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Kuwait records highest-ever 2,246 new coronavirus cases

Hong Kong bans flights as Omicron surges around globe



KUWAIT: The health ministry yesterday said that 2,246 people tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, taking Kuwait's total caseload to 423,042. Recoveries went up by 211 to reach 412,485. Health Ministry Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said, noting that recoveries represent 97.5 percent of overall infections. One death from the pandemic yesterday brought the total death toll to 2,469, he told KUNA. Seven COVID cases are in ICU's and 40 patients are in hospital wards, while 8,088 others are being treated at home. As many as 25,470 swab tests were conducted, taking the total to 6,072,961 tests, Dr Sanad added.

Meanwhile, Asian financial hub Hong Kong banned flights from eight nations yesterday as part of strict new virus curbs, with Omicron outbreaks spiraling out of control from Europe to the United States. The new coronavirus variant is spreading rapidly across continents, leaving governments rushing to roll out vaccine boosters and bolster healthcare systems as infection numbers reach new highs.

Britain, the United States, France and Australia have all announced record case numbers in recent days, while China has imposed lockdowns in two cities and rolled out mass testing for millions as it doubles down on its "zero Covid" policy ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics. Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said the city was shuttering bars and gyms and cancelling evening restaurant dining after Omicron was detected in the international business hub.

The restrictions are the latest economic blow to a city that has kept cases low but left residents cut off from the rest of the world with tight border controls. Like mainland China, Hong Kong has maintained some of the world's harshest controls - including weeks-long quarantine periods, targeted lockdowns and mass testing. The city had recorded 114 Omicron cases as of Tuesday evening, with a small community outbreak traced to Cathay Pacific airline staff sparking the latest curbs.

Lam said health officials feared the strain was silently spreading within the community. Flights from

Australia, Canada, France, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Britain and the United States will be banned for the next two weeks. Hong Kong also ordered a cruise ship carrying 3,700 people back to port for testing after nine passengers were found to be close contacts of Omicron patients.

To the north in the Chinese city of Zhengzhou, 13 million residents were ordered to take COVID-19 tests yesterday after just 11 Omicron cases were detected. The central city is under a partial lockdown, joining millions more in the nearby cities of Xi'an and Yuzhou also living under stay-at-home orders. But Xi'an's case numbers fell to their lowest level in weeks, with officials saying the outbreak had been "brought under control".

China has stuck to a rigid approach of stamping out COVID cases when they appear, with tight border restrictions and targeted lockdowns, since COVID-19 first emerged in the country in 2019. But with less than a month to go until the Beijing Winter

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News in brief

Coalition threatens Houthi ports

RIYADH: A Saudi-led military coalition threatened Tuesday to target Yemen's rebel-held ports after Houthi fighters seized a UAE-flagged ship - unless the vessel is freed. "The terrorist, Iran-backed Houthi militia must promptly release the commercial cargo ship (RWABEE) with all its humanitarian, non-combatant cargo intact," coalition spokesman Turki Al-Malki said. — AFP

13 dead in Philadelphia fire

NEW YORK: Thirteen people died when a fire tore through public housing apartments in the eastern US city of Philadelphia yesterday, US media reported. US networks including NBC and CBS reported that the blaze in the Fairmount area of the city had killed 13 people. The Philadelphia Inquirer cited police as saying that the three-storey home had been converted into two apartments. — AFP

Three arrested over 'auction' app

MUMBAI: Three young Indians accused of setting up a fake auction app advertising the sale of prominent Muslim women have been arrested, police said yesterday. Photos of more than 100 women were featured on the "Bulli Bai" app alongside derogatory messages. — AFP (See Page 5)

Ethiopia detaining deportees

NAIROBI: Thousands of ethnic Tigrayans deported from Saudi Arabia have been detained, abused or forcibly disappeared after arriving back home in Ethiopia, Human Rights Watch said in a new report yesterday. Tigrayans repatriated from Saudi Arabia were singled out and held in Addis Ababa and elsewhere against their will upon returning, HRW said. — AFP

France opens terror probe

PARIS: French prosecutors said Tuesday they have opened a terror probe over a Dec 30 blast in Saudi Arabia targeting a car participating in the Dakar rally that badly wounded its French driver. "A preliminary investigation has been opened into multiple attempted killings in connection with a terrorist group," national anti-terror prosecutors said in a statement. — AFP

MPs reject taxes, urge solution to population crisis

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: In a peaceful National Assembly session, MPs yesterday called on the government to resolve the housing problem, condemned failure to check corruption and warned of randomly naturalizing people. Unlike Tuesday's session which was filled with tension, yesterday's session passed off without any problems.

Debating the Amiri Address, read at the opening session of the new term in October, the lawmakers reiterated full determination to prevent the imposition of taxes or raising costs of public services, and demanded a solution to the consumer debt problem.

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Palestinian prisoner ends hunger strike

JERUSALEM: A Palestinian prisoner refusing food for months over his detention ended his hunger strike late Tuesday after the Zionist entity committed to his eventual release, his lawyer told AFP. Hisham Abu Hawash, a 40-year-old member of the Islamic Jihad militant movement, began refusing food in August to protest the Zionist entity holding him without charges or trial.

The married father of five from Dura, in the south of the Zionist-occupied West Bank, is being held under administrative detention - a practice of arresting suspects for renewable six-month terms without allowing them to view the charges or evidence against them. Under an agreement proposed to Abu Hawash, his detention will not be extended beyond Feb 26 in return for his ending his fast.

His lawyer, Jawad Boulos, said Abu Hawash accepted the deal. "He agreed and ended his hunger strike just 10 minutes ago, he had some tea, and everything is okay," Boulos told AFP late Tuesday. The International Committee of the Red Cross, whose medical teams visited Abu Hawash over the weekend, said he was in "critical condition" after fasting for some 140 days, warning of "potentially irreversible health consequences and possible tragic loss of life".



KUWAIT: MPs and ministers attend a session of the National Assembly yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Palestinian prisoner Hisham Abu Hawash is fed by his wife in hospital after ending his hunger strike late Tuesday. — AFP

The deal came after a campaign that drew support from Palestinians, ranging from Fatah that rules the West Bank, to militant factions in Gaza threatening revenge on the Zionist entity if Abu Hawash died. Palestinian prime minister Mohammad Shtayeh said the government was following the case and acting on the behalf of Abu Hawash. Hamas, the militant Islamist movement that rules the Gaza Strip, warned the issue was a "red line" for Palestinians.

Islamic Jihad, the second largest militant group in Gaza, said it held "the (Zionist) occupation fully responsible for the deteriorating health" of Abu Hawash, threatening revenge if he died. Demonstrations in his support were held in recent days in the West Bank and Gaza. — AFP

Taleban order shops to behead mannequins

HERAT: The Taleban have ordered shop owners in western Afghanistan to cut the heads off mannequins, insisting figures representing the human form violate Islamic law. A video clip showing men sawing the heads off shop dummies in Herat has gone viral on social media, drawing scorn both inside and outside the country.

Since returning to power in August, the Taleban have increasingly imposed a harsh interpretation of Islamic law and severely curtailed freedoms - particularly those of women and girls. While the hardline Islamists have not issued any formal national policy on mannequins - or other creeping restrictions - various local authorities are clamping down on what they say are immoral practices.

Aziz Rahman, head of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in Herat, confirmed the order to AFP yesterday. Some shopkeepers had tried to get around the decapitation order by covering mannequin heads with scarves or bags, but Rahman said that did not go far enough. "If they just cover the head or hide the entire mannequin, the angel of Allah will not enter their shop or house and bless them," he said.

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