‘Omicron may be less severe, but not mild’

A pharmacy employee collects a sample from a member of the public in a tent set up to offer Covid-19 antigen tests outside a pharmacy in Paris on Thursday, as France’s government announced plans to make being vaccinated against the coronavirus compulsory for health workers, teachers and care home staff from next month.

The new variant of Covid-19 seems to be spreading faster and could be more dangerous than previous strains, scientists say. But they are not yet sure how severe Omicron will be compared to Delta.

He Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander, on Thursday conferred medals of Royal Commendation, Excellent Service and High Commendation on 100 police officers from the Ministry of Interior for their commitment and dedication to their duties.

The ceremony was held at the Ministry of Interior in the presence of the Minister of Interior, General Sultan bin Tariq Al Said.

The Sultan commended the officers for their efforts to ensure the safety and security of the country and for their readiness to implement the tasks assigned to them.

On the other hand, the President of the World Health Organization (WHO) Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the new omicron strain is a “variant of concern”.

Based on the current rate of vaccine rollout, 100 countries will miss the WHO’s target for 70 per cent of the world’s population to be fully vaccinated by July. Tedros added that aim is seen as "healing and ending the acute phase of the pandemic."

WHO adviser Bruce Aylward said 86 nations had not even reached 10 per cent vaccine coverage. Among severe patients worldwide, 80 per cent were unvaccinated, he added.

Another variant — labelled as B.1.1.529 and first registered in September 2021 — is among those being monitored by the WHO but is not circulating widely, and the WHO’s technical lead on Covid-19, Maria van Kerkhove, said there were two other categories of greater significance who the WHO uses to track variants: “variant of concern,” which includes Delta and Omicron, and “variant of interest” — Reuters.
HM confers proficiency medals to police officers

Pakistan’s President receives OCCI chief

Environment Authority unveils 2022 plans

MUSCAT: The Environment Authority on Thursday held a press conference during which it reviewed the outcome of its activities last year and unveiled programmes of its plan of the new year, which underscores the preparation of a national strategy associated with the goals of Oman Vision 2040. “There is ongoing coordination between the Environment Authority and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion in pursuit of which a decision to ban plastic bags is expected to be taken and a date is to be set for the ban in the next few years,” said Dr. Abdullah bin Ali Al Amer, Chairman of the Environment Authority.

Al Amer pointed out that the use of plastic bags was banned earlier and the bags were replaced with two-time-use and three-times-use bags and this resulted in cutting down the quantity of discarded plastics. In a speech at the press conference, Dr. Al Amer said that, since its inception, Oman Vision 2040 committed the environment sector to realise clear-cut objectives within the span of one decade.

Accordingly, work started on Oman Environment Strategy envisaging a set of goals to be met on a yearly basis over a span of 10 years as an executive plan for the next two decades, he said. He added that the programmes, initiatives and projects brought about by Oman Environment Strategy will reflect positively on the environmental performance of the Sultanate of Oman, upgrading its global rating.

A national team tasked with environment indicators was formed under the leadership of environment specialists and competent partners from public and private sector establishments. — OMAN

ISLAMABAD: President Dr. Arif Alvi of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan received Eng. Khalid bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), and the business delegation currently in Islamabad on Thursday.

The meeting reviewed the historic relations between the Sultanate of Oman and Pakistan, as well as prospects of economic cooperation. It also stressed the importance of upgrading this cooperation and benefiting from the opportunities available at the two countries’ private sector to serve interests of the two sides.

Imran Khan, Prime Minister of Pakistan also received Eng. Khalid bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of OCCI, and his accompanying delegation.

The meeting explored aspects of economic and investment cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and Pakistan, as well as augmenting investments between the two countries.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan inducted members of his government, attending the meeting, to limit difficulties facing businessmen from the two countries. He added that this step would help setting up joint ventures particularly in Gwadar, in addition to establishing a direct maritime route between Oman ports and Gwadar port.

Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, received Eng. Khalid bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) and the business delegation currently visiting Pakistan.

President Dr. Arif Alvi of Pakistan with Eng. Khalid bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), and the business delegation currently in Islamabad on Thursday.

Economy Minister in the UAE, Dr. Sultan Al Jaber, addressed the Omani delegation on Friday.

The meeting explored boosting economic and investment cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and Pakistan and attracting investment through the two countries’ embassies.

It also discussed how the Pakistani investors could benefit from investment opportunities at sectors targeted by Oman Vision 2040. — OMAN

NIZWA: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, the Supreme Commander, on Thursday conferred medals of Royal Commendation, Excellent Service and Proficiency on a number of senior officers of the Royal Oman Police (ROP).


Crowds take to streets in Sudan to protest against military rule

Israel plans more settler housing in E Jerusalem

Biden rips Trump’s ‘lies’ on Capitol riot anniversary

Phillepines bans child marriage

In brief

ATHENS

2021 SAW FEWER MIGRANTs’ ARRIVAL

The number of refugees and migrants arriving in Greece’s East Aegean islands in 2021 hit its lowest level since the start of the refugee crisis in the Aegean some nine years ago. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) on Thursday, 4,704 migrants and refugees from Turkey to the Greek islands last year. This compares to 9,734 the year before and just under 16,080 in 2019. At the height of the refugee crisis in 2015, 850,723 people crossed.

The Greek coastguard has been controlling the sea border with Turkey very strictly since 2019. Human rights organizations complain that there are illegal pushbacks to Turkey.

ENVOYS SCUFELL AT AFGHAN EMBASSY

Police were called to the Afghan Embassy in Rome this week after a Tablet Afghan diplomat claiming ties to the Taliban opened fire inside the embassy, the mission said. Journalists said they were being told to stay clear of the envoy, who was armed.

PARIS

NEW NUCLEAR TREATIES FROM 2015

New nuclear power plants planned in France as part of France’s push to cut CO2 emissions are likely to start producing electricity in 2017-2018, the government’s nuclear environment minister said on Thursday. President Emmanuel Macron announced the new reactor farms in November, saying the auto- maize technology was crucial for France’s future and globally to curb global warming and France’s goal to reduce its dependence on imported oil and natural gas. The president has said the so-called EPRs, next-generation versions of the European Pressurized Reactors developed by the state-owned AREVA, deputy minister of sustainable development and lawmakers in the Senate.

KHARTOUM: Crowds thronged the streets of Sudan’s capital Khartoum on Thursday in the first of several anti-military rallies planned this month, and security forces fired tear gas to disperse the protests, footage posted on social media showed.

Mobile phone and Internet services were largely cut ahead of the demonstrations, as on previous protest days, and some bridge between Khartoum and its sister cities of Bahari and Omdurman were also closed.

Protesters had said they would try to reach Khartoum's presidential palace as they try to keep up pressure on the military, which bailed a power-sharing arrangement negotiated after the 2019 overthrow of Omar al-Bashir when it staged a coup last year.

"We will occupy the streets once more, leading for the tyrant's palace, reuniting military rule, and adhere to peacefulness, our strongest weapon," said a statement from resistance committees organizing protests from Bahari.

Unverified videos and posts posted by activists and civilian groups on social media showed security forces firing heavy volleys of tear gas in the capital. They also showed rallies in other cities across Sudan.

Despite the military promising to allow peaceful protests, crackdowns on demonstrations since the coup have left at least 57 people dead and many more injured, according to monitors and state media.

Calls and mobile Internet services were disrupted from late morning, journalists and Internet blockade observers NetBlocks said.

Demonstrations also took place in other cities, including in the eastern Red Sea city of Port Sudan, as well as in Atbara in the north and Wad Madani in the south, witnesses said. "The authority is that of the people," protesters chanted in Wad Madani, as they demanded soldiers "go back to the barracks." In Atbara, protesters called on Orbam "to hand over the country's keys and leave."

NetBlocks said that "unilateral action to appease a new prime minister and cabinet would undermine those institutions' credibility and risks plunging the nation into civil conflict."

The Western statement added that "unilateral action to appease a new prime minister and cabinet would undermine those institutions' credibility and risks plunging the nation into civil conflict."

-- Reuters

Washington: President Biden on Thursday scolded Donald Trump’s ‘lies’ and attempts to overturn his 2020 election defeat, vowing on the first anniversary of the January 6 Capitol riot it would let no one put a “dagger at the throat of democracy.”

In a dark, powerful address, Biden called out Trump’s effort to cheat and blunted the mob of the Republican supporters who stormed the Capitol in an attempt to prevent certification of the election result.

"This was an armed insurrection," Biden said in his speech from Statuary Hall inside the Capitol. "For the first time in our history, a president not just lost an election. He tried to prevent the peaceful transfer of power," Biden said. “They came here in rage,” Biden said, and “hold a dagger at the throat of democracy.”

"We cannot allow ourselves to be that kind of nation," Biden said. "As we go to be a nation where we allow partisan election officials to overturn the legally expressed will of the people, the veto democratic," the veteran Democrat continued. "We cannot allow ourselves to be that kind of nation.

Although Biden did not mention Trump’s name, he made clear who was being referred to when he said he was speaking to the nation on "the leader of a movement that is rotten to the core, and has no place in our politics.”

In a statement issued immediately after Biden’s speech, Trump’s lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, and the Democrat of seeking to “further divide America.”

"This political theatre is all just a distraction for the fact Biden has completed and totally failed," Trump said, -- AFP

Israel plans more settler housing in E Jerusalem

TEL AVIV: Israel is pushing ahead with the construction of more settler housing in East Jerusalem, in agreement with the human rights organisation Peace Now.

The relevant planning committee of the municipality has approved plans for 3,517 new housing units, a spokeswoman for the organisation confirmed on Thursday.

"All of these plans are bad news for the stability of Jerusalem and for the chances of peace,” Peace Now wrote on its website.

Some of the planned housing units, however, are particularly problematic because they will make continuity between Arab neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem and Bethlehem impossible.

Israel’s settlement policy is highly controversial. At the end of 2016, the UN Security Council called on Israel to implement a complete settlement freeze in the occupied Palestinian territories, including annexed East Jerusalem.

Israel considered the West Bank and East Jerusalem, among other territories, in 1967. Today, more than 500,000 Jewish settlers live there.

The Palestinians, on the other hand, want the territories for an independent state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital.

In the West Bank as well as in the Arab-dominated eastern part of Jerusalem, there had been an increase in attacks by Palestinians recently.

A Palestinian man killed himself in an Israeli raid in the area of the Palestinian city of Nablus on Thursday. Pawncast said: "Are we going to be a nation that accepts political violence as a norm?"

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"This political theatre is all just a distraction for the fact Biden has completed and totally failed," Trump said, -- AFP

State Department spokesperson Ned Price said Thursday that the United States has "engaged and a web of lies about the 2020 election," Biden said. "He values power over principle.

During the assault on Congress, Trump was “setting in the prayer asking room of the Oval Office in the White House, all watching on television and demanding that I call the election, Price said, his anger clear. "He’s a defeated former president.

In a statement issued immediately after Biden’s speech, Trump’s lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, and the Democrat of seeking to “further divide America.”

"This political theatre is all just a distraction for the fact Biden has completed and totally failed," Trump said, -- AFP

**Russia sends troops to Kazakhstan to quell unrest**

**NEW DELHI**

Election rallies were cancelled as Omicron surges

Election rallies were cancelled in India's heartland on Thursday as hours of flurries forced the cancellation of over 100 domestic flights and the weather agency issued the city's first heavy snow warning in four years. — Reuters

Snow blanketed Tokyo on Thursday as hours of flurries forced the cancellation of over 100 domestic flights and the weather agency issued the city’s first heavy snow warning in four years. — Reuters

Tokyo often sees snow once or twice a winter, but substantial accumulations are rare. Thursday’s fall was brought about by a combination of a low pressure system and temperatures that have chilled the city for well over a week. The snow began falling around noon and by 3:00 pm local time (0600 GMT), some 5 cm had accumulated, while temperatures hovered just below 0 degrees Celsius (32 F). The snow continued to fall into the evening, with predictions of at least 8 cm in Tokyo. — Reuters

Snow blankets Tokyo

**MANILA**

**President threatens unvaccinated with arrest**

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said on Thursday people who have not taken Covid-19 shots will be arrested if they disobey stay-at-home orders as infections hit a three-month high.

“If he refuses, if he goes out of his house and goes around the community, he can be restraught. If he refuses, the captain is empowered now to arrest recalcitrant persons,” Duterte said.

Daily coronavirus infections in the Philippines hit the highest since September 26 at 17,220 cases on Thursday, the health ministry said, including those caused by the Omicron variant of Covid-19.

Police say they have killed dozens of rioters in Almaty

**JAKARTA**

**85% of population found to have antibodies**

More than 85 per cent of Indonesia’s population has antibodies against Covid-19, a government-commissioned survey showed, but epidemiologists warned it was not clear whether this immunity could help contain a fresh wave of coronavirus infections.

The survey found Indonesians had developed antibodies from a combination of Covid-19 infections and vaccinations. Pandu Riono, an epidemiologist involved in the survey and its ability to operate in the winter, KCNA added.

“The successive successes in the test launches in the hypersonic missile sector have strategic significance in that they hasten a task for modernising the country’s security by force.”

Kazakhstan authorities’ “counter-terrorist operation” and called the upper house’s foreign-inspired attempt to undermine the country’s security by force.

The secretariat of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation said advanced units of Russian paratroopers were in the country and had “already begun to fulfil their assigned tasks.” Troops being sent included units from Belarus, Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as well as Russia, the secretariat said. — Reuters

**SEOUL:** North Korea fired a “hypersonic missile” this week, that successfully hit a target, state news agency KCNA reported on Thursday, in a sudden such test as the country pursues new military capabilities amid stalled denuclearisation talks.

The launch on Wednesday was the first by North Korea since October and was detected by several militaries in the region, drawing criticism from governments in the United States, South Korea, and Japan.

North Korea first tested a hypersonic missile in September, joining a race headed by major military powers to deploy the advanced weapons system.

Hypersonic weapons usually fly towards targets at lower altitudes than ballistic missiles and can achieve more than five times the speed of sound — or about 6,200 km per hour.

Despite their name, analysts say the main feature of hypersonic weapons is not speed — which can sometimes be matched or exceeded by traditional ballistic missile warheads — but their manoeuvrability.

In Wednesday’s test, the “hypersonic gliding warhead” detached from its rocket booster and maneuvered 120 km laterally before it “precisely hit” a target 700 km away, KCNA reported.

“The missile demonstrated its ability to combine ‘multi-step glide jump flight and strong lateral manoeuvring,’” KCNA said. The test also confirmed components such as flight control and its ability to operate in the winter, KCNA added.

“The successive successes in the test launches in the hypersonic missile sector have strategic significance in that they hasten a task for modernising the country’s security by force.”

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Isolation & innovation: two years of pandemic

PARIS: From a litany of lockdowns to mandatory mask-wear- ing and Covid passes to access entertainment and sporting venues, the pandemic has led to sweeping restrictions on civil liberties in some of the world’s oldest democracies.

Among Western countries, European nations particularly have been quick to crisp basic freedoms in the name of fighting the virus.

French President Emmanuel Macron caused a furor this week by saying he wanted to “piss off” those who refuse to get vaccinated by “limiting as much as possible their access to activities in social life.”

The remarks from the leader of a country that sees itself as a global beacon of liberty underscore the extent to which the pandemic has changed national priorities.

The United States has also taken aggressive steps, including closing its borders to most of the world for 20 months and making vaccinations mandatory for all federal employees and staff of big companies.

The Berlin-based rights watch- dog Civil Liberties Union for Euro- pean warrant in a report last year that measures targeting the unvac- cinated could “exacerbate existing inequalities”.

“They can create a two-tier society where some people may enjoy an extensive set of freedoms and rights while others are exclude- ed,” the report said.

PERSECUTION OR PROTECTION?

At the start of the pandemic, governments used sweeping lockdowns and curfews to try to cen- tralize the virus. But in the past year, many countries began relaxing their strategies, rolling out digital pases allowing people to show they are vaccinated.

Faced with the Omni vari- ant, some governments, notably Austria and the Netherlands, re- verted to one-size-fits-all tactics and ordered people back indoors during the end-of-year celebra- tions.

But worldwide, many coun- tries are now turning the screws on citizens who are refusing to be jabbed. Austria kept the vaccinat- ed confined to their homes last month after lifting a partial lock- down. In February, the country will be the first in Europe to make vaccines compulsory for most travel.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson says his country also needs to have a “national conver- sation” about mandatory vaccina- tion to stamp basic freedoms in the name of fighting the virus. – AFP

Countries have been quick to stamp basic freedoms in the name of fighting the virus. – AFP

The French government mean- while has proposed to follow Ger- many’s lead by barring the unvaccinated from restaurants, cinemas and leisure facilities.

While public acceptance of Covid restrictions was high at the outset of the crisis, pandemic fa-ilies are finding growing resistance to new curbs.

The unvaccinated complain of discrimination, with some going as far as to compare their treat- ment to the persecution of Euro- pean Jews during World War II.

And from the Netherlands to Austria, Germany, Belgium and France, thousands of people have taken to the streets — sometimes clashing with police — to protest Covid rules and health passes.

Liberatarian zealots

The grievances are being ex- pressed by parties on the far right, and those opposed to in- tergovernmental policies.

In Germany, the pro-business Free Democrats made strong gains in September’s general elec- tions after campaigning against strict lockdowns.

In France, which will hold presidential elections in April, left- right candidates Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour have come out swaying against Macron’s pro- posed vaccine pass.

“Conscouions restrictions are necessary,” but concerns about how they are framed and imposed are not and should not be the pres- cerve of libertarian zealots and Covid deniers,” British Guard- ian newspaper warned in March 2021.

For the most part, Europe has avoided uphold by maintain- ing a balance between the need to protect public health and defend civil liberties. – AFP
Sudan transition needs reset

NAFISA ELTAHER AND AIDAN LEWIS

The recognition of Sudan’s prime minister puts the military firmly back in control of the country but facing a population angry that its hopes for democratic rule have been set back yet again.

Unless a new course towards a transition and credible elections can be charted, more instability within and beyond Sudanese borders is likely, analysts and diplomats say.

After his government was dissolved in a coup in October, Abdalla Hamdok had reiterated a bid to salvage a transitional power-sharing arrangement between the military and civilians that was struck following Omar al Bashir’s overthrow in a 2019 uprising. Bashir had ruled Sudan for three decades.

Hamdok departs leaving the country cut off from international economic support, floundering by frequent anti-military protests, and threatened by sovereign violence and displacement in the western region of Darfur.

His efforts towards a transition fell apart due to the withdrawal of promised political parties from the political parties, and his inability to halt violence against protesters, and a standoff in talks before and after Hamdok’s return.

Most of the fractured civil-civil coalition that agreed to share power based on a 2019 constitutional declaration says publicly that it will not negotiate with the military.

“They only thing we have to say to them is go back to your barracks,” said a member of a local resistance committee in Khartoum.

That could leave the military to appoint loyalists to a new administration, building on nominations of Bashir-era veterans that it made after its takeover and that Hamdok partially rolled back.

“The military will name a government unless the civilians get together and meet with them,” said the modulator, speaking on condition of anonymity. “I think the real problem will be to sit together, and go back to the constitutional declaration, and see how they can adjust it.”

The military said after the coup that it wanted elections in 2023, but says it is committed to a transition towards democracy.

But the takeover deepened distrust of the military among civilian parties, while the protest movement led by the resistance committees has always opposed any political role for the army.

A crackdown on nationwide rallies against the coup that has left nearly 60 dead and protesters arrested has sharpened anger. Intelligence services have been given restored powers.

Western powers, which still hold some leverage because of several billion dollars of outstanding payments rescued after the coup, are trying to steer the military away from pressing ahead on its own.

They served immediate diplomatic calls on Tuesday, warning they would not support any government without the involvement of a broad range of civil groups. A unilateral approach risked plunging Sudan into renewed conflict, they said — Reuters

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Afro Voice

Copy: Neil MacGregor

Headline: Sudan transition needs reset

Body-monitoring tech comes with concerns

JULIE JAMMOT

A ring shimmered on display at the Consumer Electronics Show, but this is no mere piece of jewelry — It’s packed with sensors capable of detecting body temperature, respiration and much more.

Sensors at the annual gadget extravaganza in Las Vegas technology-enhanced accessories designed to track looking on the inside while scrutinising what is happening on the inside of wearers.

“We want to democratise personal health,” said Arnaud Kosman, founder of the French startup that created the Circular Ring.

While that goal was shared by an array of exhibitors, some experts worried a trend of ceaselessly tracking steps, time sitting, heart rate and more could bring risks of stress and addiction.

Circular Ring, founded by an entrepreneur of the world clothes a daily “energy score” based on the intensity of their activity, factoring in time spent running, body temperature, blood oxygen levels and other data, according to Kosman.

“After night & continuous, we track the ring to fall asleep, how long it takes you to fall asleep, if you are aligned with your circadian rhythm, etc,” he said of the ring, which will cost less than $300 (€300) when it hits the market later this year.

“And in the morning it vibrates to wake you up at the right time.”

A mobile application then collects this data to make personal lifestyle recommendations for improving health based on data gathered, according to the founder.

Despite the growing desire to be “wearable” CES organisers forecast that more than $14 billion will be spent this year in a category that includes fitness tech, health-monitoring devices, fitness activity trackers, connected exercise equipment and smartphone accessories.

That figure is more than double what was spent in the category in 2018.

Growth has been driven by smart watches such as those made by popular brands Apple and Samsung, as we see a raft of linked sports gear — which boomed during the pandemic — and personal tracking devices — strongly supported by governments around the world.

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**KEY OBJECTIVE:** The 2022 budget reflects all government measures, endorsed by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, that are aimed at achieving fiscal sustainability, improving the economic sector diversification.

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The focus is to maintain spending on essentials like education, healthcare, housing and social services. In addition, the 2022 budget aims to improve the economic environment and expand public-private partnership (PPP) projects.

**KEY FACTS:**

### OIL AND GAS REVENUES

- Oil and gas revenues are budgeted at RO 7.2 billion, representing an 8.4-per cent increase compared to the 2021 budget of RO 6.6 billion. However, gas revenues are budgeted at RO 2.7 million — a 5-per cent increase over the 2021 preliminary results of RO 2.6 billion. Oil revenues are declining as the 2022 budget assumes an oil price of $50/bbl which is less than the average price of $61/bbl in 2021. This reflects a precautionary position taken in the 2022 budget, as the oil prices are uncertain due to the Covid-19 pandemic and other factors. While the global economy and demand recover, energy markets are still experiencing fluctuations due to the latest variant of the Covid-19 pandemic. Omanzone.

### NON-OIL AND GAS REVENUES

- Non-oil and gas revenues are budgeted at RO 3.3 billion — representing an increase of 3.4-per cent compared to the 2021 budget of RO 3.2 billion, and a 21-per cent increase compared to the revenue as per 2021 preliminary results of RO 2.7 billion. The significant increase in non-oil and gas revenues reflects the government’s objective of reducing its dependence on oil revenues. The 2022 budget estimates VAT and Excise Tax revenues will increase by 29.5 per cent in 2022 to RO 555 million compared with the budgeted figures of RO 415 million in 2021. The corporate income tax revenues are also estimated to increase by 16 per cent to RO 465 million in 2022, when compared with the 2021 budget.

### CRUISE REVENUES

- Off-season cruise revenues will be utilised to reduce the debt and repay loans.

### GOVERNMENT TOURISM SPENDING

- The 2022 budget aims to improve the economic environment, with the government seeking to attract more investment, achieve fiscal sustainability, and reduce public spending on government units to achieve fiscal sustainability, says multinational professional services firm KPMG Oman.

### BUSINESS REPORTER

**MUSCAT JAN 4**

The 2022 Oman Budget is prepared in accordance with the objectives of the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2025). This represents the first plan of Oman Vision 2040, which aims at achieving fiscal sustainability while maintaining a strong economic sector diversification.

The 2022 budget reflects all government measures, endorsed by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, that are aimed at achieving fiscal sustainability, improving the economic sector diversification. The focus is to maintain spending on essentials like education, healthcare, housing and social services. In addition, the 2022 budget aims to improve the economic environment and expand public-private partnership (PPP) projects.

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Oman International Hospital celebrates official launch

Oman International Hospital (OIH), the nation’s newest multi-specialty hospital that soft-opened in May 2021, was officially launched on Thursday under the auspices of Dr. Ahmed bin Mohammed Al Saaidi, Minister of Health in the presence of Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Shurhidi, Executive President of Oman International Hospital Group Holding, De Mohammed bin Saif Al Hosni, Under-Secretary of Ministry of Health, Asila bin Saim Al Samsaryti, Under-Secretary of Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Investment Promotion, His Highness Baniya Al Said, Shkaitun Amal bin Suhail Bahwan, Chairperson of Al Afa Healthcare Development and Investment Company and Vice-Chairperson of Suhail Bahwan Group Holding, several ambassadours and distinguished guests.

Oman International Hospital is a prime example of public-private partnership, a major milestone as the pandemic has emphasized the need for strong healthcare systems and the vital role they play in ensuring the stability and future of the country. This project is a prime example of a public-private partnership, and it also represents a landmark in the Oman healthcare sector.

The hospital is managed by IdealMed GHS, Portugal, who have decades of experience in managing hospitals across the globe. Dr. José Alexandre Cunha, Board Member of Oman International Hospital and Chairman of IGHS Group said, “We are very proud to join hands with Suhail Bahwan Group Holding and Oman Brunei Investment Company to welcome this esteemed healthcare entity to Oman and look forward to the benefits this world-class health facility will bring to the health sector in the Sultanate of Oman now and in the future.”

Chairperson of Suhail Bahwan Investment Company and IdealMed GHS, Portugal, Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Executive President of Oman International Hospital Group Holding, commented, “Oman International Hospital project is a major milestone in the development of the sector in the Sultanate of Oman in order to contribute to the achievement of visions and objectives of our contemporary renaissance under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Hashem bin Talal. With the hospital’s official launch, the Sultanate of Oman now has more than just a hospital — a fully-featured Healthcare destination offering specialised treatments and services at affordable rates. Suhail Bahwan Group, as a shareholder, is very proud to be a part of it.”

The springing 42,000 Sq mtr hospital is equipped with state-of-the-art equipment and cutting-edge technological solutions from across the world and is to home to five Excellence Centers, a hybrid operation theatre and several other cutting-edge features and facilities. The expert doctors, nurses and para-medical staff of the hospital are drawn from the Sultanate of Oman and across the globe and are highly experienced. Strategically located in the centre of Muscat’s Al Ghubra area, just across the road from the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Oman International Hospital is easily accessible from any part of the city.

Fahal al Bakadi, Vice Chairman, Board-member of Al Afa Healthcare Development and Investment Company and CEO of Oman Brunei Investment, said, “Vision 2040 highlights the importance of the private sector’s role in the economic and the potential opportunities for the public and private sectors to work together to meet the developmental targets and needs of the country. This project is a prime example of a public-private partnership, and it also represents a landmark in the Oman healthcare sector.”

PARIS: World food prices jumped 26 per cent in 2021 to their highest level in a decade and hopes for a return to more stable market conditions this year are slim, the UN’s food agency said on Thursday.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) food price index, which tracks the most globally traded food commodities, averaged 125 points in 2021, the highest since 131.9 in 2011.

The monthly index eased slightly from a record high in December but had climbed for the previous four months in a row, reflecting harvest setbacks and strong demand over the past year.

Higher food prices have contributed to a broader surge in inflation as economies recover from the coronavirus crisis and the FAO has warned that the higher costs are putting poorer populations at risk in countries reliant on imports.

In its latest update, the food agency was cautious about whether price pressures might subside this year.

“While normally high prices are a give-way to increased production, the high cost of inputs, ongoing global pandemic and even more uncertain climatic conditions leave little room for optimism about a return to more stable market conditions even in 2022,” FAO senior economist Abdolreza Abbassian said in a statement. — Reuters

PARIS: French regulators have hit Google and Facebook with 210 million euros (£237 million) in fines over their use of ‘cookies’, the data protection watchdogs said on Thursday. US Internet companies have faced scrutiny in Europe, where they have faced strict rules that oblige them to seek the direct consent of users before installing cookies on their computers.

The Guardian reported earlier Thursday that it had given Internet companies until April 2022 to adapt to the stricter rules that oblige them to seek the direct consent of users before installing cookies on their computers.

It quoted a privacy expert as saying: “It’s a major milestone as the pandemic has emphasized the need for strong healthcare systems and the vital role they play in ensuring the stability and future of the country. This project is a prime example of a public-private partnership, and it also represents a landmark in the Oman healthcare sector.”

The hospital is managed by IdealMed GHS, Portugal, who have decades of experience in managing hospitals across the globe. Dr. José Alexandre Cunha, Board Member of Oman International Hospital and Chairman of IGHS Group said, “We are very proud to join hands with Suhail Bahwan Group Holding and Oman Brunei Investment Company. This project is to launch a major milestone as the pandemic has emphasized the need for strong healthcare systems and the vital role they play in ensuring the stability and future of the country. This project is a prime example of a public-private partnership, and it also represents a landmark in the Oman healthcare sector.”

LONDON: Oil prices rose sharply on Thursday, extending a rally from the previous session, on escalating upset in Opec+ producer Oman and supply outages in Libya.

Global benchmark Brent crude futures rose $1.53, or 1.7 per cent, to $82.13 a barrel by 1224 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures gained $1.55, or 2 per cent, to $79.40. Both contracts were trading at their highest since late November.

Brent’s six-month backwardation stood at about $8.14 a barrel, its widest since late November. Backwardation is a market structure where current prices trade at a premium to future prices and is usually a sign of a bullish market.

Russia sent paratroopers into Kazakhstan on Thursday to help quell a countrywide uprising after deadly violence erupted after days of popular protests against decrees that sparked nationwide protests.

“The political situation in Kazakhstan is becoming increasingly tense,” Communist said. “And this is a country that is currently producing 1.6 million barrels of oil per day.”

There were no indications that oil production has been affected so far. Libyan oil output is at 728,000 bpd, the National Oil Corp said on Thursday, down from a high of more than 1.3 million bpd last year owing to maintenance and oilfield shutdowns.

Prices rallied despite a surge in US fuel stocks last week. US crude stocksed fell last week while gasoline inventories surged by more than 10 million barrels, the biggest weekly build since April 2020, as supplies backed up at refineries because of reduced fuel demand.

Trading on oil, meanwhile, was minutes from a US Federal Reserve meeting that showed policymakers could raise interest rates more quickly than markets previously expected. — Reuters

France hits Google, Facebook with huge fines over ‘cookies’

Oil extends rally on Kazakhstan unrest and Libyan output

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Trading on oil, meanwhile, was minutes from a US Federal Reserve meeting that showed policymakers could raise interest rates more quickly than markets previously expected. — Reuters
MELBOURNE: World number one tennis player Novak Djokovic was denied entry into Australia on Thursday after a storm of protest about a decision to grant him a medical exemption from Covid-19 vaccination requirements to play in the Australian Open.

The tennis star, banned in Australia after his lawyers launched an appeal seeking to overturn the federal government decision. A court agreed not to deport him before a full hearing scheduled for Monday, leaving the Serbian champion holed up in a quarantine hotel in Melbourne for at least the next 72 hours.

The saga, fuelled by domestic political point-scoring about the country’s handling of a record surge in new Covid-19 infections, has led to an international row, with Serbian president denouncing his nation’s most celebrated sportsman was being harassed.

“There are no special cases, rules are rules,” Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said at a televised news briefing. “We will continue to make the right decisions when it comes to containing Australian borders in relation to this pandemic.”

Spanish champion Rafael Nadal told reporters in Melbourne that he felt sorry for his rival, but “at the same time, he knows the conditions since a lot of months ago. He makes his own decision.”

Djokovic, who has consistently refused to disclose his vaccination status while publicly criticizing mandatory vaccines, kicked off the year he won on Instagram on Tuesday he had received a medical exemption to pursue a record-breaking 21st Grand Slam win at the Open starting January 17.

The announcement prompted an outcry in Australia, particularly in the tournament host city of Melbourne, which has endured the world’s longest cumulative lockdown to ward off the coronavirus.

“NOT HUMAN AND NOT FAIR”

The move by the Australian government to block Djokovic’s entry has caused ructions between Canberra and Belgrade.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said on Twitter he had spoken with Djokovic and accused the Australian government of harassment. “We’re doing all we can. This persecution is unfair. Starting with the Australian prime minister,” he later told Serbian media. “They are acting as if the same set of rules apply to everyone, but they’re not. In others on the same grounds that Novak had applied to.”

Morrison said he was aware that “representations have been made” by the Serbian embassy in Canberra and denied the accusations of harassment. Djokovic’s father told media in Serbia that his son was ushered into an isolation room under police guard when he touched down at Melbourne’s Tullamarine Airport at about 11:30 pm (12:30 GMT) on Wednesday after a 14-hour flight from Dubai.

His family later held an emotional news conference at Djoko’s restaurant in central Belgrade, with his nine previous Australian Open trophies on display.

“They are keeping him as a prisoner, that’s not human and it’s not fair.”

There was also support on the streets of the Serbian capital.

“He is the best in the history of that sport and they cannot break him in any other way but this one. But they are not going to break him,” said Belgrade resident Zdravko Tadic.

COURT BATTLE

At a hearing in the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia on Thursday evening, lawyers for Djokovic and the government agreed the player could remain in the country until at least Monday.

Nick Wood, a lawyer for Djokovic, earlier told Judge Anthony Kelly that Tennis Australia had advised they needed to know about his participation in the tournament by Tuesday.

In response, Kelly, who had asked when Djokovic was scheduled to play his first match, said: “If I can say with the respect neces- sary, the ball won’t be wiggling the dog here.” — Reuters

There are no special cases, rules are rules. We will continue to make the right decisions when it comes to securing Australian borders in relation to this pandemic

SCOTT MORRISON
Australian Prime Minister

Australian Open
Nine-time winner and reigning champion

NOVAK DJOKOVIC
SERBIA
PROFESSIONAL SINCE 2003

ATP RANKING
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TITLES
20
GRAND SLAM TITLES
86
PRIZE MONEY
$5 million

A van, presumably holding tennis player Novak Djokovic, is surrounded by workers in personal protective equipment in a hotel carpark in Melbourne. — Reuters

Photo: Oscar Del Pizzo

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A van, presumably holding tennis player Novak Djokovic, is surrounded by workers in personal protective equipment in a hotel carpark in Melbourne. — Reuters

Photo: Oscar Del Pizzo
Man Utd names inside Richard Arnold as CEO

Manchester: Manchester United on Thursday promoted insider Richard Arnold to the role of chief executive officer, effectively replacing executing vice-chairman Ed Woodward as the soccer club’s boss.

The elevation will make Arnold arguably one of the most powerful figures in European football. He will have his hands full at a time when the American Glazer family’s leadership of the club is subject to close scrutiny and fans are hoping for it to return to the very top ranks.

Arnold, 51, who has been managing director for over eight years, had been seen as a favourite to take over the reins of the English club after Woodward announced in April he would be stepping down.

Woodward, who has been with the club since the 2005 takeover by Glazers, was one of the leading figures in the breakaway European Super League project that angered fans and regulators.

“I would like to thank Ed for his terrific work on behalf of Manchester United during his nine years as vice-chairman and 16 years with the club,” Executive Co-Chairman Joel Glazer said in a statement, without mentioning whether Woodward would continue his ties with the club in some capacity.

Woodward will depart on February 1 when Arnold takes over as CEO, a role that has been vacant since David Gill’s highly successful tenure ended in 2013.

Woodward, 50, and Arnold, an accountant by training, have been credited with driving the club’s commercial success and overseeing the signing of several lucrative sponsorship contracts.

United won their last Premier League title in 2013 in longtime manager Alex Ferguson’s last season in charge, and since then the club has struggled for trophies on the pitch, with a number of high-profile coaches and expensive players failing to live up to expectations.

The club, which brought back Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo in 2021, has had another difficult season so far, currently in seventh place in the Premier League, a record that cost former manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer his job.

German Ralf Rangnick was appointed as United’s interim manager in December, and one of Arnold’s first major decisions will be on recruiting a permanent manager in the summer.

— Reuters

Darsait sets up title showdown with Ruwi Rangers

MUSCAT: Star all-rounder Khurban Ali found the batting form with a regal 86 off 40 to help Darsait Titans scalp Ghubrah Giants by 8 wickets in a D20 Super 4 clash at Oman Cricket Turf 1 in Al Amerat on Wednesday.

Darsait faces table-topper Ruwi Rangers in the final.

Ghubrah failed to post any runs on the board, managing to reach only 152 for 9 which Darsait surpassed in only 11.1 overs, scoring 135 for 3 thanks to Khurban’s top knock.

Brief Scores (D20): Ghubrah Giants 152 for 9 in 20 overs (Mubarak Yaar 56, Usman Qurum 47, Aisha 26, Gustav Burger 23), Darsait Titans 157 for 3 (Musalim Qurum 42, Khurban Ali 86, Usman Qurum 47) by 8 wickets.

KHUBR STAR IN ANOTHER RUWI WIN

In the day’s second match, Ruwi Rangers rode on Mohammad Naeem Khubri’s 13-ball 35 not out to beat Qurum Thunders by 4 wickets and seal Qurum’s spot to reach the final.

Fantastic blits by Ayaan Khan (59 off 38) and Jundt Singh (56 off 41) were the highlights of Qurum’s 156/5 in 20 overs. Muhammad Naeem grabbed 2 for 33.

Rusts were in a spot of bother at 117 for 4 in 16 overs, requiring 49 in four overs but Khubri’s arrival changed the course of the game as he sealed a sensational win with a superb six off Manie Aloras with three balls to spare in the final over. Oman all-rounder Sandeep Goud was the pick of Qurum bowlers, taking 4 for 30.

Brief Scores (D20): Qurum Thunders 156 for 5 in 20 overs (Ayan Khan 59, Ak Muneer 48, Jundt Singh 42, Gustav Burger 23), Ruwi Rangers 167 for 6 in 19.1 overs (Manie Aloras 40, Gustav Burger 33, Mohammad Naeem 25), Qurum Thunders 156 for 5 (Sandeep Goud 4-30 by 4 wickets).
**Swiatek cruises past Fernandez, to face Azarenka in Adelaide**

**ADELAIDE:** Defending champion Iga Swiatek made short work of US Open runner-up Leylah Fernandez in a dominant 6-1, 6-2 win at the Adelaide International on Thursday to set up a quarterfinal against two-time Grand Slam winner Victoria Azarenka.

Swiatek, the 2020 Roland Garros winner, took control of the match from 1-1 in the first set and capitalized on Fernandez’s mistake serve to wrap up the victory in 75 minutes at the Australian Open warm-up event.

The Pole hit 17 winners against her 19-year-old opponent and did not face a break point as she extended her winning streak in Adelaide to seven matches.

“I was playing against a younger girl, which is pretty new for me,” Swiatek, 21, said. “She’s pretty talented and she’s a Grand Slam finalist, so I knew it was going to be tricky.”

“I felt really confident and I’m pretty happy that I could finish it really quickly and I didn’t let go of focus.”

Swiatek, who defeated Belinda Bencic to win last year’s title, will face Azarenka in the next round after the former world number one secured a 6-3, 6-2 victory over Australian wildcard Priscilla Hon at Memorial Drive.

Hon had stunned Petra Kvitova in the first round on Monday and threatened a breakthrough in the second set against Swiatek but the Belarusian wrapped up the win in just under 90 minutes.

Swiatek said she was looking forward to her match against Azarenka, who won her first Grand Slam title at Montreal Park.

“I love playing such an experienced player because it’s always a challenge,” Swiatek said of the 32-year-old.

“I have a different mindset when I play against players like that because I watched them when I was younger. It shows me my progress, but also I have huge amount of respect for them.”

Sixth seed Sofia Kenin saved three match points to beat local favourite Aifa Tomkancin 3-6, 6-3 (6-3) in two hours and 30 minutes in a late-night contest, setting up a quarter-final meeting with world number one Ash Barty.

Japanese Misaki Doi beat Russian Anastasia Gasanova 7-5 (4-3) 6-3 and will face Slovenian Kaja Juvan in the last eight.

In the men’s ATP 250 event, top seed Gael Monfils of France stormed to a 6-2, 6-1 win over Argentine Juan Manuel Cerundolo, wrapping up the match in only 55 minutes. He will face Tommy Paul in the quarter-final.

Second seed Karen Khachanov beat American Steve Johnson 6-4, 4-6, 6-2.

The Russian, who struck 16 aces in his victory, will next face Belarusian qualifier Egor Gerasimov.

— Reuters

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**Medvedev steers Russia into ATP Cup semifinal against Canada**

SYDNEY: World number two Daniil Medvedev battled past seventh-ranked Matteo Berrettini then returned for a crunch doubles rubber to help keep defending champions Russia on track for another ATP Cup title on Thursday.

The win set them up with a last four clash against Canada after Felix Auger-Aliassime stunned German world number three Alexander Zverev 6-4, 4-6, 6-3.

Medvedev, who is set to be the top seed at this month’s Australian Open with Novak Djokovic facing deportation over a visa issue, was dominant in the first set against Berrettini.

But the gritty big-serving Italian battled back to win a second-set tie-break before the Russian got a crucial break in game three of the third set to carve out 6-2, 6-7 (5-7), 6-4 win.

Russian number two Roman Safinulin earlier lofted 7-6 (8-6), 6-3 to world number 10 Jannik Sinner with the tie forced into a doubles shoot-out.

Medvedev played just five doubles matches in 2021, but has fronted up for those or six in Sydney and partnered with Safinulin again to keep their unbeaten record intact, digging deep to beat Berrettini and Sinner 7-6 (7-3), 4-6, 10-3.

“What we did amazing today was we were in a tough position at one point, and every change, every shot we had to make we tried to discuss it, and it worked,” said Medvedev of the doubles.

“Roman started playing unbelievable and we had some crazy rallies, it was amazing.”

Medvedev and Berrettini met in singles for the first time since the 2021 ATP Cup final, when the Russian ran out a 6-4, 6-2 winner to seal the trophy for his team, and he again had the edge.

Known on tour as “Deep Court Danil”, he took up his customary position near the back wall to return serve, breaking twice in the first set.

The match turned in the third set when Medvedev’s service return aimed him three break points to establish a 2-1 lead.

He held serve for 3-1 and there was no way back for the Italian.

“I made some bad decisions in the second set so I tried to learn from that in the third. I served well throughout the match and that helped me,” added Medvedev, who led the ATP Tour with 63 match wins last year.

**GREAT PLAYERS**

They will meet Canada for a place in the final against either the Roberto Bautista Agut-led Spain or Hubert Hurkacz’s Poland.

Britain had earlier kept their hopes of making the last four alive by toppling the United States 2-1, leaving their fate in the hands of Germany and Canada.

If Germany had won then Britain would have become the last semifinalist, only for Canada to shatter their dreams.

Denis Shapovalov boosted their chances by overcoming Germany’s Jan-Lennard Struff 7-6 (7/5), 4-6, 6-3, dictating with his powerful groundstrokes, to put the pressure on 11th-ranked Auger-Aliassime.

He shouldered the weight for a deserved victory, recovering from squandering four break points at 5-3 in the second set to aggressively bounce back.

“I played a good match, he’s a great player,” Auger-Aliassime said after clicking the first top-five win of his career.

“He beat me a couple of times before so happy I was able to get the job done, especially for the team.” — AFP
LOS ANGELES: Star Brooklyn guard Kyrie Irving scored 22 points in an NBA season debut delayed by his unvaccinated status, helping the Nets rally for a 129-121 victory over the Pacers in Indiana on Wednesday.

Irving's first appearance was just one highlight on a night that featured the Dallas Mavericks' 99-82 triumph over the league-leading Golden State Warriors.

The victory in Dallas set the scene perfectly for a post-game ceremony to retire the jersey No. 41 of Mavericks franchise icon Dirk Nowitzki.

In Indianapolis, all eyes were on Irving, who missed the first 35 games of the season. He played just under 32 minutes, scoring 10 of his 22 points in the fourth quarter to help Brooklyn erase a 19-point third-quarter deficit.

"Oh man, it was amazing," Irving said in an on-court interview.

Irving remains ineligible to play home games in Brooklyn because of New York vaccine mandates. He is also barred from games at Madison Square Garden and in Toronto, and it wasn't until this month that the Nets decided it would be worth having him on court part-time.

"We're going around signing a bunch of 10-day (contract players) when we have a guy who can play for us, so what's the difference between a 10-day and a guy — those are part-time players, too," Nets coach Steve Nash said, calling it an opportunity to "use a resource that we have and that we weren't using."

Irving's return came at an opportune time for the Nets, who had lost their last three games to slip behind the Chicago Bulls for the Eastern Conference lead.

Irving was in the starting lineup but got off to a slow start as Pacers guard Lance Stephenson — playing on a 10-day contract — scored 20 points in the first quarter as the hosts took a 37-22 lead.

But Irving warmed up, and capped an 8-0 run with a jump shot at the third-quarter buzzer that pulled Brooklyn within five points heading into the final frame.

"We just wanted to come out with a resilient attitude and do the right things on both ends of the floor," Irving said, calling the first half "horrible."

"We came out the second half with a resolved attitude," he said.

Kevin Durant led the Nets with 39 points, eight rebounds and seven assists. James Harden added 18 points, six assists and five rebounds.

The first look this season at Brooklyn’s "Big Three" of Irving, Durant and Harden may have been encouraging, but Irving won’t be available for their next two games — when they host the Milwaukee Bucks on Friday and San Antonio Spurs on Sunday.

"I mean, we're in a situation we've been in," Irving said. "But we're going to battle through it and we're going to do everything we can to stay together."

Mavericks honor Nowitzki

The Mavericks' win over the Warriors was the start of an emotional night in Dallas, where Germany's Nowitzki, who led the team to the NBA title in 2011, became the fourth player to have his jersey retired by the club.

Nowitzki played all 21 of his NBA seasons in Dallas, winning a season Most Valuable Player award as well as a Finals MVP.

He's sixth on the NBA's all-time scoring list with 31,560 career points and paved the way for European players such as two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Giannis Antetokounmpo and Dallas' Slovenian star Luka Doncic.

Doncic scored 26 points, and the Mavs won their fourth straight as Stephen Curry and the Golden State Warriors were unable to get their potent offense going. — AFP