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Kuwait, Arab countries ban nine African nations

World races to contain the new COVID variant



JOHANNESBURG: Airport staff assist travelers at various check-in counters while an electronic flight notice board displays some cancelled flights at OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg yesterday, after several countries banned flights from South Africa following the discovery of a new COVID-19 variant Omicron. — AFP

By B Izzak and Agencies

KUWAIT: Kuwait yesterday banned commercial flights with nine African nations over the new COVID-19 variant Omicron but allowed cargo, government spokesman Tareq Al-Mazrem said. The ban begins today and is indefinite. The countries are South Africa, where the new variant was originated, in addition to Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho, Eswatini, Zambia and Malawi.

The Council of Ministers also decided at an extraordinary meeting to ban entry of foreigners from those African countries unless they have spent at least 14 days in a third country. Kuwaiti citizens arriving from those nations must undergo institutional quarantine for seven days with a PCR test done on the day of arrival and a second on the sixth day, Mazrem said. The Council of Ministers also called on citizens to avoid travel out of Kuwait now, unless it is extremely necessary, especially to countries that have reported cases of Omicron.

Fears mounted yesterday that a highly-infectious new coronavirus strain was pushing its way into Europe as the world brought the shutters down to contain the new Omicron variant. Suspected new cases emerged in Germany and the Czech Republic,

while Dutch authorities quarantined 61 passengers from South Africa who tested positive for COVID-19. South Africa complained that it was being "punished" with air travel bans for first detecting the strain, which the World Health Organization has termed a "variant of concern".

Australia and Thailand joined the United States, Brazil, Canada and a host of other countries around the world restricting travel from the region, fearing a major setback to global efforts against the pandemic. Scientists are racing to determine the threat posed by the heavily mutated strain, which is more transmissible than the dominant Delta variant, and whether it can evade existing vaccines.

Anxious travelers thronged Johannesburg international airport, desperate to squeeze onto the last flights to countries that had imposed sudden travel bans. Many had cut back holidays and rushed back from South African safaris and vineyards. "It's ridiculous, we will always be having new variants," British tourist David Good told AFP, passports in hand. "South Africa found it but it's probably all over the world already."

But the virus has already slipped through the net with cases in Europe and Hong Kong and Zionist entity. Germany became the second European

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UAE says 100% of population vaccinated

ABU DHABI: One hundred percent of the United Arab Emirates' population has received at least one dose of a vaccine against COVID-19, the health ministry has said. The announcement late Friday came amid growing global concern over a new COVID variant dubbed Omicron that was first detected by South Africa.

The World Health Organization said the new variant is more infectious than the dominant, highly transmissible Delta strain, and several countries, including the UAE, have restricted travel from a number of south African countries. According to the UAE health ministry, "a total of 21,802,032 doses" of COVID vaccine have been administered in the Gulf Arab nation. "One hundred percent (of the population) have received one dose" while "90.18 percent are fully vaccinated".

The UAE - a federation of seven emirates - is home to around 10 million people, a majority of whom are expats. The energy-rich Arab country was considered as far back as July a leader in terms of population in inoculating people against COVID. In October, the UAE declared it had overcome the coronavirus crisis after recording its lowest number of infections that month. The UAE has so far recorded more than 741,000 cases of COVID-19, including 2,145 deaths. — AFP

Kuwait Speaker urges lawmakers to be bold

MADRID: Speaker of Kuwait's National Assembly Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem has affirmed that criticism of some "erroneous practices in the democratic system and examining it regularly" is not aimed at undermining the governing regime, but rather safeguarding it. Al-Ghanem, addressing the general assembly of the 143rd Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), thanked organizers who have chosen the theme "contemporary challenges in the face of democracies," as a main topic for debates during the international gathering.

The Speaker of the Kuwait parliament has indicated that it is not sufficient to address or adopt democracy with superficial rhetorical discussions.

"The matter warrants in-depth culture and intelligence," he noted, also underscoring other core issues in this respect, namely the practicing, the obstacles, the social, economic and cultural dimensions of the issue. Al-Ghanem called upon his fellow lawmakers to put aside slogans and purported "sanctities" when addressing "this file."

Masking any ruling regime, even in the cases where it has a democratic form, is the number-one hindrance in the face of the approach to renew and remedy its drawbacks, Al-Ghanem

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Kuwait Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem

First 'robotaxis' enter service in Beijing

BEIJING: It looks like a normal car but the white taxi by the kerb has nobody driving it, and communicates with customers digitally to obtain directions and take payment. Beijing this week approved its first autonomous taxis for commercial use, bringing dozens of the so-called "robotaxis" to the streets of the Chinese capital.

The vehicles can only carry two passengers at a time and are confined to the city's southern Yizhuang area. An employee of the taxi firm also sits in the front of the car in case any sudden intervention is needed, but the vehicle drives itself. The rollout is a significant step forward for the driverless ambitions of Chinese tech giant Baidu and start-up Pony.ai, who were given the green light to deploy the cars on Thursday.

But it is expected to be years before the taxis operate fully without human intervention, due to regulations and safety requirements.

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BEIJING: An Apollo Go autonomous taxi is seen on a street in Yizhuang, a town of Daxing District, in the southeast suburbs of Beijing. — AFP

Indian man builds Taj Mahal replica home for his wife

BURHANPUR: A lovestruck and historically minded Indian husband has emulated the world's most famous display of marital devotion by building for his wife a replica of the Taj Mahal. The original "Monument to Love" was constructed on the orders of heartbroken Mughal emperor Shah Jahan

to house the tomb of his favorite wife, Mumtaz, in the 17th century. Anand Prakash Chouksey's beloved remains very much alive, and even helped consult on the project and his version of the marble wonder of the world, around one-third the size of the original. "My wife's only demand was for a meditation room. She's a spiritual woman," the 52-year-old businessman told AFP. "She says the dome creates a different environment and there is a lot of positive energy."

The original Taj Mahal - dubbed a "teardrop on the cheek of time" by writer Rabindranath Tagore - is in Agra south of Delhi, however the new replica is 800 kilometers away in Burhanpur. But the central

Indian city is none other than the place where Mumtaz died while giving birth to her 14th child in June 1632, having accompanied Shah Jahan to quell a local revolt. Mumtaz's body was even initially buried there too, and according to locals Shah Jahan had at first wanted to build the Taj Mahal for her on the banks of the river Tapti. "The soil structure back then was not suitable to build the Taj here that's how it was decided to be built in Agra," Chouksey explained. The city is still home to the dilapidated remains of the palace where the royals lived, including a once-beautiful hammam or bathhouse built by Shah Jahan for his wife to relax in before she died.

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BURHANPUR: School children walk past a replica of the Taj Mahal during their visit at Burhanpur in India's Madhya Pradesh state. — AFP