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QatarEnergy signs deal with QPD to continue Al-Karkara, A-Structures oil fields development and production





GULF TIMES

published in QATAR since 1978

FRIDAY Vol. XXXXIII No. 12501

December 23, 2022
Jumada I 29, 1444 AH

www.gulf-times.com 2 Riyals



Registration for Marmi festival begins

The registration process for the championships of the 14th Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi) 2023 is set to start tomorrow at the headquarters of the Qatar Al Gannas Association at the Cultural Village Foundation (Katara), and will run until December 26, 2022. The festival is one of the important events organised by Al Gannas Association since falconers were registered in the world heritage list in 2011. It is annually held under the patronage of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani. **Page 2**

Need to share Covid information stressed

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday emphasised the need for all countries, including China, to share information on their experiences with Covid-19, at a time when some experts have started raising questions about Beijing's official hospitalisation and casualty figures. Blinken said Washington was ready to help all countries on Covid, but said Beijing has not asked for help from the US.

Taliban blames 'dress' for women's varsity closure

Afghanistan's Taliban-run administration said yesterday it had closed universities to women partly due to female students not adhering to its interpretation of the Islamic dress code, in a decision that was condemned globally. Acting Higher Education Minister Nida Mohamed Nadim, said several issues had prompted the decision, including female students not wearing appropriate Islamic attire and interaction between students of different genders taking place. "They didn't observe Hijab (Islamic female dress code), they were coming with the clothes that mostly women wear to go to a wedding," he said. **Page 9**

Russia wants end to war in Ukraine: Putin

President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that Russia wants an end to the war in Ukraine and that this would inevitably involve a diplomatic solution. Putin made the comments a day after US President Joe Biden hosted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the White House and promised him continued and unwavering US support. **Page 9**

COMMUNITY
See Page: 5

PM thanks members of World Cup security committee



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz al-Thani met yesterday with members of the security committee and the entities participating in securing the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 tournament at the theatre of the Ministry of Interior. During the meeting, HE the Prime Minister conveyed the greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, and thanks to the participating members of the security committee for their appreciated efforts in securing and organising the tournament. HE Sheikh Khalid conveyed his congratulation to them for the historic achievement made by the tournament, lauding the team spirit of the members of the security force, and wishing them success in their work. The meeting was attended by a number of ministers, along with senior officials in several security sectors in Qatar. **(QNA)** **Page 2**

Fans spend liberally at Qatar World Cup

By Santhosh V Perumal
Business Reporter

Fans spent 39% more in Qatar than they did at the 2018 World Cup and a whopping 300% more than at the 2014

Football fans spent 39% more at Qatar World Cup than they did at the 2018 World Cup and a whopping 300% more than at the 2014 edition, according to Visa, the official payment technology partner of FIFA.

In its final scorecard on commerce conducted at official FIFA venues during the World Cup from November 20 to December 18, Visa also said digital payments took centre stage at FIFA World Cup Qatar, which was held from November 20 to December 18.

As much as 89% of all Visa transactions at the venues were done using contactless, showcasing fans' strong preference for 'tap to pay'.

Fans also embraced paying with a 'tap' at FIFA venues, where over 5,300 payment terminals were deployed.

Top spenders in Qatar among Visa cardholders were from Saudi Arabia, the US, the UAE, Mexico, and the UK, Kuwait, Argentina, France, India, and Brazil.

Spend by fans from (Kuwait, Argentina, France, India and Brazil combined equalled the spend from Saudi Arabian fans, Visa said, adding Visa cardholders from the US spent twice as much as Visa cardholders from the UAE.

The final match between Argentina and France had the highest payment volume of all the matches and the highest average transaction value.

"We met a strong consumer demand for digital payment options and are delighted to have readied a payments network that could meet these needs and enable fans to get back to the action quickly throughout the duration of this exciting, action-packed tournament," said Dr Saeeda Jaffar, senior vice president and Group country manager, Gulf Cooperation Council – Visa.

A first-of-its-kind art and technology experience, Visa Masters of Movement attracted more than 120,000 fans over the course of the FIFA Fan Festival.

Visiting fans had the opportunity to create a unique piece of digital artwork, inspired by their own signature movements on a digital LED pitch, with eligible fans able to receive their artwork as a minted NFT.

In creating the artwork, fans had the option to choose the colour schemes based on country; Argentina was the top chosen nation, followed by Brazil, Morocco, Portugal, and Saudi Arabia.

Doha to host AFC Medical Conference in March 2023

QNA
Kuala Lumpur

Preparations began yesterday for the 7th Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Medical Conference, which will be held in Doha from March 2-3, 2023.

This conference edition comes under the theme 'Football and sports medicine – celebrating diversity,' and will be organised in co-operation between the AFC, Qatar Football Association, and Aspetar hospital.

The AFC Medical Conference will gather renowned global experts in medicine and sports science from the AFC, FIFA, and continental federations in Europe, South America, Africa, and the International Olympic Committee.

Within its preparations for the 7th Medical Conference, the AFC held several video conference seminars. During the first seminar, the participants received updates on the latest anti-doping regulations from the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA).

The second seminar was devoted mainly to understand the AFC Administration System (AFCAS) and the medical officers reporting system.

The fourth seminar was mainly focused on examining various case studies and a comprehensive understanding of the requirements of current medical administrative guidelines, policies, and procedures, while the fourth seminar dealt with legal regulations.

In the fifth seminar, representatives of the Competitions and Football Events Division (QFED) presented a detailed overview of the AFC competitions in the 2023/2024 season and discussed the different ways through which medical team representatives can be contacted.

beIN Media Group welcomes refugees

beIN Media Group welcomed 20 refugees from seven countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia on a special tour to the group's headquarters in Doha. The visit was organised by Qatar Red Crescent and Qatar Charity, in co-operation with the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was also done with support from Qatar Fund for Development, beIN Sports, and the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy. **Page 3**

Airlines scrap 2,700 US flights



Travelers arrive for flights at O'Hare International Airport yesterday in Chicago, Illinois.
Airlines cancelled more than 2,700 US flights yesterday and today, disrupting holiday travel for thousands, as a powerful winter storm hit the United States. The extreme weather coincided with the start of a holiday travel season that could be one of the busiest ever. The Federal Aviation Administration said the winter storm was bringing blizzard conditions to the Midwest with major travel disruptions expected in Chicago, Detroit and Minneapolis-St. Paul. **Page 8**

Five social media stars attend all 64 matches of FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022

In a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, five social media stars have attended all 64 matches of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 as a part of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC) initiative.

Ossy Marwah, Ben Black, Mercedes Roa, Gabi Martins and Ruben Slot had never crossed paths with each other before Qatar 2022. However, by the end of the tournament, the five social media stars created a bond that would last a lifetime.

Organised by the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC), the experience enabled the group of five to take advantage of the tournament's compact nature and attend every single match in the tournament. This included, at some point, attending four matches per day, for 11 days straight.

Ben Black, with more than 5mn Tik Tok followers said: "One day, it was like this is the easiest challenge ever, and then the next day you're just falling asleep in the van, and you know you still have two games to go, and you're falling asleep, but now that it's over, I can proudly say – we did it!"

"We literally never even knew of each other before the challenge and then we spent every single day with each other. We kept making jokes – oh by the end of this, we're going to hate each other, but I just love them all, each and every single one of them."

For Gabi Martins, who flew to Qatar from Brazil to take part in the challenge, the experience presented her with an important opportunity to showcase the region's culture to her followers in South America. **To Page 2**

'Nobody will do this again and nobody has done it before'



The five social media stars attended all 64 matches of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, through a SC initiative.

QATAR

PM meets members of World Cup security committee







HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz al-Thani met yesterday with members of the security committee and the entities who participated in securing the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 tournament at the Ministry of Interior. During the meeting, HE the Prime Minister conveyed the greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to the participating members of the security committee for their appreciated efforts in securing and organising the tournament. The PM expressed his congratulation to them for the historic achievement made by the tournament, lauding the team spirit of the members of the tournament security force, and wishing them success in their work. The meeting was attended by a number of Their Excellencies the ministers, along with senior officials in several security sectors in Qatar. **(QNA)**

MoCI honours committees, work teams for World Cup success





The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) organised a ceremony to honour committees and work teams which participated in hosting the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. HE the Minister of Commerce and Industry Sheikh Mohamed bin Hamad bin Qassim al-Thani led the event attended by a number of senior officials, as well as its representatives in the committees that took part in hosting the tournament. Present were members of the Emergency Committee to ensure the import and flow of foodstuffs and supplies, the Logistics Support Task Force, the Field Monitoring Task Force, and the Food Security Operations Room Task Force, in addition to representatives of the authorities concerned. The honouring ceremony sought to reiterate the committee and work team members' active role in contributing to hosting the tournament and recognise their efforts to support the nation in ensuring the success of the World Cup at all levels. During his speech on this occasion, HE the Minister of Commerce and Industry stressed the importance of the event, as it constituted a key occasion to celebrate the success of the national efforts during the 12-year journey leading up to hosting the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. "Under the leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, Qatar proved that success is not granted," he said, while pointing to how effort, willpower, and determination make miracles. HE Sheikh Mohamed bin Hamad bin Qassim al-Thani thanked the members of the committees and work teams from the various authorities concerned for their unlimited efforts during the tournament – a feat that contributed to building a civilised legacy, which will ever be cherished in nations' memories, and also ever remain a source of inspiration and pride for this generation and those to come. The honouring ceremony included a presentation that shed light on the role of the ministry's committees and work teams during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, as well as their most prominent contributions to the success of the major global event.

Ministry stresses on importance of risk management in supporting QNV 2030

QNA
Doha



The Ministry of Justice confirmed that risk management has become a system of work that enhances and supports the goals of Qatar National Vision 2030, pointing out that it hopes to develop an effective national plan to manage this aspect, providing a continuous methodology for identifying and classifying risks, and enabling the various competent departments to identify risks and know their causes, in addition to providing assistance in identifying strategic risks at the state level, and working to solve and address them as soon as possible.

Undersecretary at the Ministry of Justice Sultan bin Abdullah al-Suwaidi explained during a workshop by the Planning, Quality and Innovation Department at the ministry on risk management, in co-operation and coordination with the Risk & Quality Assurance Department at the State Audit Bureau, that the issue of risk management is no longer an option that one take or overlook, but rather a work system that enhances and complements the goals of Qatar National Vision 2030, national development strategies and its sectoral projects,

He pointed out that the Ministry of Justice hopes to develop an effective national plan for risk management in Qatar, which enhances the culture of managing this file, and provides a continuous methodology for identifying and classifying its risks, with the aim of enabling the various competent departments in state institutions to know its causes, in addition to helping to identify strategic risks and work on neutralise and confront it.

He stated that this workshop also comes within the framework of the ministry's endeavour to enhance the culture of risk management, and to implement the risk management methodology approved by the State Audit Bureau, with the aim of knowing the mechanisms to expedite the treatment of risks. Director of the Planning, Quality and Innovation Department at the Ministry of Justice Hadeel Abdul Latif al-Jaber, considered that managing and evaluating risks has become an integral part of the successful governance of good governments, considering Qatar an example to follow in applying its mechanisms at the regional and international levels.

She indicated that this workshop comes within an integrated vision to build the ministry's capabilities in the field of risk assessment and management, in order to ensure the success of the projects adopted by the ministry in the short and long term, in a way that guarantees a standard level of quality, and achieves the ministry's institutional goals in continuous development and innovation.

For his part, Director of Risk Management & Quality Assurance Department at the State Audit Bureau Sheikh Sultan Nayef al-Thani presented comprehensive models on the nature and management of risks, and ways to confront them, based on the determinants of Qatar National Vision 2030, which adopts as part of Qatar's economic strategy the necessity of awareness to a number of risks that may limit the realisation of its ambitions. Sheikh Sultan reviewed the time frame for risk management, the risk register at the level of the entity, and at the level of operational processes, the method of risk management, the risk management process, the models and support that can be provided or requested, in addition to the standard for identifying potential risk. He stressed the importance of the role assigned to operating managers, as they are the first line of defence in the self-assessment of risks and controls of departments, and the implementation of treatment plans.

Al-Muraikhi meets Kenyan official

HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi met yesterday with Secretary for Foreign & Diaspora Affairs of Kenya Dr Alfred N Mutua who is visiting the country. During the meeting, they discussed the bilateral co-operation ties between the two countries, and ways to support and develop them, in addition to several topics of common interest. (QNA)



Five social media stars attend all matches of World Cup 2022

From Page 1

"I remember coming out of Al Thumama Stadium one day, when we were greeted by locals offering us fruits, dates and Arabic coffee. I shared that video on Tik Tok, and I received so many comments from around the world thanking me for sharing this part of Arab culture."

The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 was held over 29 days at eight state-of-the-art stadiums, with the farthest distance between two stadiums no more than 75km. The compact nature of Qatar 2022 allowed fans and players alike to remain in one place of accommodation throughout the tournament, creating a true carnival experience.

"This has been the best month of my life. Being able to go to all the stadiums. Nobody will do this again and nobody has done it before. Being able to go to 64 matches – it was really exhausting," said Ruben Slot from the Netherlands.

YouTuber Ossy, who has more than 5.7mn subscribers, said: "It was unbelievable. The football was unbelievable. We made history. The group is unbelievable. Everyone's so amazing in their own ways and everyone worked together so well."

Mercedes, who has 7.8mn TikTok followers, spoke of the unifying nature of the beautiful game: "Thank you for everyone supporting us. I think what made everything so special were the people that were around us and I don't know where you were following from, but it doesn't matter, we're all one."

Registration for 14th Marmi Festival begins

The registration process in the championships of the 14th Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi) 2023 is set to start on Saturday at the headquarters of the Qatar Al Gannas Association at the Cultural Village Foundation (Katara), and will run until Dec 26, 2022. The festival is one of the vital events organised by Al Gannas Association since falconers were registered in the world heritage list in 2011, within the framework of preserving the folkloric and sentimental values for this sport that was inherited from the ancestors, in addition to its significance in the Arabic literature and the Arab folklore, particularly the Gulf and Qatari one. It is annually held under the patronage of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani. However, in order to facilitate the registration process for the future falconers, the registration in the Young Falconer and the Promising Falconer competitions will be held at Sabkhat Marmi in Sealine. **(QNA)**

Bisht is trending, on Messi's shoulders


Black and white bishts on display at Faris Abdul Wahab Al Hawaj store at Souq Waqif.


Bala showing a black bisht, similar to the one worn by Messi during the awarding ceremony.


Souq Waqif shops witnessed a huge demand for guthra throughout the World Cup 2022 in Qatar. **PICTURES:** Joey Aguilar

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

The popularity of Thobe, ghutra and igal as fashion fan trend during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 has shifted to a traditional Arab cloak called 'bisht', making it the most-sought after item in Doha after the award ceremony of mega sporting event. Argentina's captain Lionel Messi received the bisht from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, in a gesture widely viewed as a symbol of respect and great honour for the legendary footballer.

Bala, a seller of traditional Arab dresses at Souq Waqif, told *Gulf Times* that he witnessed a demand surge of bisht right after the closing ceremony of the tournament. "Thankfully, we had enough stock," he said.

A large number of Argentinian supporters, as well as Brazilian football fans, rushed to Souq Waqif shops and bought the traditional cloak (bisht).

Prizes range between QR70 and QR1,500, depending on the quality, design and material, while the high-end items could reach $2,500 or even more, according to Bala.

He noted that the machine-made designs are cheaper compared to the handmade ones, which are mostly made in India.

"We have different colours of bisht but fans only want the black, similar to the one worn by Messi on stage. They wear it right away and many requested me to take a picture of them," Bala said, adding that some customers bought more than one piece.

"An Argentinian told me that he will be giving the bishts, besides other traditional Arab wearables such as the thobe, ghutra and igal, to his family, relatives, and friends as gifts and souvenirs," Bala said.

Wearing of traditional Arab clothes, in addition to jerseys, large flags, and other World Cup-themed wearables, became immensely popular during the tournament.

Such a trend continued throughout the World Cup and until the finals when the bisht burst on to the centrestage.

This was echoed by Sabith, also a seller of different Arab dresses and items at Souq Waqif, saying that he continues to receive many inquiries about bisht from foreign visitors who stayed longer in the country.

"Many football fans purchased bisht but before that, it's the thobe, along with ghutra, and igal, which were really in high demand, especially for those heading to the stadiums," he added.


Dominic and Daniel with Messi.

Unforgetabble Qatar 2022: Specially-abled brothers get to meet Messi at stadium

By Shafeeq Alingal
Staff Reporter

Shaking hands with Lionel Messi and posing for a photograph with the football legend, it was a dream come true and a moment to cherish for two Doha-based specially-abled brothers.

Dominic and Daniel, expatriates from India, were invited by FIFA to watch the World Cup semi-final between Argentina and Croatia at Lusail Stadium. Besides Messi, the duo got the opportunity to meet Argentina players and shook hands with the likes of Julian Alvarez and Enzo Fernandez and Paulo Dybala in the Mixed Zone of the stadium while the two teams were heading into the ground for the kick-off.

"For me, it's like a long-pending dream coming true. I was more than excited while Messi shook my hands and wished me," said Dominic, who is a diehard Argentina fan. In fact, Dominic said, "I don't remember who all passed by me after I was greeted by Messi and handshake with him." Dominic (16) and Daniel (11) suffer from Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a genetic disorder characterised by the progressive loss of muscle. The two boys, along with their parents Vinu Joseph and Bindu Simon, were given a special invitation by FIFA to attend the match after Vinu's colleague Koshy Panicker approached the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy.

In the Mixed Zone, the family took a photo with Messi, and the two boys also accompanied the Argentina players to the ground for their national anthem. Daniel, a Portugal fan, was also glad to meet and greet some of his favourite players.

Vinu said the family was given due care and consideration inside the stadium with a range of services and facilities to ensure connectivity and mobility for specially-abled fans. The family was offered a room in the stadium lobby, which was equipped with the latest assistive technology and educational and rehabilitation equipment.

The stadiums have sensory rooms for people with intellectual disabilities.

QU YSC launches third cycle of 'December Aladaam Initiative'

Qatar University's (QU) Young Scientists Centre (YSC) has launched the third cycle of its December Aladaam Initiative, which comes as a continuation of the successes achieved by the previous two cycles.

The national outreach programme is launched annually, throughout December. The theme and the slogan varies each year to suit the slogan of the Qatar National Day (QND).

In the third cycle, the initiative focused on the QND slogan 2022, which is 'Our Unity is the Source of Our Strength', an excerpt from a speech of his Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. The goals of the initiative have also expanded to include presenting and highlighting the studies and scientific researches originating from QU and related to innovation and sustainability in the sports field, and Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup.

The YSC included participants from various colleges and departments at QU, in addition to assigning some films to secondary school students. A total of 23 male and female students participated in the initiative, including six high school students, who presented their innovative project ideas they had worked on during their participation in the Science in Sports programme, under the YSC. QU students participated from five different colleges – Medicine, Health Sciences, Engineering, Education and Law.

Through short films they presented the most important research and studies carried out in various fields to serve the organisation of the World Cup.

The films discussed different studies and research as maintaining heritage, achieving sustainability, providing security and safety for players and fans, as well as, the innovative cooling techniques in Qatar stadiums and the intelligent crowd management systems during the World Cup.

The films also raised important topics such as Artificial Intelligence, Qatar's sports law, and the importance of preserving green spaces. The initiative included 10 short films, which were prepared and edited with the help of three QU students. The films are published and shared with all community members on social media and YouTube.

Prof Noora Jaber al-Thani, director of the QU-YSC said: "The celebration of Qatar National Day enhances the loyalty and belonging and also motivates the youth to achieve more successes and achievements for our country. This year's celebration is unique, as it coincides with the hosting of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and that is why the YSC launched a new cycle of December Aladaam Initiative, to reflect the most important contributions and studies performed by QU to support this mega event.

In addition, the initiative clarified that the unity of all parties in Qatar, including Qatar University, has a fundamental impact on the strength of Qatar, it's progress and development among the countries of the world."



The short films discussed different studies and research as maintaining heritage, achieving sustainability, providing security and safety for players and fans, as well as, the innovative cooling techniques in Qatar stadiums and the intelligent crowd management systems during the World Cup.

beIN Media Group welcomes refugees in support of 'Qatar 2022 For All' initiative



A group of 20 refugees from seven countries spanning the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia, visited the beIN Media Group headquarters in Qatar as part of the 'Qatar 2022 For All' humanitarian initiative, a statement said.

Led by the Qatar Red Crescent Society and Qatar Charity, in partnership with the Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), the initiative was supported by the Qatar Fund for Development, beIN Sports, and the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy.

The objective was to promote a culture of peace and social integration, enhance the role of sports in alleviating the suffering of affected nations, provide mental health support for displaced people and refugees, and share the joy of the first FIFA World Cup held in the region.

During the visit, the refugees, from Turkiye, Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Yemen, and Iraq were shown around beIN's state-of-the-art studios and gained insight in sports rights, broadcasting, and the practice of programming.

The refugees, aged between 16 and 21, were invited to Doha by the MoFA. During their time in Doha, they also attended the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 third-place match between Morocco and Croatia. As part of the initiative, several fan zones were created across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, and Yemen, where huge TV screens broadcasted beIN Sports' coverage of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 free of charge.

HBKU college develops AI-enabled model for lung cancer treatment

Hamad Bin Khalifa University's (HBKU) College of Science and Engineering (CSE) has developed an Artificial Intelligence (AI)-enabled model for lung cancer treatment, a statement said.

Leveraging cutting-edge machine learning and computational simulation methods, Dr Tanvir Alam, assistant professor at the CSE, conducted a collaborative study with the potential to advance AI-enabled personalised treatment for lung cancer patients. To help in tackling drug resistance in lung cancers with a mutated epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR), the multidisciplinary group of researchers have developed a highly accurate drug response predictive model using machine learning and molecular dynamics (MD) simulation. Dr Alam collaborated with researchers from Pakistan and Hong Kong, and their article has been published in *Nature Portfolio's Scientific Reports*, the fifth most-cited journal in the world, it was explained.

In the last decade, rapid progress has been made in developing therapies that target EGFR-mutated lung cancer. At the initial stage of therapy, TKIs (targeted tyrosine kinase inhibitors) show encouraging results for survival rates and quality of life. However, because drug resistance appears in many cases, predicting patients' responses to TKIs is a key research area.

Dr Alam and his team have proposed the personalised drug response prediction model (PDRP) to predict responses to Gefitinib and Erlotinib, small molecule TKIs approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as a first line treatment for lung cancer patients with EGFR mutations. The proposed model combines the geometric information of the drug-target binding site and the binding energy using MD simulation, with patients' clinical and demographic information, to predict response levels of drug response.

Dr Alam said: "Our proposed personalised drug response prediction (PDRP) model achieves state of the art performance in predicting FDA-approved drug responses for lung cancer patients. The combination of clinical, geometric, and energy related information boosted the performance of the machine learning model, and provide highly accurate personalised drug response level for the patients." Dr Rizwan, a post-doctoral fellow in Dr Alam's group, noted: "The proposed AI model has significant implications when considering that EFGR-mutated lung cancer is a major contributor to lung cancer mortality worldwide. Drug resistance can affect treatment plans and reduce the effectiveness of treatment after about a year."

Highlighting its promising future applications for clinical practice, Dr Alam said: "What makes the prediction model especially exciting is that it is generic and can be tested on other types of cancers. With further work, the PDRP can ultimately support the planning of effective treatment regimens based on clinical-genomic information."

Dr Mounir Hamdi, the founding dean of CSE, HBKU, commented: "This remarkable contribution shows the potential of CSE, HBKU to empower personalised approaches in the fight against cancer and other diseases.

"This will also create new opportunities for CSE, HBKU to dedicate our expertise and cutting-edge computational capabilities to drive the insights into precision medicine and personalised health."


Dr Tanvir Alam

Suez Canal chief seeks to dispel fears over draft Egypt legislation

AFP
Cairo

The chairman of Egypt's Suez Canal yesterday affirmed the waterway is "not for sale", in a bid to allay fears over a draft law under discussion in parliament.

On Tuesday the legislature approved in principle a bill proposed by the government seeking to establish a sovereign wealth fund "that can carry out all economic and investment activities" for the Suez Canal Authority.

The draft bill has sparked wide debate on social media. Many fear the fund would undermine the state's sovereignty over the waterway which accounts for roughly 10% of global maritime trade and is a vital source of foreign currency for economically-battered Egypt.

Suez Canal Authority chairman Osama Rabie said in a news conference yesterday that the canal cannot be "sold, leased or borrowed for collateral".

He added the purpose of the fund is to invest in mega-projects. The proposed bill comes with Egypt's economy struggling under growing foreign debt, and the local currency plunging against the dollar.


Osama Rabie

In October the government said Egypt had clinched a $3bn loan deal with the International Monetary Fund conditioned on a currency depreciation and state subsidy cuts. Economist Hani Tawfiq suggested in a Facebook post that the purpose of the proposed sovereign fund would likely be to "exchange state debt for bonds issued by the fund (and) guaranteed by Suez Canal revenues".

Rabie nonetheless denied this in his press conference. He said the purpose of the fund was to draw foreign investment. But the bill has already provoked widespread anger among Egyptians on social media, where it was among the top trending topics all week. Former Suez Canal chairman Mohab Mamish said the new law would be "impossible to implement and opens the door to unprecedented changes... that allow for the presence of foreigners in the Suez Canal's management". The foreign investors could "change the system upon which the canal's management has been based for years and which has returned record profits", Mamish said in remarks published by local media.



QFFD supports scores of persons with eye diseases in Ethiopia

QNA
Doha

International eye care charity Orbis operates through the support from Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD), and in co-operation with partners in Ethiopia to tackle the blinding eye infection (Trachoma) as the disease is still prevalent in wide rural areas of Ethiopia.

The project falls under the Qatar Creating Vision initiative and was launched last April, where in the first six months, over 11,200 eye screenings have been provided to identify those with the condition, as well as those with other vision loss issues.

However, as a result of the extensive eye screenings, almost 900 surgeries for Trachoma Trichiasis and Cataract have been undertaken, alongside almost 300 training opportunities for eye health professionals and community leaders/teachers, to provide comprehensive eye care services and strengthen referral pathways.

Commenting on this project, Deputy Director General for projects in Qatar Fund for Development Sultan al-Aseeri said: "QFFD is strongly dedicated to support eye health across the world following the mandates of the initiative of Qatar Creating Vision in partnership with Orbis.

It comes with great joy and pride to witness the success of this partnership that offered eye screenings to tackle eye health issues that are widely spread in the communities in Ethiopia. We have trust that this partnership with Orbis will continue its efforts to provide the best health support to eliminate and tackle vision loss issues in vulnerable communities."

He pointed out that between 2016 and 2020 in India and Bangladesh, and thanks to the generosity of the Qatar Fund for Development, Orbis and their strategic partners provided more than 6mn eye tests and treatments, mainly to children, through Qatar Creating Vision, indicating that the project in Ethiopia is the first activity of Phase Two of the initiative.

For her part, CEO of Orbis UK Rebecca Cronin said: "Through the Qatar Fund for Developments support, the first six months of the project has reached thousands of people, looking for those with eye conditions and assisting them with the treatments they need. With our partners in Ethiopia, we are reaching those with sight loss conditions which can impact a child's education or an adults livelihood.

Glasses, surgery and antibiotics can all change someone's life.

It is thanks to the generosity of organisations such as the Qatar Fund for Development that were able to complete this work across the world." In addition, Orbis has been transforming lives through the prevention and treatment of avoidable blindness for four decades. With a close network of partners, they mentor and train local eye care teams — from community workers to doctors and nurses — so that they can save and restore vision in their communities.

Lions killed after escape bid from Sudan paramilitaries

Three lions were shot dead in Sudan after trying to escape from their cages inside a base of Sudan's feared paramilitary forces, an animal shelter official said. The lions – a species ranked as "vulnerable" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature – were born two years ago at Sudan's Animal Rescue Centre, near Khartoum, said Moataz Kamal, an official at the centre. But the lions – named Leo, Renas and Amani – were recently sold and moved to a private farm owned by the powerful paramilitary Rapid Support Forces in the capital's twin city of Omdurman, he said. The RSF force sprang out of the Janjaweed militia notorious for alleged war crimes during the conflict in Sudan's western Darfur region, and are also accused of repressing sit-in protests in Khartoum.

S Africa turns to lie-detectors in anti-poaching war

AFP
Johannesburg

Testing will be on a voluntary basis in the interim, but the "intention is ultimately to make polygraph testing compulsory to certain job categories

South Africa plans to carry out lie detector tests on staff working at its game reserves in a bid to fight rampant wildlife poaching, a national parks management agency said yesterday. Poachers, sometimes operating in cahoots with crooked park employees, have decimated the country's population of endangered rhinos in recent years.

To tackle the problem, South African National Parks authority, SANParks, has adopted a new polygraph testing policy for its employees, it said yesterday.

Testing will be on a voluntary basis in the interim, but the "intention is ultimately to make polygraph testing compulsory to certain job categories," SANParks said in a statement.

The policy approved in November is expected to come into force early next year, Environment affairs minister Barbara Creecy said in a written answer to the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) party, which published the response on Wednesday. "There are suspicions that some SANParks officials may have been corrupted," Dave Bryant, the DA's shadow environment minister told AFP. "It is high time that we take active measures and active steps towards addressing this".

South Africa is home to nearly 80% of the world's rhinoceroses.

But it is also a hotspot for rhino poaching, driven by demand from Asia, where horns are used in traditional medicine for their supposed therapeutic effect. Almost 470 rhinos were poached across the country between April 2021 and March 2022, according to government figures – up 16% on the previous 12 months. The world-famous Kruger National Park, a tourist magnet bordering Mozambique, has seen its rhino population decrease dramatically over the past decade-and-a-half due to poaching.

The park's estimated tally in 2021 was 2,800 rhinos, around 70% down compared to 10,000 in 2008, according to official SANParks statistics.

Details of the new lie-detector policy are still being finalised. SANParks communications chief Rey Thakhuli, said that "polygraph testing is not the answer to prevent or manage staff involvement in criminality but it is a tool that needs to be used as part of the toolkit and with a full understanding of its benefits, but also its limitations".

Polygraph tests for SANParks staff were first introduced in 2016 as part of a pilot project. Last year the environment ministry said 71 park officials had taken the test.

SANParks employs about 4,000 people, according to official figures.

More Ebola trial vaccines arrive in Uganda

Uganda announced yesterday that it had received shipments of two more trial vaccines to test against a strain of Ebola responsible for dozens of deaths in the East African nation. Since authorities declared an Ebola outbreak on September 20, Uganda has registered 142 confirmed cases and 56 deaths, but the spread has slowed in recent weeks, sparking hope that the epidemic could be on its way out. The outbreak has been caused by the so-called Sudan strain of the virus, for which there is currently no vaccine. But three candidate vaccines – one developed by Oxford University and the Jenner Institute in Britain, another from the Sabin Vaccine Institute in the United States, and a third from the International Aids Vaccine Initiative (IAVI) – will be trialled in Uganda in the coming weeks. **(AFP)**

Two Iraqi soldiers killed in ambush

AFP
Kirkuk

The attack took place in a zone falling between areas controlled by the federal government and the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq

Suspected militants in northern Iraq detonated bombs targeting military vehicles, killing two soldiers and wounding three, security sources said yesterday. There was no immediate claim for the attack which took place late Wednesday near Dibs outside the northern city of Kirkuk, but army officers blamed the killing on fighters of the Islamic State group.

Two army vehicles were hit by twin roadside blasts set off by "IS elements", before gunmen opened fire on those in the wreckage with automatic weapons, an officer said speaking on condition of anonymity. Two soldiers were killed and three wounded, he said, a toll confirmed by a police source.

The attack took place in a zone falling between areas controlled by the federal government and the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq. In the face of repeated attacks by IS, the two forces have said they will boost co-operation to avoid creating a security vacuum. On Sunday, Islamic State group militants said they had carried out an attack near Kirkuk killing nine police officers, again by setting off a roadside bomb then machine-gunning survivors.

IS militants seized large swathes of Iraq and neighbouring Syria in 2014, declaring a "caliphate" which they ruled with brutality before their defeat by Iraqi forces backed by a US-led coalition in late 2017.

IS lost its last Syrian bastion, near the Iraqi border, in 2019. IS cells, however, remain active in several areas of Iraq. The UN estimates the militant organisation maintains between 6,000 and 10,000 fighters inside Iraq and Syria, exploiting the porous border between the two countries and concentrating mainly in rural areas. The US-led coalition ended its combat role in Iraq in December last year, but some 2,500 US soldiers remain in the country to assist in the fight against the militants.

Prime Minister Mohamed Shia al-Sudani, during a meeting Wednesday with security officials, told officers to "change the military tactics" used in areas where IS fighters remain, and "to adopt unconventional methods of fighting" to combat them.

Previously he had denounced "mistakes by the security services", referring to the deadly ambush against police on Sunday. "There is a clear failure which led to this tragedy," he said.

Holiday rush


A view shows cars stuck in a traffic jam during holiday season in Jal el-Dib, Lebanon.



One of Qatar's newest landmarks, the spectacular Katara Towers, which has a curving architectural design representing the crossed scimitars on the nation's seal, and the adjacent landscape are seen reflected on the tranquil waters of the Lusail Marina around sunrise recently. **PICTURE:** *Gulf Times* news editor Bonnie James.

Economist highlights need to develop creative, critical thinking skills in students

Pakistan Arts Society – Qatar (PAS-Q) and Pak Shamaa School (PSS) recently collaborated to host an educational lecture titled 'Developing creative and critical thinking in students' for the teachers of the school and a general audience at the institution's main campus in Mesaimeer. Senior PSS faculty members, and a number of guests from academia and different walks of life attended.

The lecture was delivered by Dr Faisal Hanif, an economist, researcher, finance expert, and litterateur. He has more than two decades of experience in senior finance leadership roles in the energy and financial sectors complemented by professional qualifications in software engineering and academic studies in finance and management.

Dr Hanif earned his PhD in Banking and Economics from the UK. He also holds an MBA from Germany. He is currently the Head of Treasury at a group of companies in energy sector in Qatar.

Dr Hanif is a published author and literary critic in both Urdu and English languages. He is the interpreter and commentator of nineteenth-century Persian and Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib's poetic and philosophical work. He is the chairman of Bazm-e-Urdu Qatar (est. 1959) the oldest literary organisation in Qatar, the founder of Iqbal Academy Middle East in affiliation with Iqbal Academy Scandinavia, Denmark, founder of Guzergah-e-Khayal Forum to promote classical literature, and founding president of first Urdu Toastmasters Club GK Toastmasters, in Qatar.

The guest speaker was welcomed by PSS president M A Shahid, principal Nabila Kaukab, PAS-Q president Abrar Hussain, vice president Tahir Dilawar Hussain and general secretary Adeel Akbar along with school academics and PAS-Q members.


Dr Faisal Hanif being honoured on the occasion.

Akbar commenced the programme by inviting the guest speaker onto the stage. Hussain, in his welcome address, emphasised the significance of the lecture's theme and its importance for teachers and students in addition to the application of critical thinking in real-life situations and the decision-making process.

The first segment was conducted by PSS English teacher Aiman Zeb by introducing and briefly interviewing the guest speaker. Dr Hanif provided his expert views on the process of developing creativity and critical thinking for individuals and particularly for school students. He equated critical thinking to thinking with clarity in the context of understanding complex economic, social, and ethical issues.

He emphasised the necessity of implementing classroom strategies to encourage students to apply reason and logic in their day to day activities and focus on alternative arguments when evaluating a claim.

Dr Hanif spoke on the challenges with the process of developing critical thinking. Whilst highlighting the importance of sensibilities based on emotion, intuition, and common sense, he suggested not to throw away said sensibilities rather put them under the microscope of reason to remove subjectivity.

He also discussed the barriers to critical thinking such as bias, egocentrism, provincialism, relativistic thinking, stereotyping, unwarranted assumptions, selective perception, overpowering emotions, and distrust in reason. He provided real-world examples and the techniques of elimination of the barriers to critical thinking and from his personal experiences and observations.

The guest speaker further recommended every student to take some basic philosophy courses as this will enable them to strengthen their ability to learn and evaluate problems using detailed assessment and formulate a fine judgement. The lecture was followed by a question-and-answer session.

Dr Hanif added that teachers should equip students at an early age with the tools for critical thinking including scepticism and objectivity. Children must be taught that learning is not gathering information rather it is eliminating assumptions.

In response to a question on the role of parents, he said that parents are the child's teacher at home and therefore they assume greater responsibility to ensure that they educate children on how critical thinking skills can help them succeed in studies, career, and life by making right decisions and informed choices.

Dr Hanif concluded the lecture by pointing out the significance of the use of technology in the classroom and at home to accelerate academic progress and make learning more interesting. Kaukab thanked Dr Hanif for the distinguished lecture, and PAS-Q for organising the knowledge-sharing talk for the teachers of the institution.

Anwar Ali Rana, a community member, proposed a vote of thanks.


M A Shahid flanked by Nabila Kaukab and Dr Faisal Hanif.


A view of the audience.

The first song ever broadcast from space

NUTTY'S INFOTAINMENT yays!

NI1. The first ever musical recording in space was performed in 2012 on the International Space Station by Col. Chris Hadfield. It was the Christmas Carol, *Jewel in The Night*. Which was the first song ever broadcast from space?

NI2. In Medieval England, on Christmas eve, a rich porridge was cooked and eaten to "line the stomach" for the upcoming feast after a period of fasting. The porridge was made with oats, dried fruits, spices and honey. It gave way to which modern day delicacy?

NI3. The most circular country is Sierra Leone, with a roundness index of 0.934 (a perfectly circular country would have a roundness index of 1). Which is the most rectangular shaped country?

NI4. What connects Josef Hugi and Igor Belanov to Kylian Mbappe?

NI5. Created by Manuel Belgrano, its sun commemorates the appearance of the sun in cloudy skies on May 25, 1810. The blue symbolises the clear skies, while the white is supposed to represent the snow of the Andes. What is being described?

NI6. The Christmas tree in which London location has been a yearly gift from Norway to the people of Britain since 1947?

NI7. What connects lagniappe, gyro, epoch, Machiavellian, prosody, nascent, niche, hegemony, largesse and schadenfreude, among others?

NI8. In 2001, 21 years after his death, the Liverpool International airport was renamed in honour of the Beatles' John Lennon, becoming the first airport in the UK to be named after an individual. A 2.1 m tall bronze statue of Lennon stands overlooking the check-in hall. On the roof is painted the airport's motto, a line from Lennon's song Imagine. What is this motto?

NI9. *Silicon Valley* is an American comedy television series that parodies the culture of the technology industry in Silicon Valley. The series focuses on Richard Hendricks, a programmer who founds a startup company called Pied Piper, and chronicles his struggles to maintain his company while facing competition from larger entities. One of the fictional products on the show is a brand called Tres Comas. What is the name 'Tres Comas' a reference to?

NI10. Promoted as an "Alternative Nobel Prize", the Right Livelihood Award is an international award to "honour and support those offering practical and exemplary answers to the most urgent challenges facing us today." The prize was established in 1980 by German-Swedish philanthropist Jakob von Uexkull. The award sculpture (pictured below) is made of Humanium Metal, often called "the most valuable metal in the world." What is the humanium metal made of?


Right Livelihood Award

Answers

NI1. *Jingle Bells*. Tom Stafford and Wally Schirra sang it on December 16, 1965.

NI2. Plum cake. The oats got replaced by flour with the passage of time, with other ingredients.

NI3. Egypt. The Vatican and Sint Maarten came second and third.

NI4. The trio are the only players to score hat-trick for losing teams in FIFA World Cup.

NI5. Argentina's flag.

NI6. The Trafalgar Square. It is a token of gratitude for British support to Norway during WWII. The tree remains until just before the Twelfth Night of Christmas, when it is taken down for recycling.

NI7. Merriam-Webster's most mispronounced words of 2022. All made into the list of the most requested audio pronunciations of words at Merriam-Webster.com in 2022.

NI8. Above us only sky.

NI9. It represents three commas which is how many a billion has.

NI10. Metal from seized firearms collected from gun destruction programmes in Central America, Northern America and Southern Africa is melted and moulded into units called Humanium Metal.

Tribe NI.yays

The 1972 Munich Summer Olympics Men's marathon course distance of 26 miles, 385 yards was run over a route created to resemble what?

The mascot, Waldi. The course was arranged so that the head of the dog faced west, with athletes running counter-clockwise, starting at the back of the dog's neck and continuing around the ears.

(Akbar Imam, Doha)

Do you have some interesting bytes to share? And, does your vibe attract you to the 'Tribe NI.yays!' Every week one question from readers will be featured here. Please do send it to us at infotainment.factree@gmail.com. And, please do mention the school/college/company (or just 'home-sweet-home')

WORLD

DECISION

Asean nations skip Thailand meet with Myanmar junta

Thailand hosted regional talks yesterday to discuss the crisis in army-run Myanmar including rare international appearances by junta ministers, but several key members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations did not attend despite invitations. Foreign ministers of Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia and Vietnam's deputy foreign minister joined the talks hosted by Thailand's foreign minister, according to Thai foreign ministry spokeswoman Kanchana Patarachoke. There were no representatives from Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore — the junta's most vocal critics in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

LAW AND ORDER

Japan probes claim over China-run police stations

The government in Tokyo is investigating a report that China has set up covert police stations inside Japan, amid similar checks by authorities in European countries, the US and Canada. Safeguard Defenders, an Asia-focused rights group based in Spain, has published two reports since September alleging that Chinese authorities have established 102 overseas police stations in 53 countries, including Japan. China has dismissed the allegations. Asked about the Japanese government's response to the report, chief Cabinet secretary Hirokazu Matsuno told a news conference: "We will take all necessary steps as we clarify the situation."

CRACKDOWN

Vietnam arrests officials for Covid bribe scandal

Vietnamese police arrested Hanoi's vice-mayor and a senior diplomat after accusing them of receiving bribes connected to a repatriation campaign during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, officials said yesterday. The communist nation has ramped up an anti-corruption drive in the past year, with at least 35 government officials and business people detained. The public security ministry yesterday issued arrest warrants for the capital city's vice-mayor Chu Van Dung, 49, and former ambassador to Japan Vu Hong Nam, 59. They were accused of allegedly receiving bribes, but officials did not provide any details.

VERDICT

Philippines jails Spanish man on small arms charges

The Philippines has jailed a Spanish man after he was convicted for weapons possession, nearly five years after his arrest, the Philippine justice department said yesterday. Army counter-terrorism troops in January 2018 arrested Abdelhakim Labidi Adib, 20 at the time, at a checkpoint on the southern island of Basilan, a stronghold of militants. They alleged Labidi Adib, a Spanish citizen of Tunisian descent who described himself as a tourist, carried grenades and bomb-making equipment in his backpack. They also accused him of being a sympathiser of Abu Sayyaf, a local armed rebel group with ties to the Islamic State.

LEGAL

36 Cambodia opposition figures convicted by court

A Cambodian court handed out jail terms yesterday to 36 opposition figures, including exiled leader Sam Rainsy, in the latest mass trial against opponents of strongman ruler Hun Sen, a rights group and lawyer said. Rainsy has lived in France since 2015 to avoid jail on multiple convictions he says are politically motivated, including a life sentence handed down in October for allegedly ceding territory to a foreign entity. Eleven politicians from his now-dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) were sentenced to seven years in jail and stripped of their rights to vote or stand for office for five years, rights group Licadho said.

China hospital data absent from WHO's latest Covid reports

Reuters
Geneva/Beijing

The World Health Organisation has received no data from China on new Covid-19 hospitalisations since Beijing lifted its zero-Covid policy, prompting some health experts to question whether it might be hiding information on the extent of its outbreak.

However, the WHO has said gaps in data might be due to Chinese authorities simply struggling to tally cases.

WHO weekly reports showed rising hospitalisations for Covid-19 in China running up to Beijing's December 7 decision to ease restrictions on movement that were meant to stamp out any transmission of the virus but which prompted extraordinary public protests and hobbled the world's second largest economy. They peaked at 28,859 through to December 4, according to a WHO graph, the highest reported figure in China since the Covid-19 first emerged three years ago, but figures have been absent in the last two reports.

WHO spokesperson Margaret Harris said to direct questions about data reporting to the country concerned.

China's diplomatic mission in Geneva did not respond to questions.

China has been routinely accused of downplaying its Covid outbreak and some experts say its narrow criteria for identifying deaths will underestimate the true toll.

Some estimates predict large numbers of deaths ahead and China has been racing to bolster its health system.

Lawrence Gostin, a law professor at Georgetown University who follows the WHO closely, called the missing data "highly suspicious".

"What it tells me is that China is hiding data that are vital for understanding the full impact of its decision to end its zero-Covid strategy," he said.

Adam Kamradt-Scott, professor of Global Public Health at the European University Institute, said countries frequently tried to hide the extent of disease outbreaks.

"It's hard to criticise China when there's other countries that haven't reported Covid cases (at all)," he said.

WHO emergencies chief Mike Ryan has pointed to possible capacity issues. "I wouldn't like to say that China is actively not telling us what's going on. I think they're behind the curve," he said.

Global rules on disease outbreaks require countries to communicate information on ongoing outbreaks but they cannot be enforced.

Meanwhile, elderly patients lined the wards of hospitals in major cities in China yesterday.

The virus is surging across China in an outbreak authorities say is impossible to track after the end of mandatory mass testing.

Attached to a breathing tube under a pile of blankets, an old man racked with Covid-19 lay groaning on a stretcher in the emergency department of a hospital in central China.

A paramedic at Chongqing Medical University First Affiliated Hospital, who confirmed the old man was a Covid patient, said he had picked up more than 10 people a day, 80% to 90% of whom were infected with coronavirus.

"Most of them are elderly people," he said. "A lot of hospital staff are positive as well, but we have no choice but to carry on working."

The old man waited half an hour to be treated, while in a nearby room six other people lay in sick beds surrounded by harried doctors and relatives.

They, too, were mostly elderly and, when asked if they were all Covid patients, a doctor said: "Basically."

Five were strapped to respirators and had obvious breathing difficulties.

Millions of elderly people across China are still not fully vaccinated, raising concerns that the virus may kill the most vulnerable citizens in huge numbers.



A Covid-19 patient on a stretcher is taken to the emergency ward of the First Affiliated Hospital of Chongqing Medical University in China's southwestern city of Chongqing yesterday.

Shanghai hospital warns of 'tragic battle' as Covid spreads

Reuters
Shanghai

A Shanghai hospital has told its staff to prepare for a "tragic battle" with Covid-19 as it expects half of the city's 25mn people will get infected by the end of next week, while the virus sweeps through China largely unchecked.

After widespread protests against strict mitigation measures, China this month began dismantling its "zero-Covid" regime, which had taken a great financial and psychological toll on its 1.4bn people.

China's official death count since the pandemic began three years ago stands at 5,241 — a fraction of what most other countries faced — but now looks bound to rise sharply.

China reported no new Covid deaths for a second consecutive day for Wednesday, even as funeral parlour workers say demand for their services has increased sharply over the past week.

Authorities — who have narrowed the criteria for Covid deaths, prompting criticism from many disease experts — confirmed 389,306 cases with symptoms.

Some experts say official case figures have become an unreliable guide as less testing is being done following the easing of restrictions.

Infections in China are likely to be more than a million a day with deaths at more than 5,000 a day, a "stark contrast" from official data, British-based health data firm Airfinity said this week.

Airfinity said it examined data from China's regional provinces, noting that cases are rising quicker in capital Beijing and southern province Guangdong.

The Shanghai Deji Hospital, posting on its WeChat account late on Wednesday, estimated there were about 5.43mn positives in the city and that 12.5mn in China's main commercial hub will get infected by the end of the year.

"This year's Christmas Eve, New Year's Day, and the Lunar New Year are destined to be unsafe," said the private hospital, which employs some 400 staff.

"In this tragic battle, the entire Greater Shanghai will fall, and we will infect all the staff of the hospital! We will infect the whole family! Our patients will all be infected! We have no choice, and we cannot escape."

The post was no longer available on WeChat yesterday afternoon. A person who answered the hospital's main telephone line said they could not immediately comment on the article.

Shanghai residents endured a two-month lockdown that ended on June 1, with many losing income and struggling to find basic necessities.

Hundreds died and hundreds of thousands were infected during those two months.

Yesterday, many areas of Shanghai were almost as deserted as back then, with many residents isolating themselves and businesses forced to shut as staff fell ill. "All our employees are sick," said a supermarket worker as he was shutting the doors. He said he hoped to re-open on December 30.

Despite the new infections, the last vestiges of the "zero-Covid " policy are being scrapped.

China plans to cut quarantine requirements for overseas travellers in January, Bloomberg News reported, citing people familiar with the matter. Experts say China could face more than a million Covid deaths next year, given relatively low full vaccination rates among its vulnerable elderly population.

Manila boosts naval presence after Chinese 'encroachment'

AFP
Manila

The Philippines yesterday ordered its military to boost their presence in the South China Sea, citing a "threat" to a garrison in the disputed waterway after nearby Chinese "activities".

It comes two days after media reported that Beijing has begun reclaiming more land in the contested Spratly Islands, a major archipelago in the South China Sea that hosts military installations by a number of countries.

"Any encroachment in the West Philippine Sea or reclamation on the features therein is a threat to the security of Pagasa Island," the Philippine defence department said yesterday.

Manila refers to the waters immediately west of the Philippines as the West Philippine Sea, while Pagasa Island, the second biggest in the Spratlys, is also known as Thitu Island. The defence department said it had directed the armed forces "to strengthen the country's presence in the West Philippine Sea, following the monitored Chinese activities close to Pagasa Island".

The agency did not specify the nature of the "monitored Chinese activities", but the Philippine military said its air and naval patrols had observed "China militia vessels" in these areas.

Beijing claims almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea, through which trillions of dollars in trade passes annually.

Along with the Philippines, rival claimants are Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan.

China has ignored a 2012 ruling from a UN-backed tribunal that its claim is without basis.

In recent years it has built artificial islands on reefs while constructing military facilities and airstrips. Bloomberg reported on Tuesday, citing satellite images from US officials, that new land formations have emerged in the Spratlys, on Eldad Reef, Whitsun Reef, Lankiam Cay and Sandy Cay.

China's foreign ministry called the report "completely groundless".

A Philippine military statement said yesterday its regular air and naval patrols have "observed the persistent presence of China militia vessels around areas stated in the Bloomberg article".

The statement did not say if the patrols monitored the reported reclamations themselves.

"WESCOM (the Philippines' Western Military Command) shall continue conducting maritime patrols and sustaining our presence in the WPS (West Philippine Sea) to protect our nation's territory and sovereign rights," it said.

Sandy Cay lies 7kms west of Thitu, where the Philippines runs an airstrip along with military and coastguard detachments. A small civilian community also lives there.

Official visit



Indonesia's President Joko Widodo (right) welcomes Vietnam President Nguyen Xuan Phuc prior to their meeting at the Presidential Palace in Bogor, West Java, yesterday.

'The Serpent' Charles Sobhraj to be freed from Nepal prison today

Charles Sobhraj, a convicted killer who police suspect was responsible for a string of murders in the 1970s and 1980s, will be freed from prison in Nepal today after nearly 20 years behind bars, a jail official said. Sobhraj, 78, a French national, is suspected of killing more than 20 Western backpackers on the "hippie trail" through Asia, usually by drugging their food or drink in the course of robbing them. Nepal's Supreme Court on Wednesday ordered his release from prison, where he has served 19 years of his 20-year sentence, citing his age. Sobhraj has been held in the Kathmandu prison since 2003, when he was arrested on charges of murdering American backpacker Connie Jo Bronzich in 1975, and had served 19 years out of a 20-year sentence. Sobhraj denied killing the American woman and his lawyers said the charge against him was based on assumption. Several years later he was also found guilty of killing Bronzich's Canadian friend, Laurent Carriere. But he was suspected of many more murders. Thailand, where he was known as the "bikini killer", issued a warrant for his arrest in the mid-1970s on charges of drugging and killing six women, some of whom turned up dead on a beach near the resort of Pattaya. He was jailed in India for poisoning a group of French tourists in the capital, New Delhi, in 1976, before he could stand trial on the charges against him in Thailand. Thailand's justice ministry did not immediately respond to questions on whether there were any outstanding warrants for him. Sobhraj escaped from India's Tihar jail in 1986 after drugging prison guards with cookies and cakes laced with sleeping pills. Days later, police caught him at a restaurant in the Indian beach holiday state of Goa, where a statue of the man, with his signature peaked cap, stands to this day. He was jailed in India until 1997 when he returned to France. In 2003, he was arrested in Kathmandu, in connection with the 1975 murders of Bronzich and Carriere, after being spotted at a casino.

INDUSTRIAL ACTION

UK ambulance staff to stage more strikes in January

Thousands of British ambulance workers will stage two further strikes on January 11 and 23 in an escalating dispute over pay and staffing, the Unison trade union said yesterday, after a similar walkout by staff on Wednesday. While Wednesday's strike, which also involved workers affiliated to two other trade unions, lasted 12 hours, the two Unison strikes next month will last 24 hours each, Unison said in a statement. The walkouts will involve all ambulance employees as opposed to just emergency response crews, although many will be exempted from strike action under emergency cover plans, said the union, which represents the majority of ambulance workers in Britain.

APPOINTMENT

British PM Sunak names ethics adviser

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak appointed Laurie Magnus as his independent adviser on ministers' interests, filling a role that has been vacant since Boris Johnson's ethics adviser quit in June. Sunak, who became prime minister in October with a pledge to maintain "integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level", said filling the role had been a priority to help ensure standards were upheld and the public could have confidence in the government. Johnson's ethics adviser Christopher Geidt resigned a month after he said Johnson must explain why he thought he had not broken the ministerial code after being fined over attending a party during the Covid-19 national lockdown.

DATA

England reports 94 deaths due to scarlet fever

England reported 94 deaths, including those of 21 children, from scarlet fever and invasive strep A infections so far this season the UK Health Security Agency said. The government last week said it was enacting protocols to ease shortages of penicillin medicines used to treat strep A infections, allowing pharmacists to prescribe alternatives where stocks are low. There have been 27,486 reported cases of scarlet fever from September 12 to December 18, according to the UKHSA. That compares with 3,287 reported cases at the same point in the year during the last comparably high season in 2017 to 2018, although cases in that season started to rise at a different time, the agency said.

TRAVEL

Rail fares in England to rise by 5.9% in March

Regulated rail fares in England will rise by up to 5.9% in March, less than half the 12.3% inflation rate in July the increase would have been based on historically, Britain's transport department said yesterday. The government said the annual increase was in line with July's average earnings growth rather than the traditional retail price index due to "unprecedented levels of inflation". Transport Minister Mark Harper said the government was capping the rise "to help reduce the impact on passengers." "It has been a difficult year and the impact of inflation is being felt across the UK economy," he said in a statement.

ROYALTY

King Charles' first Trooping the Colour parade in June

King Charles will participate in his first Trooping the Colour ceremony, which has marked the British sovereign's official birthday for over 260 years, as monarch on June 17, Buckingham Palace said yesterday. Charles, 74, took over as sovereign in September following the death of his mother Queen Elizabeth II. "This impressive display of pageantry will take place on June 17 with the king attending and taking the salute," the palace said. British sovereigns celebrate their birthdays twice: privately on the actual day — November 14 in the case of Charles — and then at an official ceremony in June, following an age-old tradition to try and escape the whims of the weather.

Indians tap carbon credits for greener fun

Thomson Reuters Foundation
Chennai, India

For her 50th birthday, Sonia Sandhu-Torre threw a party for family and friends — and promised herself one important gift: a carbon-neutral celebration.

"I had 50 guests who were taking flights and cars to reach the party destination," said Sandhu-Torre, who hosted the bash last month at a palace-turned-hotel in western Rajasthan.

"I wanted to celebrate but was acutely aware of how big the carbon footprint of my party would be. I wanted to do something because I believe that every measure we take now will matter in the future," she explained.

She was able to bag her "perfect present" using Climes, a climate tech start-up that offers individuals and companies the possibility of becoming "climate-friendly" by buying carbon offsets online.

New businesses like Climes, Lowsoot and WOCE are seeking to grab a share of India's growing sales of carbon credits, sought by climate-conscious consumers who want to green everything from their travel to weddings and online purchases.

Globally, credits worth nearly $2bn traded on the largely unregulated voluntary carbon market in 2021, almost four times the previous year, with about 500mn credits — representing 500mn tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions — changing hands, according to Ecosystem Marketplace.

India — which has become one of the world's biggest greenhouse-gas emitting nations but aims to reach net-zero emissions only by 2070 — is slowly gaining ground in this market.

Besides the cake-cutting, fancy dress and dancing at Sandhu-Torre's party, guests enjoyed a presentation on how carbon credits work and were encouraged to do their bit to reduce the celebration's climate-heating emissions.

Their gift hampers contained QR codes linking to the Climes website where they could easily offset a share of the party's emissions by buying carbon credits that support agro-forestry, land restoration or technology that converts waste to energy.

"The process was seamless, and many of my guests chose to donate to forestry projects, with everyone being able to track the projects they had put their money in," Sandhu-Torre said.

"It was a conversation starter, with many guests wanting to know more since there are lots of scams around this."

When Tamarind Chutney, a sustainable clothing brand, decided to offset some of the carbon generated along its supply chain, it struggled with how.

"We were forced to hit pause after a year of research because we could not find a transparent solution," said 29-year-old co-founder Tanvi Bikhchandani.

"We needed to know where the money was going, but everything looked like a black hole. Most projects advertised carbon offsets as a solution and disregarded the source of emissions, which was disappointing," she said.

Voluntary carbon markets have struggled to win the trust of potential customers like Bikhchandani, with climate campaigners criticising offsets as an easy way out for polluters that want to avoid cutting their own emissions by paying others to do so.

"A tonne of carbon emitted will always have higher impact than a tonne absorbed or reduced," said Khaled Diab, communications director at Carbon Market Watch, a nonprofit that works on fair carbon pricing to achieve zero-carbon societies.

"This is one of the reasons why carbon credits should not be used for offsetting.

"Climate action is good, but buying credits should not be seen as a 'get out of jail free card'," he added.

Describing the market as "a bit of a Wild West", Diab said its unregulated nature puts the burden on buyers to appraise the credibility of the carbon credits on offer — a daunting challenge for the majority who are not experts.

"It provides corporations with a powerful greenwashing tool," he said.



Passengers wait with their luggage at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport in Mumbai, India, yesterday.

India to randomly test 2% of international travellers for Covid

Reuters
Mumbai

India will start randomly testing 2% of international passengers arriving at its airports for Covid-19, Mansukh Mandaviya, the country's health minister, told parliament yesterday, as the country steps up surveillance for new coronavirus variants.

"The global pandemic is not yet over. The virus is changing its face from time to time," Mandaviya told parliament yesterday.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a meeting with top officials yesterday to review the Covid-19 situation in the country.

"Considering the upcoming festival season and New Year, states have been advised to keep up awareness of hand hygiene and the importance of masking," Mandaviya said.

India's iconic Taj Mahal, which attracts thousands of tourists every day will now require visitors to undergo a Covid-19 test before they enter, Reuters partner ANI reported.

Lawmakers attending the ongoing winter session of parliament were spotted wearing masks.

Masks have not been compulsory in most parts of the country for several months.

India is reporting an average of 153 cases of Covid every day, Mandaviya said.

The country has 3,402 active cases of the coronavirus, according to data from the health ministry. The government earlier this week asked India's states to keep a lookout for any new variants of the coronavirus and urged people to wear masks in crowded areas, citing an increase in Covid-19 cases in China and other parts of the globe.

With more than 44mn Covid cases to date, India has reported the most in the world behind the US.

However, its number of confirmed infections has fallen sharply in the past few months.

Meanwhile, the chairperson of an Indian drug export body yesterday said the country, one of the world's biggest drug makers, is ready to step up exports of fever medicines to China as it reels from a spike in Covid-19 cases.

China's sudden easing of strict Covid-19 rules earlier this month triggered a surge in demand for fever medicines and virus test kits on the mainland, leading to shops imposing limits on how much customers can buy and drugmakers ramping up production.

"Marketing queries are coming to drugmakers asking for quotes on ibuprofen and paracetamol," Sahil Munjal, chairperson of the Pharmaceuticals Export Promotion Council of India (Pharmexcil), said.

"Ibuprofen and paracetamol are facing a shortage in China at the moment, they are high in demand."

China's embassy in New Delhi did not immediately respond to an e-mail seeking comment.

India's foreign ministry said the country, one of the biggest makers of generic medicines in the world, was ready to help China.

"We are keeping an eye on the Covid situation in China," foreign ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said at a regular news briefing. "We have always helped other countries as the pharmacy of the world."

India's pharma exports to China accounted for just 1.4% of its overall exports in 2021/22, according to Pharmexcil's latest annual report.

The US remains India's largest destination for drugs exports. Shares of Indian pharmaceutical companies have risen over the past few days on worries of a Covid-19 resurgence.

Men 'must to train themselves to notice household chores'

Perception is shaped on practice and people can train themselves into good habits, says McClelland

AFP
London

Gender imbalance in shouldering domestic work is explained by different ways in which men and women perceive chores, philosophers at Britain's Cambridge University suggest.

Women looking at an unclean surface may see something to be wiped whereas men may just observe a crumb-covered countertop, researchers argue in the journal Philosophy and Phenomenological Research.

They say data gathered during the pandemic, when both men and women spent time at the domestic coalface, throw up two important questions — why women continue to take on most housework and why men believe it to be more equally shared than it is.

According to a survey of US households during the pandemic, 70% of women said they were fully or mostly responsible for housework, and 66% for childcare, roughly the same proportion as usual.

Tom McClelland, from Cambridge University's department of history and philosophy of science, said the fact that inequalities persisted and that many men continued to be oblivious meant that traditional explanations were not the whole story.

The researchers say "affordance theory" in which people experience objects and situations as having actions implicitly attached could explain the disparity.

According to the study, when a woman enters a kitchen, she is more likely to see dishes to be washed or a fridge to be stocked.

But the study was not about absolving men or making excuses, they said.

Perception is shaped on practice and people can train themselves into good habits, McClelland said.

"If you're boiling the kettle, look to see if there are any crumbs that need wiping up. Over time you won't need the routine because the crumbs will start to grab your attention...They'll call out to be wiped up and you won't need to be so deliberate."

McClelland said the study was aimed at understanding such phenomena from an academic perspective and influencing policy areas such as paid paternal leave.

"One of the important things about parental leave is it's not just about the distribution of caring work during the early months of a child's life it's about how those early months tune you in to caring tasks in the future," he said.

"If a man has more extended parental leave, he'd be more tuned into those caring needs... and that would lead into more equitable distribution of caring and labouring in the future."

Candlelight service



A child takes part in a candlelight service ahead of Christmas celebrations at St Paul's church in Amritsar yesterday. **(AFP)**

India eyes digital competition act to rein in Big Tech

An Indian parliamentary panel yesterday recommended the government enact a digital competition act to regulate anti-competitive business practices by Big Tech companies on its platforms. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has had strained relations with many large technology companies, and New Delhi has been tightening the regulation of firms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Alphabet's Google and Apple have in the past faced scrutiny from the country's competition watchdog, the Competition Commission of India (CCI), over alleged abuse of the application market.

"The committee recommend that the government should consider and introduce a digital competition act to ensure a fair, transparent and contestable digital ecosystem, which will be a boon not only for our country and its nascent start-up economy but also for the entire world," the panel said in a report submitted in India's lower house of parliament.

The panel recommended the identification of top tech players as systemically important digital intermediaries to counter monopoly and warned they "must not favour its own offers over the offers of its competitors" when acting as mediators to supply and sales markets. In India, Amazon and rival Flipkart are facing accusations of anti-competitive practices, such as promoting preferred sellers on websites and giving priority to listings by some sellers.

Companies including Facebook, Twitter and Google have for years been concerned with many regulations India has proposed for the technology sector, with companies complaining about excessive compliance burdens.

The complaints have sometimes strained relations between New Delhi and Washington. Amazon, Google, Meta, Twitter and Apple did not immediately respond to request for comment.

A specialised digital markets unit should be established within the competition watchdog, the panel said, adding that competitive behaviour of big tech companies needs to be monitored in advance and not after markets become monopolised.

WORLD

Zelensky appeals for bipartisan US support

Reuters
Washington

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told the US Congress on Wednesday that the tens of billions of dollars of aid it had approved to help it fight a Russian invasion is not charity, but an investment in global security.

In his first visit out of his country since the war began in February, Zelensky told lawmakers in the soaring House of Representatives chamber that he hoped they would continue to support Ukraine on a bipartisan basis – a major point as Republicans are due to take the majority in the House on January 3.

"Your money is not charity," Zelensky said, clad in the khaki fatigues that have been his public uniform throughout the 300 days of conflict. "It is an investment in the global security and democracy."

Following a meeting at the White House with Democratic President Joe Biden, Zelensky's speech needed to resonate with House Republicans, who have voiced increasing scepticism about continuing to send so much aid to Ukraine.

Zelensky's arrival was greeted with multiple raucous ovations in the nearly full chamber.

Three members held up a large Ukrainian flag as he walked in.

"It is a great honour for me to be at the US Congress and speak to you and all Americans. Against all doom and gloom scenarios, Ukraine did not fall. Ukraine is alive and kicking," said Zelensky. "We defeated Russia in the battle for the minds of the world."

Zelensky joined a long list of world leaders to address joint meetings of the Senate and House, a tradition that began in 1874 with a visit by Hawaiian King Kalakaua and included almost legendary wartime visits by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, as well as kings, queens and one pope.

House members and senators from both parties leaped repeatedly to their feet to cheer parts of Zelensky's speech in English such as, "Ukraine holds its lines and will never surrender", as he likened his country's battle against Moscow's forces to great battles of World War II and even the American Revolution.


Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky speaks after giving a Ukrainian national flag to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and US Vice-President Kamala Harris during his address the US Congress at the US Capitol in Washington, DC.

There are no signs of peace talks to end the war and both Russia and Ukraine have signalled a willingness to keep fighting, although Zelensky said that he discussed a 10-point Ukrainian peace formula with Biden.

"I'm glad that President Biden supported our peace initiative today. Each of you today, ladies and gentlemen, can assist in the implementation to ensure that American leadership remains solid, bicameral, and bipartisan," he said to the lawmakers.

Planning for Zelensky's speech began in October, according to an aide to Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, when she met with Ruslan Stefanchuk, chairman of Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada.

Pelosi was attending the First Parliamentary Summit of the International Crimea Platform in Zagreb, Croatia, at the time.

Exactly 300 days after Russian troops invaded and amid intensified rocket attacks that have left Ukrainian cities in ruins, Zelensky arrived knowing that the Senate and House control America's purse strings.

His timing was perfect, as Congress is on the verge of approving an additional $44.9bn in new emergency military and economic assistance, on top of some $50bn already sent to Ukraine this year.

Daniel Fried, former US ambassador to Poland and a fellow at the Atlantic Council, said Zelensky's trip demonstrated that he and Biden share a belief that the United States, despite its faults, is leader of the free world.

Zelensky, Fried said, "didn't go to Berlin, Brussels, London or Paris" for his first trip abroad since the start of the war.

The 44-year-old Zelensky, a former comedian and actor, also visited Washington on a day that the Senate overwhelmingly confirmed a new ambassador to Russia.

The optics of Zelensky's welcome as a defender of democracy carried a message far deeper than military aid.

It was meant to signal to Russian President Vladimir Putin that the United States and its Nato allies remain steadfastly behind Ukraine, despite recent signs of impatience among some Republican lawmakers over the rising cost.

For Zelensky, whose wartime olive fatigues have become globally recognised, the House overlooked a rule that normally requires men to wear a jacket and tie inside the chamber.

Russia wants 'end to war in Ukraine' - Page 9

Winter storm threatens holiday travel plans for millions of Americans

Reuters
Detroit

A massive winter storm system enveloped a vast stretch of the United States yesterday, threatening to upend the travel plans of millions of Americans ahead of what could turn out to be one of the coldest Christmas Days on record in many cities.

Leading into the holiday weekend, the storm is expected to bring blizzard conditions to the Great Lakes region, up to 2" of rain followed by a flash freeze on the East Coast, wind gusts of 60mph (100kph) and bitter cold as far south as the Mexican border.

As the storm moves over the Great Lakes, a weather phenomenon known as a bomb cyclone is expected to develop due to "the abrupt deepening of this low pressure system", the National Weather Service (NWS) said.

In its wake, the cyclone could spawn snowfalls of a half inch an hour and winds of more than 50mph (80kph) in the Upper Midwest and interior Northeast, the weather service said.

Power outages were likely, and the storm was expected to make travel by land or air dangerous or impossible at times.

"It's dangerous and threatening," President Joe Biden said at the White House, urging Americans with travel plans to not delay and to set off already. "This is not like a snow day, when you were a kid, this is serious stuff."

More than half of the Lower 48 states, from Washington state to Florida, are under winter weather alerts, including wind chill advisories affecting about 135mn people, said Ashton Robinson Cook, a meteorologist at the weather service.

Parts of the Mid-Atlantic and Plains could see Christmas Day weather that is near the coldest on record, though record lows will not be as widespread as the storm, according to the weather service.

Philadelphia could see temperatures fall to 15° Fahrenheit (-9° Celsius) on Sunday, near a previous low from 1943, while Sioux City, Iowa, could end up at -14F (-26C), surpassing a record from the 1980s.

Travel conditions, already bad in the Great Plains region, will gradually deteriorate in the Midwest and Great Lakes area as the cold front moves east and brings more than a foot of snow with it to some parts, Cook said.

Snow squalls – brief bursts of moderate to heavy snow and strong wind – are expected from Illinois to Indiana, and could produce whiteout conditions.

The American Automobile Association (AAA) estimates 112.7mn people plan to travel 50 miles (80km) or more from home between December 23 and January 2, an increase of 3.6mn people over last year and closing in on pre-pandemic numbers.


A traveller waits for a flight at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, Illinois. A winter weather system bringing snow, high winds, and sub-zero temperatures has wreaked havoc on holiday travel during one of the busiest days of the year for airlines.

Nearly 2,000 US flights scheduled for today and tomorrow have been cancelled, including more than 700 departures and arrivals at two major airports in Chicago, according to flight-tracking service FlightAware.

Hundreds of flights have been cancelled in Denver.

Many US airlines have waived change fees and fare differences for passengers.

The frigid air mass that had already enveloped northern states was pushing south through central Oklahoma and northwestern Texas, where the mercury is expected to plunge to about 10F (-7C).

Combined with wind gusts of up to 60mph (100kph), wind chills could go as low as -40F (-40 C).

Temperatures in parts of the Southern Plains and Southeast could stay below freezing – 30-plus degrees less than normal – for multiple days, the weather service predicted.

Greg Carbin, chief of forecast operations at the Weather Prediction Centre, said that freezing or below-freezing temperatures are expected to bisect Florida from Pensacola through Orlando to Daytona Beach.

Temperatures could register about 25° below normal.

"That's pretty darn chilly for Florida," he said.

Motorists in the Ohio and Tennessee valleys were warned that wet roads could instantly freeze over due to a rapid drop in temperatures.

The weather service also warned of freezing rain in parts of Oregon and Washington in the Northwest, where the storm originated, late yesterday.

Georgia on Wednesday joined North Carolina and Kentucky in declaring states of emergency.

Temperatures in north Georgia were forecast to hit 10F (-12C) with subzero wind chills.

"We are expecting weather we haven't seen in a decade or more," Georgia Governor Brian Kemp said at a media briefing.

US power and natural gas prices in the Midwest and West Coast soared to multiyear highs yesterday.

Canada's politicians fight over spending on healthcare system

Reuters
Ottawa

Canada's federal and provincial governments' nearly two-year fight over the need for new spending on the country's universal healthcare system will drag into next year and could further erode confidence in the already strained system.

The healthcare system, facing challenges before the pandemic, has been put under further strain since, with a severe labour shortage leading to temporary closures of emergency rooms.

Leaders of provinces and territories, which administer health services, want more money – known as health transfers – from Ottawa to bolster the overloaded system, but the government is pushing back.

With no agreement this year, healthcare system is likely to be at the centre of political debate in 2023.

Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government wants an agreement sealed next year, according to a spokesperson in the office of federal Health Minister Jean-Yves Duclos.

Provinces want the share of healthcare costs covered by federal transfers to rise to 35% from 22% now, and to maintain that level over time.

The federal government says that it is already covering 35% of spending by some measures.

Ottawa is offering more money, though it has not yet said how much, but on the condition the spending meets certain objectives, including on backlogs, health-worker support and data collection.

The provinces say that they retain authority over decisions on how the money is spent.

"If I were to send people all the money they need in the provinces, there is no guarantee that ... folks would be waiting less time in the hospitals," the prime minister said in an end-year interview with the CBC broadcast on Tuesday.

"One of the only levers I have is saying, 'I'm not giving you this money with no conditions'," he said.

About half of Canadians surveyed last month said they were satisfied with health services over the past year, down from 66% in 2021 and 68% in 2020, according to an Ipsos Canada poll.

People are also increasingly concerned about the future viability of universal healthcare, with 57% saying that they believe the current rate of spending is unsustainable, up from 52% last year, Ipsos said.

"Canadians are very pessimistic about our ability to be able to sustain the current level of spending," said Sebastien Dellaire, senior vice-president at Ipsos Canada.

Canada has the fourth-lowest number of funded acute care beds per capita among countries in the 38-member Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

While increased spending could bring improvements, it will not address the most crucial problem: a rapidly ageing population.

As the baby-boomer generation ages, healthcare costs will spike, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), a state-funded research body.

The average spending on someone 80 or older is seven times that of someone 64 and under, the CIHI said, noting public spending per person increased 36% from 2011 to 2020.

In 2021, some 861,000 of Canada's nearly 39mn people was 85 or older, according to Statistics Canada.

That number is projected to rise steadily to more than 2.7mn by 2050.

"This is a federal-provincial government tug-of-war over who's going to pay for a failing healthcare system," said Nadeem Esmail, a senior fellow with the right-leaning Fraser Institute think tank.

Arizona to remove shipping container wall on border

AFP
Washington

Arizona has agreed to dismantle a wall of shipping containers at the Mexican border that critics said was an expensive, ecologically damaging political stunt that did nothing to keep migrants out of the United States.

The state's Republican Governor Doug Ducey spent $90mn of taxpayers' money lining up rusting boxes in what he said was a bid to stem the flow of people crossing into the country.

The corrugated containers, which snake for four miles (7km) through federal lands like a huge stationary cargo train, divide an important conservation area that is home to vulnerable species, but which is so difficult to traverse that people traffickers routinely avoid it.

Now Ducey, who leaves office early next year, will have to get rid of the 915 containers from the Coronado National Forest.

In an agreement reached on Wednesday with the federal government, Ducey's administration said it will "remove all previously installed shipping containers and associated equipment, materials, vehicles, and other objects from the United States' properties on National Forest System lands within the Coronado National Forest".

From close up, the double-stacked container wall looks like the clumsy handiwork of a giant playing with building blocks.

Its presence is so jarring that, in addition to the federal court case, it was also the subject of two lawsuits by the Centre for Biological Diversity, an environmental organisation that has been active in the area for three decades.

"The biodiversity of this region is off the charts," Russ McSpadden, a member of the organisation, told AFP. "It's one of the most important conservation areas in the entire United States."

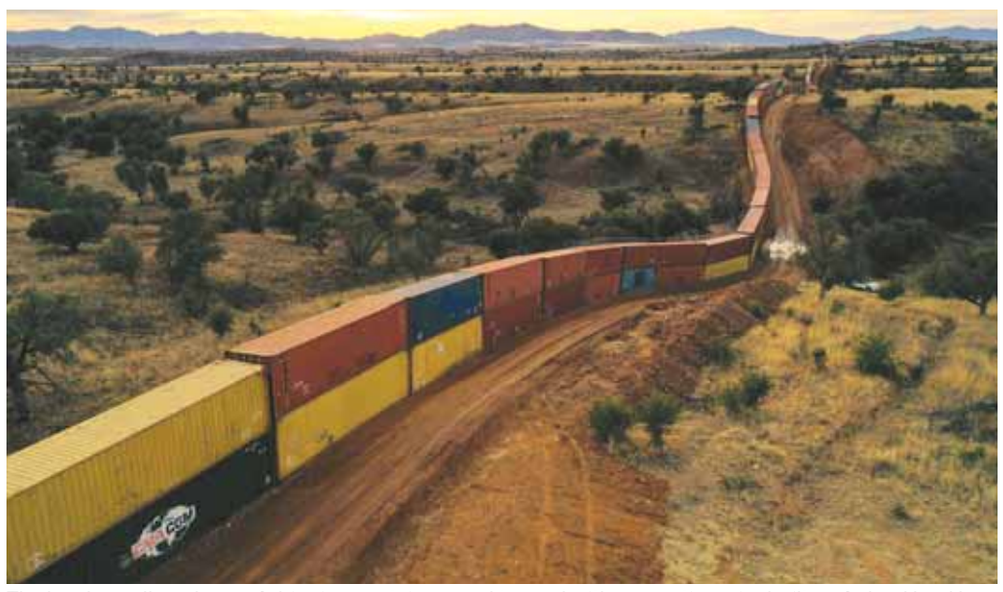
Arizona shares around 370 miles (600km) of border with Mexico, including environmental preservation areas, national parks, military zones, and indigenous reservations.

Until the 2017 arrival in the White House of Donald Trump – who was propelled to power on his pledge to "Build That Wall" – there was very little in the way of a physical barrier separating it from Mexico.

Now vast stretches of the border have a fence that towers up to nine metres high.

Before the containers arrived in the Coronado National Forest – an area that can only be reached by dirt roads – the border here was demarcated by a wire fence.

That meagre barrier was more than equal to the task of keeping people at bay, says McSpadden, whose cameras have picked up jaguars, and who has worked with teams collecting data on ocelots.


The border wall made up of shipping containers and topped with concertina wire built on federal land by Republican Governor Doug Ducey, along the US-Mexico border.

"I've never captured migrant traffic on any of the remote cameras," he said. "It's an incredibly wild valley. There's no real urban population anywhere nearby. It's a very difficult part of the border for migrants to cross."

And even if this were a heavily trafficked route, a casual observer can see that the shipping containers would not be very effective.

In several places that AFP visited, the boxes do not line up because of the uneven terrain, leaving gaps easily large enough for a person to walk through.

Others have holes rusted in them, and in some spots, it appears to have been impossible for workers to find a place stable enough to put a container.

A viral video shows a determined climber scaling the six-metre-high barrier in a matter of seconds, gaining easy purchase on the textured box walls.

However, what the shipping containers do block is a waterway and the migration routes of the animals that McSpadden is studying.

"Jaguars know no borders," he says. "Southern Arizona, northern Mexico, it's the same for them."

With males known to range hundreds of miles, it's easy for animals that came north to hunt to get trapped away from breeding populations south of the border.

"Jaguars want to move back and forth freely," he says. "This is their range, and the border wall bisects the jaguars' home."

Lawyer told White House aide to 'downplay' January 6 knowledge

A former lawyer for ex-White House aide Cassidy Hutchinson told her to "downplay" her knowledge of events leading to the US Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, telling her "the less you remember, the better", according to a transcript of her testimony released yesterday.

Attorney Stefan Passantino advised Hutchinson in preparing for a February deposition before the US House of Representatives committee probing the Capitol attack to say that she could not recall certain events, she told the committee in September.

Hutchinson testified that Passantino, a former White House ethics lawyer under former US president Donald Trump, never directed her to lie to the committee, but urged her not to try to refresh her memory and volunteer information about key events.

"The less the committee thinks you know, the better," Hutchinson recalled Passantino telling her, the transcript released by the committee showed.

Passantino did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The January 6 panel is scheduled to release a final report detailing its findings later.

Hutchinson, who worked as a top aide to then-White House chief of staff Mark Meadows, later switched attorneys and became a star witness for the committee.

She detailed at a public hearing in June that Trump knew many of his supporters were carrying weapons on the morning of January 6. ***– Reuters***

Russia wants 'end to war in Ukraine'

Kremlin says Biden, Zelensky ignoring 'Russia's concerns'

Reuters/AFP
Moscow

President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that Russia wants an end to the war in Ukraine and that this would inevitably involve a diplomatic solution.

He made the comments a day after US President Joe Biden hosted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the White House and promised him continued and unwavering US support.

"Our goal is not to spin the flywheel of military conflict, but, on the contrary, to end this war," Putin said.

"We will strive for an end to this, and the sooner the better, of course."

White House spokesman John Kirby said Putin has "shown absolutely zero indication that he's willing to negotiate" an end to the war, which began when Moscow sent troops into Ukraine on February 24.

"Quite the contrary," Kirby told reporters during an online briefing. "Everything he (Putin) is doing on the ground and in the air bespeaks a man who wants to continue to visit violence upon the Ukrainian people" and "escalate the war".

Kirby reiterated that Biden was open to talks with Putin, but only after the Russian leader "showed a seriousness about negotiations" and after consultations with Ukraine and US allies.

Russia has persistently said it is open to negotiations, but Ukraine and its allies suspect a ploy to buy time after a series of Russian defeats and retreats that have swung the momentum of the 10-month war in favour of Kyiv.

"I have said many times: the intensification of hostilities leads to unjustified losses," Putin told reporters.

"All armed conflicts end one way or another with some kind of negotiations on the diplomatic track," he added. "Sooner or later, any parties in a state of conflict sit down and make an agreement. The sooner this realisation comes to those who oppose us, the better. We have never given up on this."

Russia says it is Ukraine that is refusing to talk.

Kyiv says Russia must halt its attacks and give up all territory it has seized.

Putin also played down the significance of the Patriot air defence system that Biden agreed to supply to Zelensky, saying that Russia would find a way to counter it.

He said it was "quite old" and did not work like Russia's S-300 system.

"An antidote will always be found," he said, boasting that Russia would "crack" the Patriots. "So those who do it are doing it in vain. It's just prolonging the conflict, that's all."

Putin also said a price cap imposed on Russian oil by Western countries, designed to limit its ability to fund the war, would not damage the Russian economy.

He said he would sign a decree early next week to set out Russia's response.

The Kremlin has accused Kyiv and Washington of turning a deaf ear to its concerns and charged the United States was using Ukraine as a battleground to weaken Russia.

"We can say with regret that so far neither President Biden nor President Zelensky have said even a few words that could be perceived as potential readiness to listen to Russia's concerns," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Officials in Moscow have repeatedly said in recent months that they have not ruled out talks with Ukraine.

They blamed the closure of diplomatic channels on Zelensky, who has said he will not negotiate while President Vladimir Putin is in power.

"Not a single word was heard warning Zelensky against the continued shelling of residential buildings in towns and villages in Donbas and there were no real calls for peace," Peskov said. "This suggests that the United States is continuing its line of de facto fighting an indirect war with Russia to the last Ukrainian."

Ex-cop jailed for Dirty War-era crimes

Reuters
Buenos Aires

An Argentine court has sentenced a former police officer extradited from France to 15 years in jail for the kidnapping and disappearance of a young man during the country's so-called Dirty War some four decades ago, a court clerk said yesterday.

Mario Sandoval is one of many former officers who have been sentenced for crimes against humanity committed during the 1976-1983 dictatorship's brutal crackdown against suspected leftists and political dissidents.

Human rights groups estimate that close to 30,000 people were kidnapped or disappeared at the hands of the armed forces in the South American nation.

Sandoval is accused of multiple human rights violations, including torture.

He was sentenced for the disappearance of university student Hernan Abriata, who was kidnapped from his home in 1976.

According to state news agency Telam, Sandoval had before the sentence said he was not involved in Abriata's disappearance.

The court clerk, who asked to remain anonymous, told Reuters that Sandoval had been sentenced for being a "co-perpetrator of the crimes of unlawful deprivation of liberty, sadly aggravated in concurrence with the infliction of torture".

The full grounds for the sentence will be made public on February 2, the clerk added.

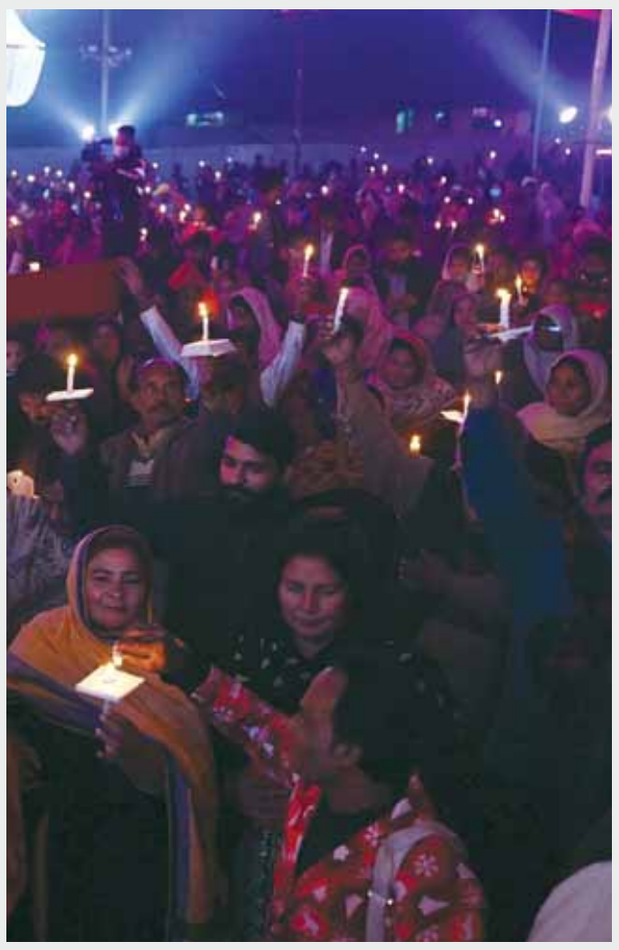
After the fall of the dictatorship Sandoval moved to France where he obtained citizenship in 1997.

After years of legal tussles, he was extradited in late 2019.

France, Germany to hold delayed cabinet meeting

The French and German governments have rescheduled a joint cabinet meeting for next month, the French presidency announced yesterday, as the two neighbours look to put recent tensions behind them.
The meeting was meant to take place in October but was cancelled due to differences between the EU's biggest partners on energy and defence.
The two governments will sit down together in Paris on January 22, a symbolic date that will be the 60th anniversary of the Elysee Treaty which was a key part of post-war reconciliation between the neighbours. **- AFP**

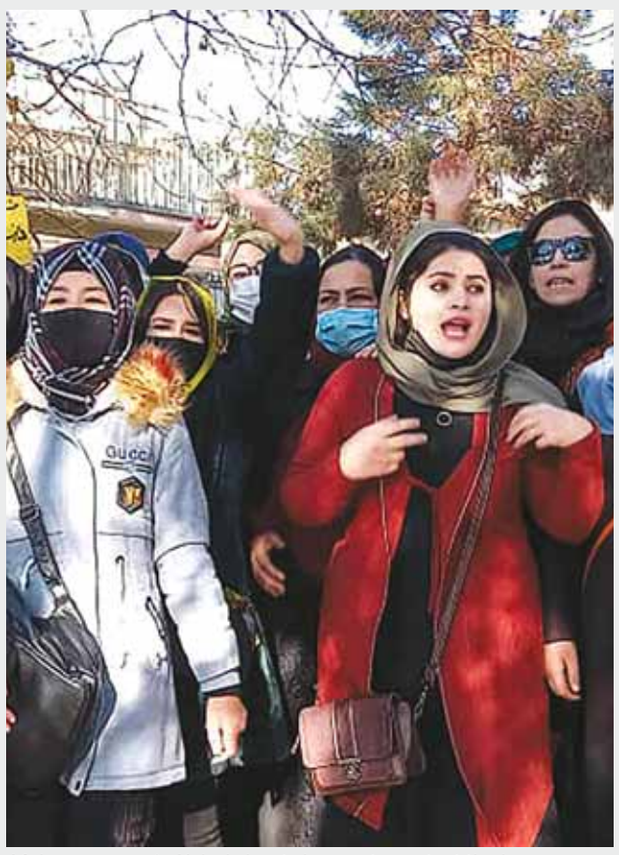




Group activity

Dancers perform during the 'Qhapac Raymi' (summer solstice) Festival in the Andean city of Cusco, Peru.

Right: Devotees hold candles while attending a special service at a church in Lahore on Wednesday night.



Afghan women in Kabul chant slogans to protest the ban on university education for women.



People take part in a 'Marche Blanche' as they leave the Town Hall to remember the victims of an apartment block fire, at Vaulx en Velin, in the northern outskirts of Lyon, southeastern France. Ten residents died in the fire that broke out on December 16, in a rundown apartment block.

Chile plans embassy in Palestinian territories

Reuters
Santiago

Chile plans to open an embassy in the Palestinian territories, President Gabriel Boric said late on Wednesday, which could make the Andean country one of only a handful to have an embassy-level office in the territories that are contested with Israel.

Chilean Foreign Minister Antonia Urrejola confirmed the plan yesterday, but said there was no timeline in place yet and that Chile continues to recognise both Palestine and Israel as legitimate states.

Leftist Boric, who has repeatedly expressed support for the Palestinian people's demand for an independent state, made the comments at a private ceremony in Santiago hosted by the city's important Palestinian diaspora.

"I am taking a risk (saying) this ... we are going to raise our official representation in Palestine from having a charge d'affaires; now we are going to open an embassy," Boric said, without giving details on where the embassy would be located.

The Israeli embassy in Chile did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Palestinian Authority's foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment sent outside of business hours.

The Palestinian territories, which Palestinians want recognised as a state, encompass the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and contest control over East Jerusalem.

Israel captured those areas in a 1967 Middle East war and there have been regular clashes since then.

The West Bank has experienced some of the worst levels of violence in more than a decade this year, much of it concentrated around Nablus and the nearby city of Jenin, with at least 150 Palestinians and more than 20 Israelis killed.

Chile's Boric said the embassy was meant to give Palestinians the representation they deserve and to demand that "international law be respected".

In September, Boric postponed receiving the credentials of Israel's new ambassador to Chile after Israeli forces killed a Palestinian teenager.

Israel criticised the decision, saying that it "seriously" harmed bilateral ties.

German intelligence official held in Russia spying probe

AFP
Berlin

An official for Germany's BND foreign intelligence agency has been arrested on suspicion of treason for allegedly passing state secrets to Russia, officials said yesterday, as tensions soar between Moscow and Berlin.

Ties between Russia and Germany have deteriorated dramatically since the invasion of Ukraine earlier this year, and German officials are on high alert for Russian espionage.

The man – identified only as Carsten L – "transmitted information that he had obtained in the course of his professional activities to Russian intelligence services", federal prosecutors said.

He was arrested on Wednesday in Berlin, with authorities searching his workplace and apartment and that of one other person.

"Investigations were conducted in close co-operation with the BND," the statement added.

The suspect allegedly passed the information to Russia this year.

He was remanded in custody after appearing before a judge.

BND president Bruno Kahl said the agency would not comment further on the case for now, as "restraint and discretion are very important".

"With Russia, we are dealing with an actor whose unscrupulousness and willingness to use violence have to be reckoned with," he said. "Every detail of this operation that becomes public means an advantage for this adversary in its intention to harm Germany."

Since the start of the Ukraine war, concerns about Russian spying in Germany have increased.

Last month a German man was handed a suspended sentence for passing information to Russian intelligence services while working as a reserve officer for the German army.

And in October, Germany's cybersecurity chief, Arne Schoenbohm, was sacked after a television satire show broadcast allegations that he had ties to Russian intelligence services.

Germany had seen spying cases with links to Russia even before the Ukraine war, as have other European countries.

In 2016, a German former intelligence agent who spied for both the Russian secret services and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was jailed for eight years.

The Ukraine conflict has heightened concerns in Berlin not only about Russian espionage plots, but also attempted sabotage of critical infrastructure and cyber-attacks.

The rail network in the north of the country was temporarily paralysed in October by what operator Deutsche Bahn called "sabotage", with some officials pointing the finger at Russia.

Important communications cables were cut at two sites.

39 Mafiosi jailed for forcing procession to divert

Reuters
Rome

An Italian judge has handed down jail sentences totalling 80 years to 39 people for diverting a Good Friday religious procession to the house of a Mafia family and paying homage to an imprisoned crime boss.

A Sicilian archbishop said he hoped it would deter others from doing anything similar in future.

"You should never invoke God or his name, which is certainly not on the side of the Mafiosi, who are violent and ruthless men," Archbishop Luigi Renna said in a statement.

Locals were carrying a statue of the Christ through the Sicilian village of San Michele Di Ganzaria during the Easter of 2016, when a group stopped the traditional cortege and forced it to pass before the house of Mafia godfather Francesco La Rocca.

La Rocca was serving a life sentence at the time for various Mafia-related crimes, but his wife came out of the house to greet the well-wishers and made an offering.

The mayor and priest of San Michele Di Ganzaria refused to follow the procession away from its official route and denounced those responsible for diverting it.

The group was convicted of disturbing a religious event and incitement to commit crimes.

The eight ringleaders received three-year terms, and the others were sentenced to between six months and two years, nine months in jail.

"This sentence is certainly going to make people suffer, but I hope that the suffering will bear fruit," the Catania archbishop said.

In Italy, many members of organised crime see themselves as part of a religious, cult-like group, invoking the help of saints and using religious statues in initiation rites.

Afghan women banned from university as they were 'not following dress code'

Afghan universities have been declared off limits to women because female students were not following instructions including a proper dress code, the Taliban's minister for higher education explained yesterday.
"Those female students who were coming to universities from home were also not following instructions on hijab ... they were dressing like they were going to a wedding," Neda Mohamed Nadeem said in an interview on state television.
On Tuesday, Nadeem triggered international outrage by ordering a sweeping ban on women's education in universities, in the latest crackdown on women's rights in Afghanistan.
The ban came less than three months after thousands of women students were allowed to sit university entrance exams, many aspiring for teaching and medicine as future careers.
Secondary schools for girls have been closed across most of the country for over a year - also temporarily, according to the Taliban, although they have offered a litany of excuses for why they have not opened. **- AFP**

Spain to protect whistleblowers

Spanish lawmakers have approved draft legislation to protect anyone who exposes serious offences or corruption cases in the public or private sector in line with a 2019 European directive.
Justice Minister Pilar Llop hailed the bill in parliament as "a very important text for the prevention of corruption and the fight against it".
The bill, which now goes to the Senate, seeks "to protect anyone who in any employment or professional context identifies and exposes serious criminal or administrative offences". **- AFP**

COMMENT

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From climate justice to climate liability

Many have dismissed last month's COP27 climate conference as a failure, owing to the lack of progress on pledges made at the COP26 summit last year, and to the absence of clear commitments to phase out fossil fuels. More broadly, the COP process itself has been criticised as inadequate and ultimately unworkable, given its reliance on unanimity among all the parties.

But COP27 did produce one notable breakthrough: the world's advanced economies, including the United States and the European Union, finally accepted some responsibility for the "loss and damage" caused by climate change. In the bureaucratic language of the final communiqué, they agreed "to establish new funding arrangements for assisting developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change in responding to loss and damage." A special committee comprising 24 countries has been established to determine how the new fund will be financed, managed, and distributed. Their conclusions are due at the COP28 summit in the United Arab Emirates late next year.

Yet, given that the Republicans will soon have control of the House of Representatives, it is hard to believe that the US will be putting much cash on the table. There is also uncertainty about whether China will be a major contributor. Although it is now a leading source of emissions, the United Nations still considers it a "developing" country. Finally, while the EU has accepted, in principle, that the countries most responsible for climate change should help bear its costs, it is heading into a recession, which will most likely limit Europeans' contribution.

China's involvement is especially important. Not only does it generate almost one-third of global emissions, but the EU has made Chinese contributions a condition for its own participation. Hence, former British prime minister Gordon Brown warns that we could end up with a "fund without funders."

The reality is that COP27 will likely be remembered as a watershed moment

But as real as that danger is, it should not diminish the importance of what governments agreed to at COP27. The developed world's acceptance of responsibility for the impact of climate change establishes grounds for reparations, and indicates a degree of liability that will now be tested in courts around the world. "Climate justice" will evolve from a powerful slogan into a live legal issue. If climate change is the result of emissions – past and present – and if it is driving the increased incidence and severity of extreme weather, that means this year's flooding in Pakistan and creeping desertification in North Africa can be attributed to those who caused the emissions.

But who, exactly, is liable? The developed world's governments have accepted that they are partly accountable. But responsibility, and therefore liability, might also be attributed to the companies that have produced, sold, and profited from the sales of the products that generated the emissions. Energy companies can try to argue that until the 1980s and 1990s, there was no scientific consensus on the adverse climatic effects of burning hydrocarbons. But from the 1990s onwards, that defence cannot stand.

The age of potential liability thus began around 30 years ago, when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and others started creating a body of credible scientific research. And now, the age of real climate liability is upon us. For the companies involved – particularly those subject to the laws and political decisions of the advanced economies – such liability is an existential threat. It is analogous to the Master Settlement Agreement that resolved the conflict between the tobacco industry and 46 US state attorneys general over responsibility for the medical costs associated with smoking.

But whereas that settlement required the companies to pay a total of $206bn over 25 years, climate change and its associated costs are much bigger. The risks are global, and they are still growing, because emissions continue to rise. In fact, the worst is yet to come, and the potential costs are almost beyond calculation.

There will be a ferocious legal battle, to be sure. But simply by accepting responsibility for the global costs of climate change, in principle, the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change have let the genie out of the bottle. Fossil-fuel companies and their investors will not be able to claim that they weren't warned.

True, COP27 left many participants and observers disappointed. Climate scientists, activists, and others are understandably dismayed that the urgency of climate change is being ignored, and that more immediate issues such as the cost-of-living crisis and Russia's war in Ukraine are crowding out the attention of policymakers and the public. But the reality is that COP27 will likely be remembered as a watershed moment. — Project Syndicate

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All that Qatar asked for was a little respect

Zia Chaudhry MBE DL UK on the Western hypocrisy surrounding a World Cup for the ages



"We are the best judges of others, and the best lawyers for ourselves" – One of my favourite sayings, and one that came to mind again recently when I was watching the World Cup and all the drama surrounding it.

Despite an abundance of British credentials (born here, brought up here, educated here, joined an establishment profession here, pay my taxes here, received an MBE from the Queen, unfailingly polite, self-deprecating sense of humour, well-behaved in a queue and love cake), I must admit I did not feel very British when it came to some of the media coverage of the competition in Qatar. I have always been wary of hurling the "racist" label around too liberally, maybe in part because I have been blessed with "success', but try as I might I cannot avoid the word when I look at how Qatar has been treated recently.

Major global sporting events are an ideal opportunity to bring people together and reinforce the common bonds of humanity. Or, they can be an ideal opportunity to propagate notions of superiority and the promotion of cultural hegemony. And when it is the latter, we see on full display the increasingly evident liberal hypocrisy which picks and chooses the causes it deems worthy of support – political or otherwise. For example, for years we have heard how sport and politics should not mix. Then Ukraine was invaded and suddenly no event could take place without mention of the plight of the Ukrainians. Imagine the surprise of the Palestinians, with their decades-old struggle to be free of oppression!

Growing up in Britain it's easy to buy into the idea that Western values are superior. Yet what happens when we scratch beneath the surface?

There are daily debates in Britain and America which seem to struggle with basic definitions of man and woman, so how well-placed are we to export our views to other nations when we seem to be in a state of confusion ourselves? Don't get me wrong, I am all for an exchange of ideas and if we believe "ours" are more beneficial to society then we should not be afraid to say so. But that does not mean that all norms of respect are cast aside. And it certainly does not entitle us to ignore the laws of other states when we choose to visit them.

Sadly, some of the coverage of the World Cup has merely served to highlight the limitations of "liberal" tolerance. We will put up with your funny ways when it suits us (particularly when we want your money) but only as long as you accept our inherent superiority, and when we decide to criticise you, your job is to humbly submit. For too long it has appeared that many nations were willing to go along with this model but in 2022 the world looks very different to how it did in 1922 and there are those who are struggling to cope with that. They can dress up their concerns however they like but it is becoming apparent that the emperor is not wearing any clothes, and he is not enjoying this being pointed out.

Much of the unsuspecting and well-intentioned public has been misled by irresponsible depictions of so-called tolerance without analysing this further. I am clear in my understanding that Muslims in the UK must abide by the law of the land. There is no debate about this. So if Muslims with four wives for example, cannot expect English law to recognise them, how is it that some people can expect Qatar to change its laws and norms to accommodate their behaviour during a month-long competition.

And what was depicted as some rights issue was of course no more than a reminder that certain behaviour was not acceptable in public in Qatar. There was no enforcement of "Islamic values" on unsuspecting visitors. There were no religious police investigating whether couples were married or not, or insisting that women cover their hair, or ensuring that nobody consumed alcohol. But there certainly seemed to be a lot of people enjoying each other's company, the football on display, and their host's hospitality.

If I avoided the British media and its barbed comments, I saw a World Cup which really displayed the meaning of the Qur'anic verse stating "We made you into nations and tribes so that you can get to know one another" [Qur'an: 49:13]. It was a joyous occasion. It culminated in one of the best finals ever. It will be remembered for years to come. All that Qatar asked for in return was a little respect.

● *Zia Chaudhry MBE DL*
Barrister, Speaker, Author.



ROOM WITH A VIEW: A general view shows the World Cup Group C football match between Argentina and Saudi Arabia at the Lusail Stadium last month. (**AFP**)

Gratitude earns more favours from Allah

Gratitude is the greatest way to live for those who possess high ranks of righteousness, and such people did not reach these lofty ranks except through their gratitude; this is because belief is comprised of two halves: one half is gratitude and the other is perseverance.

Gratitude is to acknowledge being treated well by Allah; it is also to praise the One who has done one many favours. It also entails displaying the effect of the favours of Allah upon a person by believing with one's heart, uttering praise and glorifications of Allah by one's tongue, and to use one's limbs in the worship and obedience of Allah. If only a few favours are worthy of a great deal of gratitude, how would the case be when favours are abundant? People are either grateful or ungrateful.

Gratitude holds a high rank in Islam:

●Allah parallels it with His mention. He Says (what means): *"So remember Me; I will remember you. And be grateful to Me and do not deny Me".* [Qur'an 2: 152]

●Allah parallels it with belief. He Says (what means): *"What would Allah do with [i.e., gain from] your punishment if you are grateful and believe?..."* [Qur'an 4: 147] Meaning, if you fulfil the rights due to Allah and the reason for which He has created you by gratitude and belief, He will not punish you.

●Those who practise gratitude to Allah are those who are chosen to be granted His favours. He Says (what means): *"And thus We have tried some of them through others that they [i.e., the disbelievers] might say, 'Is it these whom Allah has favoured among us?' Is not Allah most knowing of those who are grateful?"* [Qur'an 6: 53]

●Allah has classified people into being either grateful or ungrateful; the worst matter in the scale of Allah is ingratitude whilst the dearest things to Him are gratitude and the grateful. Allah Says (what means): *"Indeed, We guided him [i.e., man] to the way, be he grateful or ungrateful"* [Qur'an 76: 3]

●Allah tests His slaves in order to see who will practise gratitude and who will not. Allah informs us about what Prophet Sulaymaan 'alaihi-s-salaam said when He Says (what means): *"... This is from the favour of my Lord to test me whether I will be grateful or ungrateful. And whoever is grateful – his gratitude is only for [the benefit of] himself. And whoever is ungrateful – then indeed my Lord is Free of need and Generous."* [Qur'an 27: 40]

●Allah promises increased favors for those who are grateful. He Says (what means): *"And [remember] when your Lord proclaimed, 'If you are grateful, I will surely increase you [in favour]; but if you deny, indeed My punishment is severe.'"* [Qur'an 14: 7]

●Allah loves gratitude and the deeds of the grateful. He Says (what means): *"If you disbelieve – indeed, Allah is Free from need of you. And He does not approve for His servants disbelief. And if you are grateful, He approves [i.e., likes] it for you..."* [Qur'an 39: 7]

The grateful people mentioned in the verse are those who remain steadfast upon belief during trials and who do not retreat or recant on their belief. Some people verbally thank Allah during times of ease, but during trials they give up their faith. The truly grateful are those who express the true condition of their hearts during trials by remaining steadfast and continuing to thank Allah by their tongues, hearts and limbs. Additionally, this verse clarifies that the pleasure of Allah is achieved by being grateful to Him.

●Allah did not make the reward for the grateful subject to any condition, as He did for other acts of worship, which He conditioned to His will; rather, Allah immediately mentions their reward; He Says (what means): *"...And Allah will reward the grateful."* [Qur'an 3: 144] and also (what means): *"...And We will reward the grateful."* [Qur'an 3: 145]

●Allah informs us that one of Satan's primary objectives is to prevent humans from being grateful; He Says (what means): *"[Satan said] 'Then I will come to them from before them and from behind them and on their right and on their left, and You [i.e., Allah] will not find most of them grateful [to You]."* [Qur'an 7: 17]

●Allah describes His grateful slaves



to be few in number; He Says (what means): "...And few of My servants are grateful." [Qur'an 34: 13] The reason being that many people enjoy blessings and bounties from Allah, but fail to practice gratitude to Allah.

●Allah praised the first prophet sent to man on earth, Prophet Nooh 'alaihi-s-salaam due to him being grateful. Allah Says (what means): *"O descendants of those We carried [in the ship] with Noah. Indeed, he was a grateful servant."* [Qur'an 17: 3] This is as an indication that we should imitate him .

●Gratitude is the first instruction given to man as soon as he begins to comprehend. Allah Says (what means): *"And We have enjoined upon man [care] for his parents. His mother carried him, [increasing her] in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning is in two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents; to Me is the [final] destination."* [Qur'an 31: 14]

● Allah specified it as one of the main qualities of a person who sets himself as a good example for others to follow. He says regarding Prophet Ibraaheem 'alaihi-s-salaam (what means): *"Indeed, Ibraaheem was a [comprehensive] leader, devoutly obedient to Allah, inclining toward truth, and he was not of those who associate others with Allah. [He was] grateful for His favours. He [i.e., Allah] chose him and guided him to a straight path."* [Qur'an 16: 120-121]

Therefore, gratitude is one of the objectives that man is commanded to accomplish.

Imaam ibn Al-Qayyim mentioned that gratitude is one of the ranks of belief, which can be extracted from the fifth verse of Surah Al-Faatihah, (what means): "It is You we worship and You we ask for help." Then he mentioned the following additional points regarding gratitude:

● It is one of the highest ranks of belief.

● It is higher than the rank of contentment; and nobody can be content without being grateful.

● Allah praises the grateful.

●Allah promises the grateful the best of rewards.

●Allah makes gratitude a reason for attaining more of His bounties.

● It is a means to preserve the favors of Allah upon a person.

● It is one of the main objectives that a slave must accomplish.

●It is extracted from Ash-Skakoor, which is one of the Names of Allah, and which implies gratitude.

●Those who are grateful are very few in number.

●Gratitude results in more favours from Allah.

Gratitude is having one's heart devoted to loving the One bestowing the favors, having the limbs continuously obedient to Him and having the tongue repeatedly mentioning Him, praising Him and glorifying Him. Gratitude entails the following three things:

1. One should realise the favors bestowed upon him and have it present in his mind constantly, because this leads him to remember the Bestower of favors and therefore being grateful to and loving Allah, who is of course the Bestower of favors. This would therefore make one exert more effort in worshipping Allah.

2. One should receive favors with humility and express his need to Allah, the Bestower of favours, and mention that he is unworthy of the favors bestowed upon him, and that it is only due to the Grace and Kindness of Allah that such favors were bestowed.

3. One should praise Allah, the Bestower of favors, and this is done in two ways:

1) Generally: To describe Allah as being generous and kind.

2) Specifically: To mention His favours upon one.

There are two points regarding the issue of mentioning and talking about favors from Allah:

1) To mention all that Allah Has bestowed upon one.

2) To utilise these favors in His obedience.

People fall into three categories with regards to the favors from Allah:

1. Those who are grateful and praise Allah for bestowing them upon them.

2. Those who are ungrateful and do not mention them.

3. Those who express that they are worthy of them, when in fact they certainly are not.

An-Nu'maan ibn Al-Basheer, radhiallah 'anhu, said: "He who does not thank Allah for small favours will not thank Him for great ones; and he who does not express gratitude to people (for doing him favours) will not express gratitude towards Allah. Appreciating and mentioning the favour bestowed upon one from Allah is gratitude, and not doing so expresses ingratitude." [Ahmad]

This should be done in front of people and between a person and himself (i.e., to himself) but if people are of the envious type, then one should conceal such favors, and he would not be ungrateful in this case, because he is simply concealing them in an attempt to prevent an evil from befalling him, such as an evil eye or an evil plot from the envious, and it must be known that to prevent harm from afflicting man is an objective set forth by the Islamic Shari'ah.

There is no way one can do anything to repay the favours bestowed upon him by Allah, except that he should continue to praise and thank Allah for having bestowed them upon him, as well as utilising these favours for the pleasure of Allah.

What is our duty towards Allah with regards to the favours He bestows upon us?

●Being submissive to Allah.

●Loving Allah.

●Acknowledging that He is the Bestower of all favours.

●Praising Him.

●Utilising these favors in a way that pleases Him.

Does the way of expressing gratitude towards Allah differ, just like the favours themselves differ?

Yes; gratitude can be expressed by the heart, the tongue and the limbs.

Expressing gratitude by the heart: This is by knowing that Allah is the Bestower of these favours, and this is something that is very important when cultivating children, so that they know where favors come from, as Allah Says (what means): *"O Mankind, remember the favour of Allah upon you. Is there any creator other than Allah who provides for you from the heaven and the earth? There is no deity except Him, so how are you deluded?"* [Qur'an 35: 3]

Article source: http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/

Knowing and recognising Allah's favours

Again, knowing and recognising the favours, as well as their source, is the initial step and it precedes thanking Allah. Recognising favours such as the favours of being able to move, walk, work, exercise, sleep, eat, etc. all branch from the great favour of being healthy. The favour of being humans; the favour of being Muslims; the favour of being guided; the favour of being well-mannered; the favour of being a Prophet (when it applies for those whom Allah Has chosen) are also great ones to reflect on.

This issue is very important to mention when calling people towards Allah. Allah repeatedly reminds us in different parts of the Qur'an of His favours upon us. He says (what means): *"...And [He] subjected for you the ships to sail for you through the sea by His command and subjected for you the rivers. And He subjected for you the sun and the moon, continuous [in orbit], and subjected for you the night and the day. And He gave you from all you asked of Him. And if you should count the favour [i.e., blessings] of Allah, you could not enumerate them. Indeed, mankind is [generally] most unjust and ungrateful."* [Qur'an 14: 32-34]

There are many other verses in the Qur'an in which Allah reminds us of the favours that He has bestowed upon us. One way of calling people towards Allah is to remind them of the favours of Allah upon them, so that they may be grateful and not to be amongst those about whom Allah says (what means): *"...And Allah is full of bounty to the people, but most of the people do not show gratitude."* [Qur'an 2: 243]

Some people attribute favours to other than the actual source, like Qaaroon, who said when he was reminded of the favours of Allah upon him (which means): *"...I was only given it because of the knowledge I have!.."* [Qur'an 28: 78] It is arrogance that leads to such a reaction, which results in misery for such people, because Allah says (what means): *"And whatever you have of Favour – it is from Allah..."* [Qur'an 16: 53]

Expressing gratitude by the tongue: One's tongue reflects what he conceals in his heart, and thus when his heart is overwhelmed by gratitude to Allah, the tongue will naturally constantly utter praise and gratitude to Allah. One should ponder upon how the Prophet sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam would perform Thikr, or supplications and remembrance of Allah, to see how much gratitude and praise they contained;

➢Whenever he, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, woke up, he would say: "All praise is due to Allah, Who has brought us back to life after He has caused us to die, and to Him is the return."

➢Whenever he, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, would retire to bed, he would say: "All Praise is due to Allah who has fed us, provided us with drink, satisfied us and given us protection. Many are those who have no one to provide for them or give them shelter."

➢Some of his regular morning and evening supplications were: "O Allah! Whatever favour I, or any of Your creation has, is solely from You; there is no partner with You; All praise and gratitude is due to You."

➢He, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, would ask forgiveness saying: "I seek refuge in You from the evil of what I have done. I acknowledge the favours that You have bestowed upon me, and I confess my sins, so forgive me."

➢All his supplications would begin with the praise of Allah, which He is very worthy of.

➢ He, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, would begin all his speeches by praising Allah.

➢The opening supplication for prayer, Surah Al-Faatihah, supplications whilst bowing and prostrating, and his supplications after concluding his prayers, were all filled with praise and gratitude to Allah.

➢Whenever he, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, wished to eat, drink, travel or sneeze, he would praise Allah and thank him.

➢On one of the nights when it was the turn of 'Aa'ishah, radhiallah 'anha, to be with him, she began looking for him in the dark by feeling around with her hand, then her hand touched his hands and she heard him saying: "O Allah! I seek protection against Your Wrath in Your Pleasure. I seek protection in Your Pardon against Your punishment; I am not capable of enumerating praise of You. You are as You have lauded Yourself".

Expressing gratitude by the limbs: Any righteous deed or act of obedience which the son of Aadam performs is a form of expressing his gratitude to Allah, the Lord. There are different means of performing gratitude of the limbs; one of which is when one practices the instruction of Prophet Muhammad, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, when he said: "When you get up in the morning, charity is due from every one of your joints. There is charity in every ascription of glory to Allah; there is charity in every declaration of His Greatness; there is charity in every utterance of praise of Him; there is charity in every declaration that He is the only true God (worthy of worship); there is charity in enjoining good; there is charity in forbidding evil. Two Rak'as of Dhuhaa (i.e., forenoon prayer) is equal to all this (in reward)."

Thus, any of the things mentioned in the above narration is a righteous deed which reflects gratitude to Allah. One should exert all efforts to thank Allah using all his limbs and should never feel that he has thanked Allah enough, or that he does not need to do it again the next day.

There is no contradiction between thanking people and being grateful to Allah, because Allah commands us to thank and reward those who do us favours, the foremost of them being one's parents, as Allah says (what means): *"...Be grateful to Me and to your parents..."* [Qur'an 31: 14] The problem is when one thanks people and abandons thanking Allah; this is a great disaster.

Additionally, there is a difference in the manner in which one thanks people and thanks Allah; one should be submissive and humble whilst thanking Allah because this reflects servitude, while on the other hand, one cannot do so with other humans; one should instead supplicate for their forgiveness and praise them. One who does not thank other people is evil and it is unlikely that he would thank Allah and express gratitude towards Him.

Moreover, favours and bounties from Allah are preserved and even increase by one being grateful, but what is it that helps a person to be grateful?

➢By observing the condition of those who are lower than you in status, and to remember when seeing those who are higher than you in standard that it is only by the decree of Allah. Allah says (what means): *"And it is He who has made you successors upon the earth and has raised some of you above others in degrees [of rank] that He may try you through what He has given you."* [Qur'an 6: 165]

➢By realising that one will be held accountable for these favours, as Allah says (what means): *"Then you will surely be asked that Day about [worldly] pleasure".* [Qur'an 102: 8] Even for bounties as seemingly minor as cold water. Some people, due to their misunderstanding of the concept of gratitude, deprive themselves from enjoying them, whereas in fact they were bestowed upon us to enjoy. Allah says (what means): *"...Eat from the good [i.e., lawful] things which We have provided for you and be grateful to Allah if it is [indeed] Him that you worship."* [Qur'an 2:172]

Thus, gratitude cannot entail deeming lawful matters as prohibited, which is one of the principles of the Sufis. If gratitude was a precondition of enjoying the bounties of Allah, then nobody would have been able to enjoy any of the favours or bounties from Allah, because no one can do enough deeds to appropriately express gratitude to Allah for what He bestowed upon us. The solution therefore is to utilise these favours and bounties in ways that please Allah, and to thank Him and seek His pardon for our shortcomings - and Allah will accept this much from us.

➢By supplicating to Allah to help us to be grateful to Him, as in the prophetic supplication in which he, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, taught Mu'aath to say: "O Allah! Help me remember You, express gratitude to You and worship You in the best manner."

It is more virtuous to be grateful when blessed with a favour than to persevere when one is afflicted. Allah loves to see the effects of His favours. Once, Imraan ibn Husayn came out wearing a fine garment, and when he saw how his friends were looking at him, he said: "The Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Allah loves to see the effect of His Bounties on His slaves."

The Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Eat, drink and give out in charity without arrogance or exaggeration, because Allah loves to see the effect of His Bounties on His slave." Therefore, the limit when expressing and showing the effect of the favours from Allah on oneself is to neither be boastful and proud, nor to exaggerate.

Allah hates a Kanood, or an ungrateful person, and punishes him. Imaam Al-Hasan said: "A Kanood, is one who remembers the disasters which befall him and always forgets to mention the favours from Allah (upon him)." This quality is more apparent in women; for example, a woman's husband is kind to her for many years, but as soon as she experiences a minor shortcoming from him, she will immediately tell him that she has never seen anything good from him. This is a form of oppressing the husband, and thus the majority of the dwellers of Hell are women, the reason being that they are ungrateful to their husbands. If being ungrateful to one's husband results in punishment in Hell, how will the case be for those who are ungrateful to Allah?

'Umar ibn 'Abdul-'Azeez would look at the favours of Allah upon him and say: "O Allah! I seek refuge in You from meeting Your favours with ungratefulness or denying them after knowing them, or forgetting them and not mentioning them with praise (i.e., praising You)."

It is also recommended that one prostrates whenever he receives news about a new favour or bounty from Allah, as was the practice of the Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam. Likewise, when Abu Bakr received the news that Musaylamah the liar (who claimed to be a Prophet after the death of Prophet Muhammad, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam) was killed, he went down into prostration. Ka'b ibn Maalik also prostrated when he was given the good news of forgiveness from Allah after he failed to participate in a battle. On the other hand, this should not be a daily practice, but rather, it should only be done when one receives good news or a new favour.

An example of a new favour or good news is the incident when one of the Salaf who was hiding from Al-Hajjaaj, prostrated when he received the news of his death, because the death of a tyrant is a great bounty and favour from Allah. Also, the news of having a new baby, or a Muslim victory over the infidels, warrants such a prostration to be made.

Imaam Ibn Al-Qayyim said: "The religion consists of two halves; one half is represented by gratitude and the other half is by perseverance." Scholars have disputed regarding who is better, a rich person who is grateful, or a poor person who is patient, but it seems that it is best for the rich person to be grateful, and for the poor to persevere.

Article source: http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/

Renewing faith through fear and hope

Texts from the Qur'an: The hope of the believers which is accompanied with good deeds; Allah The Almighty Says (what means): *"Indeed, those who have believed and those who have emigrated and fought in the cause of Allah - those hope (i.e., expect) the mercy of Allah."* (Qur'an, 2: 218) They believed, gave up their homes, migrated to strange countries, fought for the sake of Allah The Almighty, sacrificed, suffered the perils of war, and put up with the hunger, thirst and exhaustion that accompany Jihaad (struggle). Such people can rightly hope for the mercy of Allah The Almighty and for His Paradise.

Hope for the forgiveness of sins; Allah The Almighty Says (what means): *"Say, 'O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [i.e., by sinning] do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins [i.e., for those who repent and correct themselves]."* (Qur'an, 39: 53) Regardless of how many sins one has committed, minor or major, one should never despair of the forgiveness of Allah The Almighty.

Allah The Almighty Says (what means): "Say, 'To whom belongs whatever is in the heavens and earth?' Say, *'To Allah.' He has decreed upon Himself mercy. He will surely assemble you for the Day of Resurrection, about which there is no doubt. Those who will lose themselves [that Day] do not believe."* [Qur'an, 6: 12]

Imaam ibn Jareer At-Tabari, may Allah have mercy upon him, commented on this verse saying, "Allah has decreed that He will be merciful with His slaves, but how was His mercy expressed? He did not punish them although they deserved it (due to their sins); rather He delayed and accepted their repentance, which made them have hope."

Hope even applies to worldly matters, like hoping for wealth, children, a wife, a job, finding what is lost, and so on. Prophet Ya'qoob, may Allah exalt his mention, taught his children to have hope in finding their lost brother Yusuf, may Allah exalt his mention: *"O my sons, go and find out about Yusuf and his brother and do not despair [i.e., lose hope] of relief from Allah. Indeed, no one despairs of relief from Allah except the disbelieving people."* (Qur'an, 12: 87)

Texts from the Sunnah (Prophetic tradition):

Anas bin Maalik, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that the Messenger of Allah, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "Allah the Exalted has said: `O son of Aadam! I forgive you as long as you pray to Me and hope for My forgiveness, regardless of the sins you have committed. O son of Aadam! I do not care if your sins reach the height of the heaven; if you then ask for my forgiveness, I would forgive you. O son of Aadam! if you come to Me with an earth load of sins, but meet Me associating nothing with Me, I would match it with an earth load of forgiveness.'" [At-Tirmithi]

On the deathbed, people have two different sensations, fear or hope. One must always train himself to have good expectations of his Lord, because Allah The Almighty will treat a person according to his expectations. The Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, advised three days before his death: "Let none of you die unless he has good expectations of Allah." [Muslim] Thus, we are encouraged have hope at the time of our deaths. This is why some of our Salaf (righteous predecessors), may Allah have mercy upon them, would command their children to recite the verses from the Qur'an that mention the mercy of Allah The Almighty whilst they were on their deathbed, in order to have good expectations of their Lord before dying.

The Prophet, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "A believer will be brought close to his Lord on the Day of Resurrection and (He will) envelop him in His Mercy, He will make him confess to his sins saying: `Do you remember (doing) this sin and that sin?' He will reply, 'My Lord, I remember.' Then He will say: 'I covered it up for you in the worldly life, and I forgive you for it today.' Then the record of his good deeds will be handed to him." [Al-Bukhari and Muslim]

The Messenger of Allah, sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: "He who loves to meet Allah, Allah loves to meet him; and he who dislikes to meet Allah, Allah abhors to meet him." [Muslim]

Thus, one should combine fear of and hope in Allah The Almighty.

Article source: http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/

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QATAR





Mina District and the Box Park are excellent for a leisurely stroll in good weather and perfect spots to enjoy the sunset.







A winter full of colour

The colourful and vibrant Mina District and Box Park at Old Doha Port are again easily accessible with the partial reopening of the Corniche.
The full opening is from Sunday.
Mina District features a variety of food and beverage establishments and retail stores among others.
The Box Park, comprised of recycled containers in eye-catching shades, house commercial and retail spaces.
Both the locations are excellent for a leisurely stroll in good weather and perfect spots to enjoy the sunset.
PICTURES: Thajudheen





