistan - The Afghan Taliban said on Wednesday that it was hosting peace talks between Pakistani officials and a Taliban-inspired militant group that has battled Islamabad for over a decade.

Since the Afghan Taliban returned to power last year, Islamabad has increasingly complained of attacks by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), especially along the mountainous border with Afghanistan.

The TTP is a home-grown movement but shares com-

mon roots with the new rulers of Kabul, who Pakistan has claimed permit its fighters to stage assaults from Afghan soil.

"Talks were held in Kabul between the government of Pakistan and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in the mediation of the Islamic Emirate," government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said, using the self-styled name of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

"The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, in good faith, strives for a successful negotia-

tion process and expects both sides to be tolerant and flexible," he said on Twitter.

In a statement, the group also confirmed that 'negotiations are underway' under the guidance of the Afghan Taliban.

A truce previously agreed for the Islamic festival of Eid will also be extended until May 30, the statement said.

A militant source told AFP that 'negotiations are held in Kabul in a positive atmosphere' but that it would be 'premature to draw any conclusion'.

Pakistan government offi-

cials have not yet commented on the talks.

The official discussions may be an indication the Taliban are trying to smooth over rocky relations with neighbouring Pakistan. The mountainous region between Afghanistan and Pakistan has long been a hive of militant activity, with the border becoming a source of friction since the Taliban reclaimed power in August. Islamabad has made repeated claims its forces have been targeted by fighters across the international boundary.

Last month, Afghan officials said a Pakistani airstrike in eastern Afghanistan killed 47 people. Pakistan did not comment on the strike but urged Kabul to secure its border to prevent militant operations.

The Afghan Taliban called the assault a 'cruelty' that 'is paving the way for enmity between Afghanistan and Pakistan'. Last year Pakistan conducted peace negotiations with the TTP during a month-long ceasefire, but that truce eventually collapsed.

AFP

Morocco 'breathing again' as tourists return

Marrakesh, Morocco - Moroccan snake-charmer Youssef watched as long-absent tourists again thronged Marrakesh's famous Jamaa El-Fna square, ending a long pause forced by the COVID pandemic.

"We're breathing again," he said.

The ancient southern city, famous for its views of graceful red buildings set against palm trees and snow-capped mountains, has long drawn visitors including celebrities from Madonna to Yves Saint Laurent.

But it was particularly hard hit by a two-year collapse in tourism that saw arrivals to the North African kingdom plummet to just a third last year from 2019.

For Youssef, taking a break from playing his oboe-like 'ghaita' pipe before the seemingly mesmerised serpent, 'it's such a pleasure to be back here after these slow, painful months'.

Tourism - which accounts for some seven per cent of Morocco's economy and creates hundreds of thousands of formal and informal jobs - was battered by Morocco's tight restrictions during the pandemic.

Today, Marrakesh residents see signs of hope again as tourists have returned to the UNESCO-listed old city's narrow alleys. Cafe terraces are full and foreigners browse shops and market stalls for traditional



Tourists shop around in the old city of Morocco's Marrakesh last week (AFP)

clothing, furniture and souvenirs.

"We're not back to pre-pandemic levels but the situation has been improving over the past month," said salesman Abdellah Bouazri, after serving an Argentinian customer in a Boca Juniors football top.

Bouazri, 35, said the coronavirus had forced him to temporarily abandon his shop and find alternative work as a security guard.

The father of two was one of many in the beleaguered indus-

try forced to find an alternative income - including many informal workers without contracts or social security.

But he said he was optimistic about the future: "It has been hard, but today I'm delighted to be going back to my real job."

'Recovery incomplete'

Morocco this week reopened land borders with the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, two years after they were shut

due to COVID and a major diplomatic row.

That was the latest step in a slow recovery for the tourism sector, backed by the government which has launched a two billion dirham (€190mn) support fund, on top of €95mn it released to prop up hotels.

"The recovery might be underway, but it's incomplete," said the FNIH national hotels federation's chief Lahcen Zelmat.

According to the tourism ministry, Morocco last year earned

We are not back to pre-pandemic levels but the situation has been improving over the past month

ABDELLAH BOUAZRI

some €3.2bn in tourism revenue - less than half the figure for the year before the pandemic.

But revenue in the first quarter was up by 80 per cent on last year, according to official figures, and the finance ministry predicts a 'more favourable outlook for 2022'.

That was reflected in the steady flow of tourists outside the Medersa Ben Youssef, a 16th-century Koranic school in Marrakesh. "This place is magical - I'm impressed by all the detail," said Nick, a 29-year-old Londoner visiting for the first time. "Since COVID I've been missing exploring new cultures."

Nearby, other visitors queued up to the Yves Saint Laurent museum, one of the city's top tourist spots.

"The museum was a must," said Coco, a Chinese student living in Germany. "We consider ourselves very lucky to be able to travel again, and we're really charmed."

AFP

World's tallest building engulfed as Mideast sandstorms hit UAE

Dubai, UAE - The world's tallest building disappeared behind a grey layer of dust on Wednesday as sandstorms that have swept the Middle East hit the United Arab Emirates, prompting weather and traffic warnings. The 828-metre Burj Khalifa, which towers over Dubai and is usually visible across the busy financial hub, retreated behind a curtain of airborne dirt that shrouded much of the country.

The UAE is just the latest country in the path of sandstorms that have smothered Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iran and others in recent days, closing airports and schools and sending thousands to hospital with breathing problems.

Capital city Abu Dhabi's air quality index (AQI) soared into the 'hazardous' zone overnight, according to waqi.info and the Plume pollution app. The Middle East's sandstorms are becoming more frequent and intense, a trend associated with overgrazing and deforestation, overuse of river water and more dams.

Experts say the phenomenon could worsen as climate change warps regional weather patterns and drives desertification.

Emirati authorities issued a nationwide warning urging residents to remain vigilant.

"Abu Dhabi Police urges drivers to be cautious due to low visibility during high winds and dust," the police force tweeted,



A view of the haze obscuring the skyline of the Gulf emirate of Dubai with a mosque in the foreground during a heavy sandstorm on Wednesday (AFP)

The UAE is just the latest country in the path of sandstorms that have smothered Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iran and others in recent days, closing airports and schools

as residents took to social media to publish photos and videos.

"Please do not be distracted by taking any videos or using your phone," it added.

'Hazardous weather'

A National Centre for Meteorology graphic showed nearly all the country covered by the storm, with the warning: "Be on the alert: hazardous weather events are expected."

Winds with speeds up to 40km per hour are blowing the

dust, it said, reducing visibility in some areas to less than 2,000 metres.

However, a Dubai airports spokesman said there was no impact on air traffic. Weather conditions were expected to remain the same for the next few days. In neighbouring Saudi Arabia, badly hit on Tuesday, conditions eased in the capital Riyadh on Wednesday but continued to restrict visibility in the city centre. Emergency rooms in Riyadh hospitals received some 1,285 people suffering from res-

piratory problems over 24 hours from the sandstorm, the state-run Al-Ekhbariya channel reported late on Tuesday.

The Saudi national weather centre reported that dust was also affecting visibility in the west and south, specifically in Assir, Najran, Hael and Medina provinces. Medina is home to Medina city, the second-holiest city in Islam.

The centre predicted another sandstorm would arrive in the kingdom by Sunday.

AFP



US Deputy Director of Naval Intelligence Scott Bray (centre) testify before a House Intelligence Committee hearing in Washington, DC on Tuesday (AFP)

In a hearing, Pentagon reports rise in UFOs over the past 20 years

Washington, US - An increasing number of unidentified flying objects have been reported in the sky over the past 20 years, a top US defense official told lawmakers on Tuesday in the first public hearing on UFOs in half a century.

"Since the early 2000s we have seen an increasing number of unauthorised and/or unidentified aircraft or objects in military controlled training areas and training ranges and other designated airspace," Scott Bray, deputy director of Naval intelligence, told a House security panel.

Bray attributed the rise to efforts by the US military to 'destigmatise the act of reporting sights and encounters' as well as to technological advances.

However, he said the Pentagon had detected nothing 'that would suggest it's anything non-terrestrial in origin' behind these phenomena.

On the other hand, Brey also did not definitively rule out that possibility.

"We've made no assumptions

about what this is or isn't," Bray said.

In June 2021, US intelligence had already claimed in a long-awaited report that there was no evidence of the existence of extraterrestrials in the skies, while acknowledging that they had no explanation for dozens of phenomena observed by military pilots.

Some could be explained by the presence of drones or birds creating confusion in the radar systems of the US military.

Others could stem from tests of military equipment or technologies carried out by other powers, such as China or Russia.

The US military and intelligence are primarily interested in determining whether these aerial objects may be linked to threats against the United States.

"Unidentified Aerial Phenomena are a potential national security threat. And they need to be treated that way," said Democratic Representative Andre Carson of Indiana, who was chairing the panel holding the hearing.

AFP

Indian court frees convict in Rajiv Gandhi murder case

New Delhi, India - India's top court on Wednesday ordered the release of a man jailed over the assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, more than 30 years after he was first arrested.

A bench headed by Justice L. Nageswara Rao invoked extraordinary powers to grant relief to A.G. Perarivalan, 50, who was already granted parole in March.

Perarivalan was convicted for supplying batteries used in a bomb that killed Gandhi in the southern state of Tamil Nadu on May 21, 1991.

The bombing was carried out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a Sri Lankan armed separatist group.

Gandhi's killing by a suicide bomber was seen as retaliation for a 1987 Indian government pact with Sri Lanka to disarm the Tamil guerrillas.

Perarivalan, who was arrested in 1991 and was 19 at the time of the assassination, was first sentenced to death, but later had his punishment commuted to a life sentence. His case was mired in legal wranglings since he filed a mercy petition in 2015.

Tamil Nadu's governor passed the decision on the plea to India's president, but the Supreme Court ruled that this did not have 'constitutional value' and invoked special powers to order Perarivalan's release.

AFP

Climate change indicators hit record highs in 2021: UN

Geneva, Switzerland - Four key climate change indicators all set new record highs in 2021, the United Nations said on Wednesday, warning that the global energy system was driving humanity towards catastrophe.

Greenhouse gas concentrations, sea level rise, ocean heat and ocean acidification all set new records last year, the UN's World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said in its 'State of the Global Climate in 2021' report. The annual overview is 'a dismal litany of humanity's failure to tackle climate disruption', UN chief Antonio Guterres said.

"The global energy system is broken and bringing us ever closer to climate catastrophe.

"We must end fossil fuel pollution and accelerate the renewable energy transition before we incinerate our only home."

The WMO said human activ-

ity was causing planetary-scale changes on land, in the ocean and in the atmosphere, with harmful and long-lasting ramifications for ecosystems.

Record heat

The report confirmed that the past seven years were the top seven hottest years on record.

Back-to-back La Nina events at the start and end of 2021 had a cooling effect on global temperatures last year.

Even so, it was still one of the warmest years ever recorded, with the average global temperature in 2021 about 1.11 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial level.

The 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change saw countries agree to cap global warming at 'well below' 2C above average levels measured between 1850 and 1900 - and 1.5C if possible.



Antonio Guterres (AFP)

"Our climate is changing before our eyes," said WMO chief Petteri Taalas.

"The heat trapped by human-induced greenhouse gases will warm the planet for many generations to come. Sea level rise, ocean heat and acidification will continue for hundreds of years unless means to remove carbon from the atmosphere are invented."

End of the line nears for NASA's InSight Mars lander

Washington, US - After some four years probing Mars' interior, NASA's *InSight* lander will likely retire this summer as accumulated dust on its solar panels saps its power. The lander will, however, leave behind a legacy of data that will be tapped by scientists around the world for years to come, helping to improve our understanding of planet formation, NASA said, while announcing on Tuesday the imminent end to *InSight*'s science operations.

Equipped with an ultra-sensitive seismometer, *InSight* recorded more than 1,300 'marsquakes', including a magnitude 5 quake on May 4, the largest so far.

But around July, the seismometer will be turned off.

The lander's energy level will then be checked about once a day, and some pictures may still

be taken. Then by the end of 2022, the mission will be completely stopped.

The cause: the accumulation over months of Martian dust on the lander's two solar panels, each measuring about seven feet (2.2 metres) wide. *InSight*, which is already running on only a tenth of the energy it had at the beginning, will soon find its batteries drained.

The speed at which dust accumulated corresponded more or less to what had been estimated by NASA.

The lander got a new lease on life around a year ago, when its robotic arm was put to new and unplanned use to remove some dust from the solar panels, extending the mission.

The maneuver - employed six times successfully - saw the arm use dust itself to clear the panels, as it scooped up some martian

soil and gently dropped onto the robot so the dirt was blown across the solar panels, clearing parts of their surface.

Adding something to the lander specifically to clean the panels was forgone due to costs, explained Bruce Banerdt of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, during a press conference on Tuesday.

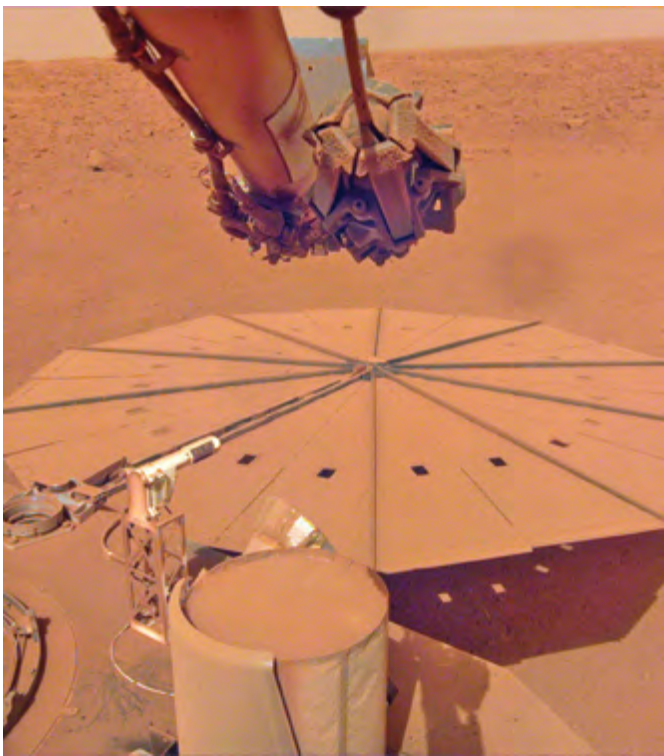
Such a mechanism would leave 'less to put into the science instruments', he said.

'Treasure trove'

InSight, one of four missions currently on the Red Planet - along with the US rovers Perseverance and Curiosity, and China's Zhurong - arrived on Mars in November 2018.

Its seismometer, made in France, has since paved the way for great advances.

"The interior was kind of just



An image captured by NASA's *InSight* Mars lander of one of its dust-covered solar panels on April 24 (AFP)

a giant question mark," said Banerdt, who has worked on the *InSight* mission for more than a decade. But thanks to *InSight*, "we've been able to map out the inside of Mars for the very first time in history." Seismic waves, varying based on the materials they pass through, offer a picture of the interior of the planet.

For example, scientists were able to confirm that the core of Mars is liquid and to determine the thickness of the Martian crust - less dense than previously thought and likely consisting of three layers.

The magnitude 5 quake in early May was much larger than all those previously recorded and close to what scientists thought would be the maximum on Mars, though it would not be considered a huge tremor on Earth.

"This quake is really going to be a treasure trove of scientific

information when we get our teeth into it," Banerdt said.

Earthquakes are in particular caused by plate tectonics, he explained. But, they can also be triggered when the Earth's crust moves due to temperature anomalies caused by its mantle.

It is this type of vibration that scientists think they are dealing with on Mars.

Not all of *InSight*'s scientific operations have gone smoothly, however, such as when its heat probe had trouble being successfully buried below the surface to take the planet's temperature because of the composition of the soil where the robot landed.

Regardless, in light of the seismometer's success, NASA is considering using the technique elsewhere in the future, said Lori Glaze, director of NASA's Planetary Science Division.

AFP

Finland, Sweden apply to join NATO

Ukraine opened the first war crimes trial of a Russian soldier since the invasion began

Brussels, Belgium - Finland and Sweden on Wednesday submitted a joint application to join NATO as Russia's invasion of Ukraine forces a dramatic reappraisal of security in Europe.

The reversal of the Nordic countries' longstanding policy of non-alignment came as Ukraine opened the first war crimes trial of a Russian soldier since the invasion began.

Vadim Shishimarin, 21, from Irkutsk in Siberia, pleaded guilty to killing an unarmed 62-year-old man in Ukraine's Sumy region on February 28 - four days into the invasion.

"By this first trial, we are sending a clear signal that every perpetrator, every person who ordered or assisted in the commission of crimes in Ukraine shall not avoid responsibility," prosecutor general Iryna Venediktova said.

Russia's government has no information on Shishimarin, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, adding that many such cases reported by Ukraine are 'simply fake or staged'.

Peskov further accused Kyiv of a 'complete lack of will' towards peace talks, after Ukrainian negotiator Mykhaylo

Podolyak said stop-start dialogue was 'on hold', having failed to yield any breakthroughs.

The Kremlin also intensified a tit-for-tat round of diplomatic expulsions against European countries, ordering out dozens of personnel from France, Italy and Spain. At NATO headquarters in Brussels, alliance chief Jens Stoltenberg formally received the applications from the Finnish and Swedish ambassadors, calling them 'a historic step'.

"All allies agree on the importance of NATO enlargement. We all agree that we must stand together and we all agree that this is a historic moment which we must seize," he said.

The membership push could represent the most significant expansion of NATO in decades, doubling its border with Russia, and President Vladimir Putin has warned it may trigger a response from Moscow.

But the applications face resistance from NATO member Turkey, which accuses the Nordic neighbours of harbouring anti-Turkish extremists.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan demanded 'respect' from NATO over his government's concerns.



Finland PM Sanna Marin (centre) attends the vote of the plenary session at the parliament about the NATO membership bid in Helsinki on Tuesday (AFP)

Western allies remain optimistic they can overcome Turkey's objections and for now, several including Britain have offered security guarantees to Finland and Sweden to guard against any Russian aggression.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the Nordic applications would not have been expected a short time ago, 'but Putin's appalling ambitions have transformed the geopolitical con-

tours of our continent'.

Mediators for Azovstal

On the ground, in Ukraine's ruined port city of Mariupol, a unit of soldiers had been holding out in the Azovstal steelworks, but Moscow said on Wednesday that 959 of the troops had surrendered this week.

Kyiv's defence ministry said it would do 'everything necessary' to rescue the undisclosed num-

ber of personnel still in the plant's tunnels, but admitted there was no military option available.

"The evacuation mission continues, it is overseen by our military and intelligence," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in his nightly address.

"The most influential international mediators are involved."

Those who have left Azovstal were taken into Russian captivity, including 80 who were heavily

wounded, the Russian defence ministry said.

The ministry, which published images showing soldiers on stretchers, said the injured were transported to a hospital in the eastern Donetsk region controlled by pro-Kremlin rebels.

The defence ministry in Kyiv said it was hoping for an 'exchange procedure... to repatriate these Ukrainian heroes as quickly as possible'. But their fate was

unclear, with Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov refusing to say whether they would be treated as criminals or prisoners of war.

Putin had 'guaranteed that they would be treated according to the relevant international laws', Peskov said.

'We will still fight'

Despite their last-ditch resistance in places such as Mariupol, and their successful defence of Kyiv, Ukrainian forces are retreating across swathes of the eastern front.

White smoke from burning fields marks the pace of Russia's advance around the village of Sydorove, on the approaches to the militarily important city of Sloviansk and Ukraine's eastern administrative centre in Kramatorsk. Army volunteer Yaroslava, 51, sat on a slab of concrete jutting out from the remains of a school in Sydorove where her husband's unit had set up camp before it was hit by a Russian strike.

She stared at a spot where rescuers and de-miners had spotted a motionless hand reaching out from the rubble. "We had settled in London before the war but felt like we had no choice but to come back," Yaroslava said. "My two sons have just signed three-year contracts with the army. We will fight. We will still fight," she said without moving her eyes.

AFP



Motorists queue to buy fuel at Ceylon petroleum corporation fuel station in Colombo on Wednesday (AFP)

Sri Lankan police arrests MPs over mob violence

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lankan police arrested two ruling party lawmakers for allegedly instigating mob violence that plunged the country into days of unrest and left nine people dead last week, officials said on Wednesday.

The members of parliament, both from President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's party, were questioned by criminal investigators on Tuesday evening and detained overnight, a police official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"There is direct evidence against the two MPs and that is why they were arrested," the official said. Sanath Nishantha and Milan Jayathilake were among 22 politicians - including former prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and his son Namal - whose passports were impounded last week following allegations that they instigated violence.

On May 9, thousands of ruling party supporters who were bussed into the capital attacked a peaceful demonstration by anti-government protesters demanding President Rajapaksa resign over an economic crisis that has paralysed the country.

Then-Prime Minister Mahinda

Rajapaksa - the president's elder brother - resigned shortly after the mob attack sparked retaliatory violence and arson, with more than 70 ruling party leaders' homes destroyed.

More than 225 people were hospitalised from the violence, according to health officials.

Police said the MPs, both from President Rajapaksa's party, were questioned by investigators on Tuesday evening and detained overnight

Police say they have arrested about 500 people in connection with the violence and retaliation.

Cabinet formation

Thousands continue to demonstrate outside the president's seafront office in Colombo, demanding he resign over an economic crisis that has resulted in acute shortages of food, fuel and essential medicines.

The shortages have been accompanied by record inflation and lengthy blackouts, bringing

severe hardships to Sri Lankans, who are experiencing the country's worst financial crisis since independence from Britain in 1948. Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed as prime minister last week.

Wickremesinghe has the crucial support of two main opposition parties to form a 'unity government' aimed at pulling the country out of the crisis, but had yet to form a full cabinet.

Four ministers were appointed on Saturday. Official sources said Wickremesinghe was still in talks with potential coalition partners to finalise his cabinet.

The prime minister was expected to also take on the crucial finance portfolio for ongoing bailout talks with the International Monetary Fund.

Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera said the energy crisis was worse than initially feared.

"We will not be able to supply petrol in the next two days and I appeal to motorists not to queue up," Wijesekera said in parliament. He said the government managed to raise 53mn dollars for a petrol tanker that was already at the Colombo port and was awaiting full payment before unloading.

AFP

More than 100,000 people officially missing in violence-wracked Mexico

Mexico City, Mexico - More than 100,000 people are now listed as missing in violence-wracked Mexico, a grim milestone that the United Nations rights chief on Tuesday called 'a tragedy of enormous proportions'.

Rights groups appealed for urgent action to tackle disappearances that have skyrocketed during years of spiraling drug-related violence.

The National Registry of Missing Persons, which has been tracking disappearances since 1964, said that as of Monday, the whereabouts of 100,099 people were unknown. About 75 per cent are men.

The Movement for Our Disappeared warned that the figure was 'certainly well below the number' of actual cases, calling for the government to deal with the crisis 'in a comprehensive and immediate manner'.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said the disappearances represented a 'human tragedy of enormous proportions'.

"No effort should be spared to put an end to these human rights



Workers of Mexico City government move a fence with photos of missing persons in Mexico City, on Tuesday (AFP)

violations and abuses of extraordinary breadth, and to vindicate victims' rights to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition," she added.

Only 35 of the disappearances recorded have led to convictions - a 'staggering rate of impunity' that is 'mostly attributable to the lack of effective investigations', Bachelet's office said.

'Pattern of impunity'

The UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

described the situation as 'heart-breaking'. Enforced disappearances are a daily occurrence in Mexico, 'reflecting a chronic pattern of impunity', they added.

The UN committee, which is made up of independent experts, warned in April that Mexico was facing an 'alarming trend of rising enforced disappearances'.

Organised crime groups were mainly responsible for these disappearances, 'with varying degrees of participation, acquiescence or omission by public servants', it said.

AFP

Nine dead, 24 wounded in clashes in Tajikistan

Dushanbe, Tajikistan - Clashes between Tajik security forces and 'terrorists' killed nine people and wounded two dozen in a restive region bordering Afghanistan and China, the interior ministry said.

The ministry said members of 'organised criminal groups' armed with weapons and Molotov cocktails attacked security officials in the eastern region of Gorno-Badakhshan.

One security officer was killed and 13 were seriously injured in the attack, it said.

The attack came during an 'anti-terror operation' launched earlier on Wednesday after 200 armed people blocked a highway on the border with Afghanistan. As a result of the operation, eight 'militants' were killed, 11 wounded and more than 70 'active members of a terrorist group' were detained.

AFP

'World remains unprepared to face new pandemics'

Geneva, Switzerland - Global reform efforts to better ward off new pandemic threats have been slow and fragmented, leaving the world as unprepared as when COVID-19 first surfaced, a report warned on Wednesday.

A year ago, an independent expert panel presented a damning report to the World Health Organization's main annual assembly complaining that poor coordination and bad decisions had allowed the COVID pandemic to swell to such a catastrophic scale.

At the time, the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, co-chaired by former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark and former Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, drew up a long list of measures



Pedestrians walk in the street wearing protective face mask in the centre of Thessaloniki, northern Greece, on Wednesday (AFP)

needed to overcome COVID and ensure the world is better prepared to face future threats.

But in an assessment report one year on, the no longer active panel cautioned that the world was still 'tinkering' and its inac-

tion was laying 'the groundwork for another pandemic'.

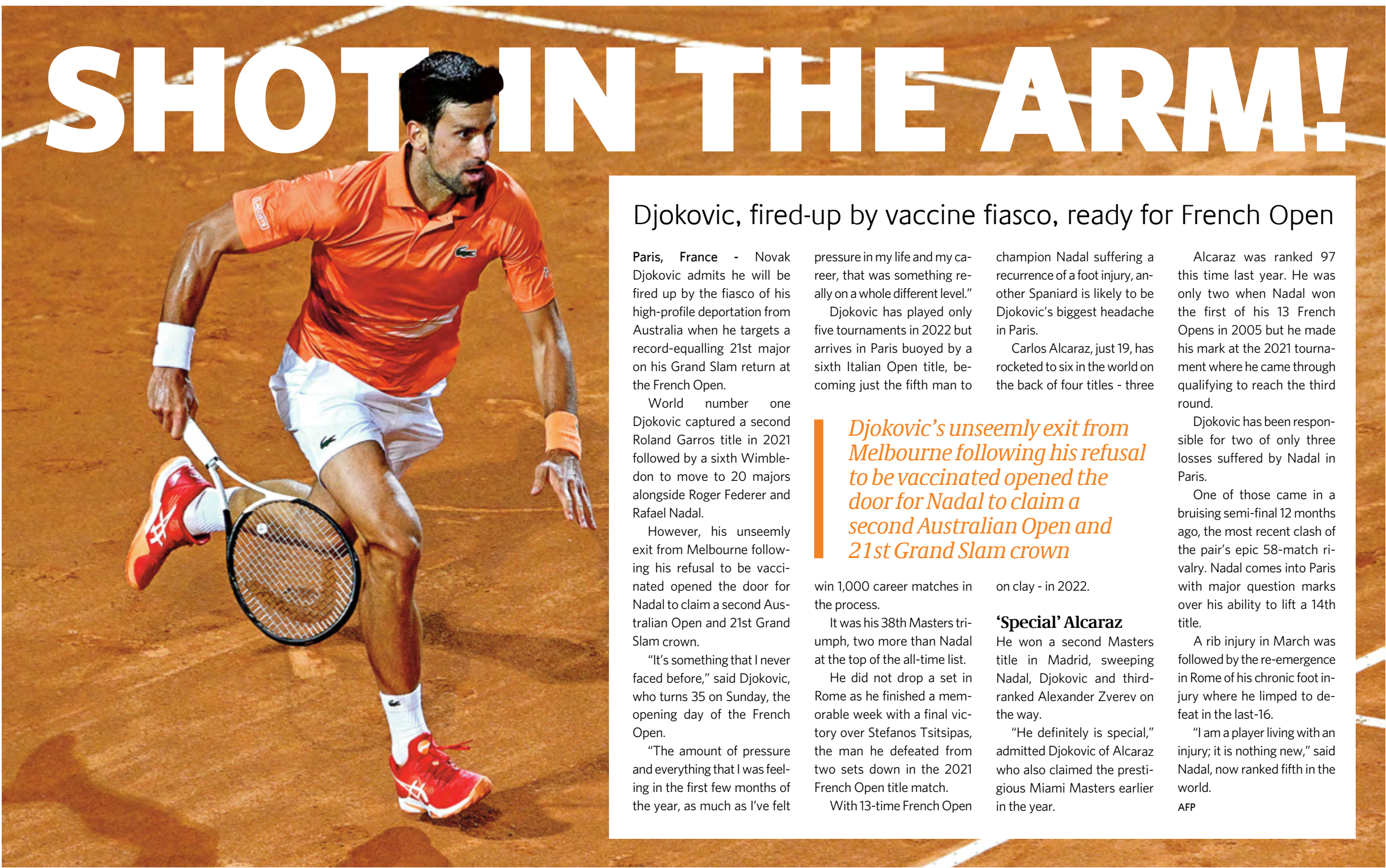
"We largely have the very same tools and the same system that existed in December 2019 to respond to a pandemic threat," Clark told reporters. "Those tools

were not good enough." All was not bleak. Clark hailed that the 'transformative work required at the global level to prevent the next pandemic has begun'.

She pointed to how new mechanisms set up after COVID surfaced had made it possible to deliver around 1.5bn vaccine doses to poorer countries, and praised the efforts under way to diversify production of vaccines and antivirals. Agreement is also expected towards more secure and flexible funding for WHO, while plans for a dedicated pandemic fund are taking shape.

Changes to the International Health Regulations are being considered, and negotiations are under way towards a new 'legal instrument'.

AFP



Djokovic, fired-up by vaccine fiasco, ready for French Open

Paris, France - Novak Djokovic admits he will be fired up by the fiasco of his high-profile deportation from Australia when he targets a record-equalling 21st major on his Grand Slam return at the French Open.

World number one Djokovic captured a second Roland Garros title in 2021 followed by a sixth Wimbledon to move to 20 majors alongside Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

However, his unseemly exit from Melbourne following his refusal to be vaccinated opened the door for Nadal to claim a second Australian Open and 21st Grand Slam crown.

"It's something that I never faced before," said Djokovic, who turns 35 on Sunday, the opening day of the French Open.

"The amount of pressure and everything that I was feeling in the first few months of the year, as much as I've felt pressure in my life and my career, that was something really on a whole different level."

Djokovic has played only five tournaments in 2022 but arrives in Paris buoyed by a sixth Italian Open title, becoming just the fifth man to champion Nadal suffering a recurrence of a foot injury, another Spaniard is likely to be Djokovic's biggest headache in Paris.

Carlos Alcaraz, just 19, has rocketed to six in the world on the back of four titles - three on clay - in 2022.

'Special' Alcaraz

He won a second Masters title in Madrid, sweeping Nadal, Djokovic and third-ranked Alexander Zverev on the way.

"He definitely is special," admitted Djokovic of Alcaraz who also claimed the prestigious Miami Masters earlier in the year.

Alcaraz was ranked 97 this time last year. He was only two when Nadal won the first of his 13 French Opens in 2005 but he made his mark at the 2021 tournament where he came through qualifying to reach the third round.

Djokovic has been responsible for two of only three losses suffered by Nadal in Paris.

One of those came in a bruising semi-final 12 months ago, the most recent clash of the pair's epic 58-match rivalry. Nadal comes into Paris with major question marks over his ability to lift a 14th title.

A rib injury in March was followed by the re-emergence in Rome of his chronic foot injury where he limped to defeat in the last-16.

"I am a player living with an injury; it is nothing new," said Nadal, now ranked fifth in the world.

AFP

All eyes on Tiger's comeback and Jordan Slam quest at PGA

Tulsa, United States - Tiger Woods and his incredible injury comeback and Jordan Spieth's quest for a career Grand Slam will seize the spotlight in Thursday's opening round of the 104th PGA Championship.

Woods, a 15-time major champion, and three-time major winner Spieth are grouped with four-time major winner Rory McIlroy in a marquee trio for the first two days at Southern Hills.

Top-ranked Masters champion Scottie Scheffler, 2021 British Open winner Collin Morikawa and second-ranked Spaniard Jon Rahm are among the most fancied players and are together as well, but might struggle to match the Woods group spectator count. "Tiger's here, so nobody really remembers that I'm here," Scheffler said. "So it's all good."

Woods suffered severe leg injuries in a February 2021 car crash, spending weeks hospitalized and months unable to walk.

His emotional return at last month's Masters ended with a share of 47th and a stamina struggle, but he saw walking 72 holes as a major feat and says he's stronger as another endurance test looms.

"I've gotten stronger since then, but still it's going to be sore and walking is a challenge," Woods said.

Asked if he can win, Woods said, "I feel like I can, definitely. I just have to go out there and do it."

Among those trying to stop him will be Rahm, who comes off a victory two weeks ago at the US PGA Mexico Open.

"He's Tiger. He's a competitor," Rahm said. "He's going to try to win every single time and anytime he tees up, the world wants him to win."

"Yeah, totally expected for the attention to be on him, but it doesn't really change anything of what I want to be doing this week."

Like Rahm, Spieth wants to be having his name engraved on the Wanamaker Trophy. If he wins, Spieth will join Woods, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Ben Hogan and Gene Sarazen as the only players to sweep all four major titles in their careers.

AFP



Formula One opt against replacing cancelled Russian Grand Prix

Paris, France - The Russian Formula One Grand Prix cancelled due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine will not be replaced this season, the championship promoters said on Wednesday.

"We can confirm that we have decided against replacing the Russian Grand Prix this season," Formula One said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The season will now be 22 races for 2022."

Formula One had acted speedily to cancel this year's Russian Grand Prix after defending world champion Max Verstappen and four-time champion Sebastian Vettel said they were opposed to competing in the Russian city of Sochi following the February 24 invasion of Ukraine.

AFP

Unstoppable Swiatek firm favourite for second French Open title



Iga Swiatek

I'm going to try to do step by step, just think of the next match as I did in these tournaments

Swiatek.

"I'm going to try to do step by step, just think of the next match as I did in these tournaments."

"If I'm going to treat it as any other tournament, I think it's going to be fine and I'm going to be able to keep it that way."

Williams, who turns 41 in September, has not played since retiring in the first round at Wimbledon last year, and her long-time coach Patrick Mouratoglou is now working with two-time Grand Slam champion Simona Halep, who won her first major in Paris in 2018.

Unpredictable

Unlike the men's event where Rafael Nadal has won 13 of the past 17 editions, a first-time women's Grand Slam champion has been crowned in each of the past six French Opens.

Most recently, Barbora Krejickova emerged as an unlikely victor, the first player to win both the singles and doubles at Roland Garros since Mary Pierce in 2000.

AFP



Tiger Woods

Oman Cricket announces Omani Youth Skills Day

Muscat - Oman Cricket has announced that the nation's first-ever 'Omani Youth Skills Day' will be held on May 25, from 7 pm onwards, at the Oman Cricket Academy. The upper age limit for participation is 16 years.

The objective of the initiative is to promote the sport of cricket among the Omani youth and identify the ones with an active interest and innate talent.

Fun activities such as longest throw competition, target throw competition, maximum distance stationary ball hitting competition and target hitting competition will be held on the Omani Youth Skills Day.

Oman Cricket Academy Manager Evert Laubscher said: "We are very excited to be hosting the first ever Omani Youth Skills Day."

"It will be a fun-filled day for everyone involved, with prizes and gift hampers to win. This is a great opportunity for the youth of Oman who have not been exposed to cricket, to come and learn a few different skills associated with the game. It will also be an opportunity for us to scout and identify some future talent that we can then involve in the Oman Cricket Academy system."

The 'Omani Youth Skills Day' is a part of Oman Cricket's Grassroots programme. For further details/queries on the event, Evert can be reached on +96891924529. Parviz can be reached on +96892521242.



Omani Youth Skills Day will help Oman Cricket spot local talent



IPL 2022



LSG V KKR

Kolkata go down fighting to Lucknow in high-scoring thriller



BRIEF SCORES:

Lucknow Super Giants 210 for 0 in 20 overs (Quinton de Kock 140 (70) 10x4, 10x6; KL Rahul 68 (51) 3x4, 4x6) beat Kolkata Knight Riders 208 for 8 (Nitish Rana 42 (22) 9x4, Shreyas Iyer 50 (29) 4x4, 3x6, Rinku Singh 40 (15) 2x4, 4x6; Mohsin Khan 3 for 20) by 2 runs.

TODAY'S MATCH (6PM)

ROYAL CHALLENGERS
BANGALORE

VS

GUJARAT
TITANS

Malik will be a handful with red-ball, says Ravi Shastri

Former India coach wants Jammu and Sunrisers fast man to get BCCI contract 'straightaway' Mumbai, India - Umran Malik needs to be given a central contract "straightaway" by the BCCI, in the opinion of Ravi Shastri, who also believes Malik will be "a handful" in first-class cricket and has the potential to even be part of the Indian Test set-up subject to him being put on the development pathway by Indian cricket authorities.

Malik, who recently clocked 156.9 kph, possibly the fastest ball in IPL history, is also the fourth-highest wicket-taker this IPL with 21 wickets in 13 matches at an average of 20 and economy rate of 8.93. Playing his first full IPL season, Malik has already bagged a five-for (the second-best figures so far this season), but it is his raw, uninhibited pace that has troubled batters, brought fans to the edge of the seats and excited pundits like Shastri.

"Central contract straightaway," Shastri said on ESPN-cricinfo's T20 Time Out after Malik put on another impactful performance with a three-wicket



haul in Sunrisers Hyderabad's win against Mumbai Indians on Tuesday. "And keep him in the mix, don't let him float around. Keep him in the mix with the main players and then he learns seeing (and) being around with the (Mohammed) Shamis and the (Jasprit) Bumrahs, and see the way they train, see the way they manage their workload.

"Of course, there'll be the team management there, support staff, that'll help him do that,

You don't want him to cut down on pace. The last thing you would tell him looking for control, cut down on pace. What you want him to do is get his lines right...

RAVI SHASTRI

but don't let him stray at the moment. Get him into the mix, and keep him there and groom him."

While Malik has rattled the best batters in the IPL - on Tues-

day, Malik hit Rohit Sharma in the helmet - with his extreme pace as well as uprooted stumps, someone like Shami has called on him to focus on combining "pace with

accuracy".

"He'll get better and better," Shastri said. "You see his bowling once he takes a wicket. Look at the lines he starts bowling as opposed to when he has not got a wicket - that's when he is trying everything, his lines are all over the place. You don't want him to cut down on pace. The last thing you would tell him looking for control, cut down on pace. What you want him to do is get his lines right: if he can bowl that stump line, attack the stumps on a constant basis, varying his lengths, he will trouble (batters).

"If he gets a wicket and new guy comes in, he can really rattle him because he has got the pace, he can keep the bloke on his toes, but it's that line - if he gets into that channel, without cutting his pace it will make a huge difference."

And if Malik could stick to that plan, Shastri said he would not be surprised if Malik is soon be part of the Indian Test squad. "I promise you, this guy is going to be a handful in red-ball cricket. Handful, really."

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Jurgen Klopp

Klopp has ‘no reason’ to talk to Gerrard before title climax

London, United Kingdom- Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said he'd no intention of contacting club great Steven Gerrard to offer words of encouragement before the climax to a thrilling Premier League title race this weekend.

Liverpool complete their campaign at home to Wolves on Sunday, hoping an Aston Villa team now managed by Gerrard can do them a major favour away to City.

"No, of course not," replied the German, when asked if he planned to speak with former Liverpool captain Gerrard. "Stevie prepares now for Burnley, who are fighting for everything. It's Villa's last home game. They will play that game and then collect the bones (freshen up) and go again on Sunday.

"There's no reason to talk to him. We all know that Villa wants to win because Villa wants to win - that's it."

Liverpool beat Southampton to take title race to final day

Southampton, United Kingdom - Jurgen Klopp rated Liverpool's chances of winning the Premier League as "not likely but possible" after the under-strength quadruple chasers took the title race to the final day of the season with a 2-1 win against Southampton on Tuesday.

After Liverpool defeated Chelsea on penalties in a gruelling FA Cup final just three days earlier, Klopp took a gamble with nine changes at St Mary's.

Despite effectively fielding a reserve team and trailing to Nathan Redmond's early strike, Liverpool hit back through goals from Takumi Minamino and Joel Matip.

The Reds are just one point behind leaders Manchester City, with both teams having one game left.

A title race for the ages will go City's way if they win against Aston Villa at the Etihad Stadium on Sunday.

Klopp insisted at the weekend that he does not expect City to drop points against Villa.

But Liverpool would be crowned champions for the second time in three seasons if they beat Wolves at Anfield and City



Liverpool's Joel Matip (unseen) scores past Southampton goalkeeper Alex McCarthy during their English Premier League match at St Mary's Stadium in Southampton on Tuesday (AFP)

fail to win.

"Of course it is unlikely because City play at home against Aston Villa, who play only on Thursday. It is possible, not likely but possible. That is enough," Klopp said.

"It is our last home game of the season, the atmosphere will be outstanding, and we will try to

use it.

"Of course it could happen. Football is a tricky game sometimes. The only chance we had tonight was to win. We did our job. We never give up."

Klopp's side will be expected to do their part of the equation against Wolves, especially now their refreshed key players can

return to the team.

Sadio Mane, Luis Diaz, Andrew Robertson, Thiago Alcantara and Trent Alexander-Arnold were among those left out against Southampton, while Mohamed Salah and Virgil van Dijk were sidelined with injuries suffered at Wembley.

"I never had a group like this.

They push each other constantly. In the end, it is absolutely outstanding and tonight is really special," Klopp said.

"We would have had much more problems today if we'd played the guys who played 120 minutes on Saturday.

"If it hadn't worked out, it would have been 100 per cent

my responsibility. Now it worked out and the boys should be really proud of that."

City boss Pep Guardiola said he planned to watch the game on television and if he tuned in, it would have made for frustrating viewing as Southampton squandered the lead.

AFP

‘Historic’ equal pay deal for US men and women footballers

Washington, United States - The US men's and women's national soccer teams will receive equal pay under a "historic" agreement announced by the US Soccer Federation on Wednesday, following years of pressure from female players.

The move makes the federation the first in the world to equalize World Cup prize money awarded to its men's and women's teams.

"This is a truly historic mo-

ment. These agreements have changed the game forever here in the United States and have the potential to change the game around the world," said US Soccer president Cindy Parlow Cone.

The terms of Wednesday's landmark agreement include "identical compensation for all competitions, including the FIFA World Cup, and the introduction of the same commercial revenue sharing mechanism for both

These agreements have changed the game forever here in the United States and have the potential to change the game around the world

CINDY PARLOW CONE

teams," USSF said. The deal stipulates that players from both teams "pool and share" the otherwise unequal prize money paid by FIFA for participation in their

respective World Cups.

For non-World Cup tournaments, players from "both teams will earn an equal amount of the total prize money paid when

both teams participate in the same competition."

In February, the US national women's team won a \$24 million payout and a promise of equal pay in a major settlement with US Soccer, that was contingent on the new collective bargaining agreement.

The question of World Cup prize money had formed a prominent part of the lawsuit, which was filed in 2019.

AFP



US Soccer president Cindy Parlow Cone

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Ibrahimovic to miss Nations League matches

Stockholm, Sweden - Swedish football legend Zlatan Ibrahimovic will miss Sweden's Nations League matches in June against Slovenia, Norway and Serbia due to injury, coach Janne Andersson said on Wednesday.

"He's had injury problems for a while and hasn't played so much in Milan, so he's declined to play," Andersson told reporters as he presented Sweden's squad.

Ibrahimovic, 40, returned to the Swedish national team in March 2021 after a five-year hiatus.

In March, he said he wanted to continue playing international football for "as long as possible"



Zlatan Ibrahimovic

despite Sweden's failure to qualify for the 2022 World Cup.

But speculation has since mounted that this may be his last season as a player due to his mounting injuries and has seen him rarely play for his Serie A club AC Milan.

His physical problems have prompted even former Italian star Francesco Totti, who aged 40 was dragged away from playing kicking and screaming, to suggest that the Swede should "listen to his body" before deciding to continue.

Ibrahimovic will be 42 by the time of the next major international tournament finals he could play in, Euro 2024 in Germany.

AFP

Nottingham Forest need penalties to reach playoff final

London, United Kingdom - Nottingham Forest are one game away from returning to the Premier League for the first time since 1999 after edging out Sheffield United on penalties in a dramatic Championship playoff semi-final.

Forest led 2-1 from the first leg and looked set for Wembley when Brennan Johnson blasted into the top corner on 19 minutes.

However, the Blades fought back after the break as goals from Morgan Gibbs-White and John Fleck sent the tie to extra-time.

The visitors were only denied



Nottingham Forest goalkeeper Brice Samba is congratulated by team-mate Brennan Johnson after their shoot-out victory

a remarkable fightback by a brilliant save from Brice Samba five minutes from time as he spread

himself to block Iliman Ndiaye's effort.

And Samba was the Forest

hero in the shootout as he saved from Oliver Norwood, Conor Hourihane and Gibbs-White.

Johnson, Cafu and Steve Cook scored from the spot for Steve Cooper's men to continue an incredible turnaround in fortunes at the City Ground.

Forest were bottom of the table when Chris Hughton was sacked in September.

They narrowly missed out on automatic promotion behind Fulham and Bournemouth, but will have another shot in the richest game in world football when they face Huddersfield at Wembley on May 29.

AFP

JACOBABAD



HEATWAVE

By the time Pakistani schoolboy Saeed Ali arrived at hospital in Jacobabad - one of the world's hottest cities - his body was shutting down from heatstroke. The 12-year-old collapsed after walking home from school under the burning sun, his day spent sweltering in a classroom with no fans. "A rickshaw driver had to carry my son here. He couldn't even walk," the boy's mother Shaheela Jamali told AFP from his bedside.

Jacobabad, in Pakistan's arid Sindh province, is in the grip of the latest heatwave to hit South Asia - peaking at 51 degrees Celsius (124 Fahrenheit) at the weekend.

Canals in the city - a vital source of irrigation for nearby farms -- have run dry, with a smattering of stagnant water barely visible around strewn rubbish. Experts say the searing weather is in line with projections for global warming.

The city is 'on the front line of climate change', said its deputy commissioner Abdul Hafeez Siyal. "The quality of life here is suffering."

Most of the one million people in

Extreme temperatures compound poverty in Jacobabad - Pakistan's hottest city

Jacobabad and surrounding villages live in acute poverty, with water shortages and power cuts compromising their ability to beat the heat. It leaves residents facing desperate dilemmas.

Heatstroke

Heatstroke - when the body becomes so overheated it can no longer cool itself - can cause symptoms from lightheadedness and nausea to organ swelling, unconsciousness, and even death.

Nurse Bashir Ahmed, who treated Saeed at a new heatstroke clinic run by local NGO Community Development Foundation, said the number of patients arriving in a serious condition was rising. "Previously, the heat

would be at its peak in June and July, but now it's arriving in May," Ahmed said.

Labourers forced to toil in the sun are among the most vulnerable. Brick kiln workers ply their trade alongside furnaces that can reach up to 1,000 degrees Celsius.

Water mafias

Life in Jacobabad is dominated by at-

tempts to cope with the heat. "It's like fire burning all around. What we need the most is electricity and water," said blacksmith Shafi Mohammad.

Power shortages mean only six hours of electricity a day in rural areas and 12 in the city. Access to drinking water is unreliable and unaffordable due to scarcity across Pakistan and major infrastructure

problems.

Local 'water mafias' are filling the supply gap when taps run dry everywhere. They have tapped into government reserves to funnel water to their own distribution points where cans are filled and transported by donkey carts to be sold at Rs20 per 20 litres.

In a farming village on the outskirts of the city, women wake up at

3am to pump drinking water all day from a well - but it is never enough.

"We always prefer that our cattle have clean drinking water first, because our livelihood depends on them," said Abdul Sattar, who tends a herd of buffaloes for milk and sale at a market.

Pakistan is the eighth most vulnerable country to extreme weather caused by climate change, according to the Global Climate Risk Index compiled by environmental NGO Germanwatch.

Floods, droughts and cyclones in recent years have killed and displaced thousands, destroyed livelihoods and damaged infrastructure. And many people choose to leave Jacobabad in the hottest months, leaving some villages half empty.

Professor Nausheen H Anwar, who studies urban planning in hot cities, said authorities need to look beyond emergency responses and think long term.

"Taking heatwaves seriously is important, but sustained chronic heat exposure is particularly critical," she said. "It's exacerbated in places like Jacobabad by the degradation of infrastructure and access to water and electricity which compromises people's capacity to cope."

AFP



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INFINITI QX80



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Safe, stylish, and sensational, **the INFINITI QX80** unleashes a luxurious ambience as it rolls by, leaving behind a trail of elegance

Designed to handle all of life's roads with comfort, safety, style and entertainment, the INFINITI QX80 is the most luxurious SUV from INFINITI till date. The flagship model includes the new generation INFINITI InTouch infotainment, Premium In-Vehicle-Infotainment (P-IVI) System featuring two HD display screens, 3D maps, Apple Car Play and Android Auto capabilities. The model is equipped with a BOSE Performance Series with 17 speakers for high fidelity audio experience with surround sound technology.

The new 'Black Edition' grade features dark chrome and black exterior accents highlight the front grill and fascia, side fender vents, door mirror caps and rear tailgate strip. The commanding stance is heightened with the addition of dark chrome 22-inch forged alloy wheels. Three stylish interior trim colours are also available: including 'Graphite', Saddle Brown' and 'Wheat' with a revised Charcoal Ash Wood accent trim.

The QX80 features a range of available drive-assist technologies. Blind Spot Intervention (BSI), Lane Departure Prevention (LDP), Distance Control Assist (DCA), and an updated Intelligent Cruise Control system are all included, while Android Auto and Apple CarPlay continue to bring enhanced connectivity across the QX80 range.

With a powerful 5.6ltr V8 engine driving the rear or both axles, the QX80 is a consummate performer in all driving conditions. A smooth-shifting seven-speed automatic transmission seamlessly channels the engine's ample power and torque reserves for an assured feeling of control behind the wheel. From travelling on the highway, towing a heavy load, or traversing tough off-road passes, the QX80 brings hand-crafted luxury, utility and sophistication for up to eight passengers.

Safety features

The safety features of INFINITI QX80 85 LUXE SENSORY includes Anti-Lock Braking System (ABS), Infiniti VDC, Vehicle Dynamic Control, Electronic Brake Force Distribution (EBD), B-LSD with Hill Start Assist, driver & assist seat and curtain airbags & side airbags, advanced airbag, driver seat 3 point ELR with double pretensioners and load limiters, Assist seat 3 point ELR with double pre-tensioners and load limiters, rear seat belt RH&LH:3 point ELR, Center:3 point ELR", 3rd row seat belt, RH&LH:3 point ELR, tyre pressure monitoring system, child anchors (with ISO-FIX), high mounted stop lamp with LED in RR spoiler, crash sensitive door unlock, and around view monitor, Trailer Stability assist, predictive forward collision warning and remote engine starter.

Produced in Kyushu, Japan, INFINITI sold more than 23,000 QX80s in 2019, in North America (20,260 units), the Middle East (1,650) and Eastern Europe (1,216).



Stylish dashboard features a range of controls and drive assist technologies



Comfortable leather seats



Spacious, convertible cabin



Black Edition

(To experience the INFINITI QX80, visit the INFINITI Centre at Qurm or call Toll-free 800 50011 or visit www.infiniti-oman.com)

LARGER THAN LIFE

The INFINITI QX80 exudes luxury in every stroke. The flagship model of the INFINITI range combines bold proportions and a commanding exterior design with a high-quality spacious interior. Features include:

- Double-arch grille
- Intermittent front wiper with speed & rain sensors
- Adaptive front lighting system & high beam assist
- Automatic LED headlights
- Seating capacity - 7-Seater / 8-Seater
- Dimensions L x W x H (mm) - 5,340 x 2030 x 1925
- Wheelbase (mm) - 3075
- Ground clearance (mm) - 234
- Luggage volume - 1404.6L (3rd row folded flat)
- Fuel capacity - 100L

Designed to handle every road

From the first press of the throttle, you'll know you're driving something that exudes authority. The QX80 was made to take whatever life can throw at it - or behind it. Its 5.6ltr V8 engine generates up to 400 horsepower and 413 lb.-ft (560nm) of torque and performs effortlessly across all driving conditions. QX80 is designed to handle all of life's roads, with:

- 7-speed Automatic Transmission
- INFINITI All-Mode 4WD
- Hydraulic Body Motion Control

Exclusivity for everybody

Travelling in the QX80 is just as immersive and comfortable as driving it. There's not only seating for up to 8 persons but also entertainment for all. This includes:

- INFINITI InTouch P-IVI Navigation System with 3D maps & voice recognition
- Dual display HD screens - Upper 8" and lower 7"
- Rear seat entertainment system with dual 8-Inch QHD screens
- Bose Performance Series with 17 speakers

All-around protection

The QX80 is packed with a host of advanced drive-assist technologies and predictive safety features, like:

- Intelligent cruise control
- Smart rear view mirror
- Around view monitor with moving object detection
- Forward emergency braking with pedestrian detection
- Predictive forward collision warning
- Lane departure warning & prevention
- Blind spot warning & intervention
- Backup collision intervention
- Driver & passenger advanced type airbag - front side & curtain airbag
- Distance control assist

Special 'black edition'

Stand out in style with the bold INFINITI QX80 'Black Edition' which has:

- Outside mirrors in black colour
- Front grill type: Black finishing
- Front fascia trim: Dark chrome colour exterior finish
- Side fender vents: Dark chrome colour exterior finish
- Back door finisher (rear tailgate strip): Dark chrome colour exterior finish
- 22" 18-spoke forged Aluminium-alloy wheels in unique dark finishing