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Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah gearing up for Dakar Rally





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Amir holds phone call with Pakistan PM

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani held yesterday a telephone conversation with Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif, during which the Pakistan PM extended his congratulations on the success of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, wishing Qatar's leadership, government, and people more progress and prosperity. The phone call also discussed the bilateral relations and ways of enhancing and promoting them, in addition to the latest regional and international developments. (**QNA**)

Tunisia trade union threatens action

Tunisia's powerful UGTT union will hold mass protests and "occupy the streets" soon to show its rejection of next year's austerity budget, the leader of the union said yesterday, in its strongest challenge to the government of President Kais Saied yet. The union, with more than a million members, has proven able to paralyse the economy with strikes.

Ukrainian drone hits Russian air base

A drone believed to be Ukrainian penetrated hundreds of kilometres through Russian airspace, causing a deadly explosion at the main base for Moscow's strategic bombers in the latest attack to expose gaps in its air defences. Moscow said it had shot the drone down causing it to crash at the Engels air base, where three service members were killed. Under its usual policy on incidents inside Russia, Ukraine did not comment. The base is hundreds of miles from the Ukrainian frontier. **Page 9**

China ends quarantine for overseas travellers

China said yesterday it would scrap mandatory quarantine on arrival, further unwinding years of strict virus controls as the country battles a surge in cases. Having mostly cut itself off from the rest of the world during the pandemic, China is now experiencing an unprecedented surge in infections after abruptly lifting restrictions that torpedoed the economy and sparked nationwide protests. And in a sudden end to nearly three years of strict border controls, Beijing said it would scrap mandatory quarantines for overseas travellers. **Page 6**

'Deadliest' winter storms hit US



The winter storm that has left much of the eastern United States in a deep freeze and killed nearly 50 people is one of the deadliest in the country in the past three decades. The nationwide toll of deaths related to the days-long storm has so far risen to 47 people across nine states, with at least 25 perishing in western New York's Erie County. People walk over the frozen Reflecting Pool by the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. Heavy snow, howling winds, and air so frigid it instantly turned boiling water into ice took hold of much of the US over Christmas weekend, including normally temperate southern states. **Page 8**

FIFA Qatar World Cup best in 21st century: BBC poll

Football fans worldwide have favoured the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 as the greatest tournament in the 21st century.

The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 was voted the 'best World Cup this century' in a BBC Sport survey with a whopping 78% votes.

The next in line were the 2002 World Cup (Japan/South Korea) with just 6% votes, followed by 2014 (Brazil) with 5%, 2006 (Germany) and 2018 (Russia) tied at 4%, and finally the 2010 (South Africa) World Cup, with 3%.

The results come despite the BBC choosing to shun the opening ceremony of the World Cup, instead launching a tirade of attacks against Qatar's human rights record, in a move that saw the BBC receive major backlash from football fans in the UK.

For more reasons than one, FIFA president Gianni Infantino and several other sporting actors anointed the tournament as the best ever due to the diversity and inclusion of the game.

"Many people from around the world have come to Qatar and have discovered the Arab world, which they didn't know or they knew only for what was portrayed to them," the FIFA boss told reporters.

From the surprises, shocks, and upsets in the group stages to the excitement of the knockout rounds, and arguably the best final ever, the Qatar 2022 World Cup moved the world in many ways.

After Argentina's thrilling victory over defending champions France in a penalty shoot-out, Lionel Messi finally won the one trophy he had failed to win throughout his lengthy career.

FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022

Qatar delivered a football legacy that ended with Lionel Messi earning his World Cup glory by defeating a contesting France squad 3-2 on penalties.

Several groundbreaking moments were struck in Qatar as Morocco became the first African and Arab team to go to the semi-finals.

Doha Port to receive 58 cruises in 2022/23

By Santhosh V Perumal
Business Reporter

Doha Port, Qatar's gateway to marine tourism, is expecting as many as 58 cruises during the 2022/23 season, which according to Mwani Qatar, is one of the busiest seasons.

The cruise season, which runs until the end of April 2023, is seen to benefit domestic tourism and its allied sectors. This the first season after Qatar successfully hosted the FIFA World Cup, which concluded on December 18, 2022.

"In total 58 cruises are scheduled to call Doha Port in the new 2022/23 cruise season. Six cruise liners will make their maiden calls to Qatar during the season which will continue until April 2023," Mwani Qatar said in a tweet.

Cruise ship Le Bougainville docked at Doha Port on December 25 to signal the start of the 2022/23 cruise season. Managed by the French company Ponant Cruises, the first ship of the season is 131m long and 18m wide, and can accommodate 294 people, including crew members.

One more cruise ship MSC World Europa is expected to dock at Doha Port on December 29. As many as 19 cruises are expected in January 2023, 20 cruises in February, 13 cruises in March and three in April.

In line with the country's plans to enhance Qatar's position as an attractive tourist destination, Doha Port is in the midst of a comprehensive redevelopment process.

Doha Port – which is being transformed into a hub for cruise ships, giant cruise lines, and luxury yachts – boosts efforts to transform Qatar into an attractive regional tourist destination serving global cruise ships.

It is situated in the heart of Doha Corniche, with close connectivity to the city's most prominent tourist attractions such as Souq Waqif, Museums, Msheireb Downtown Doha and stadiums, making it a direct gateway not only to the vibrant heart of the capital but also to a unique set of cultural and entertainment destinations.

The Doha Port Redevelopment Project, carried out by the Ministry of Transport to the port's basin and quay, has contributed to boosting its capacity for receiving the world's largest cruise ships as it had received three supersize floating hotels during World Cup.

"The cruise industry sector has become an important tributary of the national economy and a mainstay of the tourism industry in the country. This is evidenced by the strong numbers that were achieved during the past years before the outbreak of the pandemic, " Hussain Ahmad al-Maqeef, Mwani Qatar's executive vice president, commercial, had said. **To Page 4**

Rain across Qatar, chance today too



Scattered to thundery rain was received across Qatar, inshore and offshore, yesterday, the Met office said. The minimum and maximum temperatures were 15C and 21C, respectively. The forecast for today (Tuesday) mentions a chance of rain at places, with a minimum and maximum temperatures of 15C and 23C, respectively. **PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam **Page 12**

The ideal way forward is mutual respect for values

Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka, Editor in-Chief of *Gulf Times*, rebuts European criticism of Qatar, point by point, in an interview that he granted to prominent Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*



Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka

The criticism of Qatar's treatment of migrant workers by Denmark is hypocritical and uncalled for, Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka, Editor in-Chief of *Gulf Times* has told the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*.

Faisal al-Mudahka, who has lived for some time in Denmark and visited the Danish capital Copenhagen several times and is familiar with the Danish people and their culture told the newspaper that the relationship between Qatar and Denmark has mostly been business-like, about money.

"Your government was here, your crown prince was down here, and nobody talked about problems. It was only about oil and trade with Qatar," Faisal told the *Jyllands-Posten* reporters in Doha. (https://jyllands-posten.dk/sport/ECE14638117/avistegning-qatarmedie-sender-danske-troejer-og-budskaber-i-fake-newsskrald-espand/)

According to him when there is no money on the table, the hypocrisy comes out. "Now they are trying to teach us about human rights and everything related to that," he said in the interview published in the Danish language edition of the publication.

Faisal said he had arranged the reception for "Mister Moller" (Arnold Mærsk Mc-Kinney Møller) when the now deceased businessman visited Qatar about 12 years ago.

"He came down here to congratulate His Highness the Amir on Qatar being chosen the host of the World Cup. A brilliant businessman. He must have been 90 years old when he was here. He had a butler with him. He kept asking about who had built what down here. He is a legend," al-Mudahka recalled.

"Now the agenda is different.

"The first message came from Hummel (Danish sports good manufacturer), who launched an understated World Cup design with a pulled-back logo. The black third shirt symbolised a mourning band, in memory of the migrant workers who 'died' during the construction of the stadiums.

Al-Mudahka said that jersey made the blood rush in the veins of the Arabs. He said he responded by writing an article, which was first printed in the *Gulf Times*. He said he sent it to *Jyllands-Posten*, which published a translated version.

The main point of the text was that Denmark should first put its house in order by treating refugees and Muslims properly before starting to shoot at Qatar, where, conditions for expatriate workers have improved tremendously.

Replying to a question on foreign workers, al-Mudahka said all countries have their challenges.

"Why do the Danes have to teach us? Should we wear a black shirt to remind that Denmark was a slave-trading nation?"

With regard to the arm band worn by German interior minister Nancy Faeser during her visit to Qatar, al-Mudahka said visitors should respect the laws of the country that they visit. "You cannot come and teach people what values are important. Spawning gender politics argument is not welcome."

He said she was violating international law by doing such a thing in Qatar. "When you go to another country, you must follow the international treaties, respect the local rules. It is a breach of the diplomatic rules. You impose your values on us and do not respect the law. Germany's laws are not the same as Qatar's laws. We have laws and a Constitution, and it is based on Islam."

Al-Mudahka said when Western politicians try to impose their culture and values on the people in the Middle East, they are hurting the sentiments of 450mn people in the Arab world, and 1.5bn Muslims world-wide.

He also questioned the authority of the critics.

"Who are you to say such things? If it had been a body under the UN which censured Qatar, we could talk about it. But you can't tell us what to do," he stated.

Al-Mudahka said times have changed. "You cannot come and teach people what values are important. That's what makes people angry."



He said he wants to fight these prejudices which are based on the stereotypical perception that the European world has of Arabs, created by, among other things, Hollywood's film industry. The narrative in films like *Lawrence of Arabia* was that Arabs are traitors, they steal, they kill each other to get water, they have lots of oil, etc.

Al-Mudahka said that is the kind of thing Qatar would try to change with the hosting of the World Cup. "We also do good things. But we have not been proactive enough to tell the outside world our history."

He reiterated that Qatar is a Muslim country and it will never become a Western country. "Never. Because our religion and culture are different."

But, he said Qatar wants to modernise the region to inspire all the desperate young people who immigrate to Europe. "There are so many young people without hope in the Arab world, and there is a lot of unemployment."

To the question how can we get closer to each other, the West and the Arab world, al- Mudahka replied: "The politicians are thinking about elections, they are creating smokescreens. We must find common values. Diplomacy has failed. Look at Russia and Ukraine. Culture and public diplomacy will work if we focus on culture and sport. We have a lot in common. I have lived in Denmark. All our young people play PlayStation and other games. They watch football or Formula 1. We have so much in common."

He concluded by saying: "I am against being taught. Moral teaching must be stopped. Enough is enough."

QATAR

FM sends written message to Iranian foreign minister



Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran Hossein Amir-Abdollahian received a written message from HE the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, pertaining to the bilateral relations and ways to support and develop them. The message was conveyed by HE the Assistant Foreign Minister for Regional Affairs Dr Mohamed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi during his meeting yesterday with Iranian minister of foreign affairs. **(QNA)**

Al-Muraikhi meets Kuwaiti ambassador

HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi met yesterday with ambassador of Kuwait to Qatar Khaled Badr al-Mutairi. They discussed aspects of bilateral co-operation. (**QNA**)



Official

Amir, Deputy Amir, PM condole with Biden on snow-hit victims

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz al-Thani sent cables of condolences to US President Joe Biden on the victims of the snowstorm that swept through some states, wishing the injured a speedy recovery. **(QNA)**

Assistant FM for regional affairs meets Iranian deputy foreign minister for political affairs



HE the Assistant Foreign Minister for Regional Affairs Dr Mohamed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al-Khulaifi met yesterday in Tehran with Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs of Iran Dr Ali Bagheri. During the meeting, they discussed bilateral co-operation and ways to support and develop them, in addition to the latest developments in the negotiations of the return to the joint action plan, as well as a number of regional and international issues of common interest. The deputy foreign minister for political affairs of Iran congratulated Qatar for its success in organising the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. **(QNA)**

Assistant FM meets Unesco representative for Gulf states



HE the Assistant Foreign Minister Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhater met yesterday with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) Representative for the Gulf States and Yemen and Director of the Unesco Office in Doha Salah El Din Zaki Khaled. During the meeting, they reviewed co-operation between Qatar and the organisation in the fields of education, culture and environment, and discussed co-operation between the two parties in Yemen. The meeting also discussed the latest developments in the situation of women in Afghanistan. During the meeting, HE the Assistant FM welcomed the new Unesco representative in Doha, and wished him success in performing his duties. For his part, the Unesco representative congratulated Qatar on its success in organising the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. **(QNA)**

National Cyber Security Agency fetes defence officers for World Cup security

QNA
Doha



The National Cyber Security Agency honoured 38 officer candidates in the Ministry of Defence in recognition of their participation in protecting and securing cyberspace in Qatar during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, in the presence of HE the President of the National Cyber Security Agency engineer Abdulrahman bin Ali al-Farahid al-Malki, and HE the Commander of Qatar Amiri Signal and Information Technology Corps Brig Gen Zayed bin Ahmed al-Kuwari.

Addressing the ceremony, HE al-Malki said that the wise leadership was aware of the magnitude of the challenges that would accompany the hosting of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 - the biggest and most important tournament in the world. Securing cyberspace for the tournament in particular and for the country in general was among the most important challenges. Accordingly, National Cyber Security Agency was established to meet the challenge of securing the country's cyberspace.

He stressed that the National Cyber Security Agency succeeded to achieve its primary goal which was protecting the cyberspace of Qatar during the World Cup; indicating that the agency achieved this goal through active participation with the relevant authorities, most importantly the Ministry of Defence.

HE the President of the National Cyber Security Agency added that hard work, sincerity and dedication since the first day have led to achieving the goal of protecting the country's cyberspace from the risks during the World Cup. He explained that the National Cyber Security Agency had developed plans and precise and rapid work mechanisms to address any risk to various institutions, and was able to deter all risks.

HE al-Kuwari underlined that the National Cyber Security Agency achieved its goals aimed at protecting the cyberspace of Qatar, praising the agency's achievements during the past period, especially during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. He noted that the fruitful co-operation between the Ministry of Defence and the National Cyber Security Agency comes at the directives of HE the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Affairs Dr Khalid bin Mohamed al-Attiyah, and HE the Chief of Staff of Qatar Armed Forces Staff Lieutenant-General (Pilot) Salem bin Hamad al-Nabit, to develop joint co-operation and strengthen the protection of the country's cyberspace.



He stressed the importance of continuous and fruitful co-operation and partnership between the National Cyber Security Agency and the Ministry of Defence through courses, practical training and other joint tasks aimed at enhancing the capabilities of workers in this important field; pointing to the importance of investing in Qatari cadres and developing their capabilities and skills in various fields, especially in cybersecurity.

A film highlighting the achievements during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 was displayed during the ceremony which honoured 38 officer candidates in the Ministry of Defence, in appreciation of their participation in the efforts of the National Cyber Security Agency, and the preservation and cyberspace security during the tournament. At the end of the ceremony, commemorative shields were exchanged between HE the President of the National Cyber Security Agency and HE the Commander of Qatar Amiri Signal and Information Technology Corps, on the occasion of the fruitful co-operation between the two sides.

Katara launches Qatari Public Diplomacy promotional campaign in Jan

QNA
Doha

The Cultural Village Foundation – Katara announced yesterday the Qatari Public Diplomacy Promotional Campaign – January 2023. The campaign includes a series of educational and awareness lectures dealing with public diplomacy in its various cultural, educational, traditional and economic fields.

The CEO of Katara Public Diplomacy Center Darwish Ahmed al-Shaibani, said that the centre seeks, through launching the campaign, to build and qualify the national capabilities in the field of public diplomacy through a distinguished program that trains and qualifies those who want to work in the field of public diplomacy in its various departments and specialities.

He pointed out that the campaign includes specialised lectures that target employees in various official ministries and authorities, held at their workplaces, to increase knowledge and develop manpower through training and qualifying in the field of public diplomacy, in addition to highlighting its role in the field of international affairs, and building bridges of communication between communities and nations.

He explained that this campaign comes after the success achieved by Katara during its presidency of the current session of the Global Public Diplomacy Network, which membership includes 27 countries from different continents of the world, and a year after the establishment of the Katara Public Diplomacy Center, which is the first of its kind in Qatar, Gulf region and Middle East.

He emphasised that the centre's objectives focus on building national capabilities, publishing research and studies on public diplomacy in its various aspects in order to open new horizons of dialogue and promote bridges that link between the Arab and world culture, in addition to achieving sustainable development to achieve a more sophisticated and advanced reality.

The CEO of Katara Public Diplomacy Center, expressed his happiness of the impressive success achieved by Qatar in hosting exceptional tournament of FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, which marked a milestone in the history of the World Cup tournaments, appreciating impressive contribution of the World Cup in bringing peoples and cultures together and introducing the true bright image of the region. He praised the local media for highlighting the inclusive image of Arab culture and introducing it through broadcasting the events that accompanies FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

The campaign is provided by a number of ministers, ambassadors and faculties, in addition to training courses for workers at official and governmental ministries and authorities in the field of public diplomacy and negotiating.

This programme coincides with the launch of a media campaign designed to increase awareness in collaboration with local television channels and social media platforms to broadcast a set of TV interviews and videos.



The campaign comes a year after the establishment of the Katara Public Diplomacy Center, which is the first of its kind in the region.

beIN Sports clocks record-breaking cumulative viewership of 5.4bn for World Cup

The beIN Media Group (beIN) is marking a World Cup victory of its own by revealing record viewership figures for FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. beIN recorded more than 5.4bn cumulative views throughout the month-long tournament on its flagship channel beIN Sports across the Middle East and North Africa (Mena), and 1.1bn views on its official social media channels.

The highly anticipated final match that ended with Argentina becoming FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 winners with a 4-2 victory on penalties against France, was watched by a staggering 242.8mn viewers on beIN Sports' free-to-air channel. This figure equates to 68%, more than two-thirds, of the Mena's total adult population and, when analysed per country, results show viewership was particularly strong in Qatar where 93% of the adult population tuned in. In Morocco 91% of adults watched, followed by Lebanon (89%), Algeria (79%), and Egypt (72%). On its official YouTube channel, the final match drew in a cumulative viewership of 25mn with viewership peaking at 4.44mn during the penalty shootouts.

The overall viewership across beIN's 24-country coverage area across Mena for all matches is a 135% increase compared with the Qatar-based network's broadcast of the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018. The final of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 attracted 88mn more viewers on beIN Sports than the final of FIFA World Cup Russia 2018. Average TV viewership per match throughout the tournament saw a significant rise in 2022 reaching 80.6mn, compared to that of 36.2mn for 2018's coverage.

Mohamed al-Subaie, CEO of beIN – Mena, said: "It's incredibly special for us that the first World Cup in the Middle East has broken regional viewership records with more than 5.4bn cumulative views across the month-long tournament.

This is evidence of the appetite for football and similar tournaments across the Arab World and we are honoured to have been the exclusive rights holder. We are excited to be preparing for many more extensive broadcasts as we continue to inspire, educate, and entertain viewers across Mena."

This year's tournament – the first held in the Middle East – featured four teams from the Arab World: hosts Qatar, neighbouring Saudi Arabia, and North African duo Tunisia and Morocco. Morocco's Atlas Lions went the deepest, recording landmark victories over Spain and Portugal in the knock-out stages to become the first Arab – and first African – nation to reach a World Cup semi-final.



The figures from beIN, the exclusive FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 broadcast rights holder across 24 countries in Mena, show that aside from the final, the semi-final game that saw Morocco lose out on a spot in the final to France, earned record viewership of 186.1mn on beIN Sports. That equates to 52% of the adult population in Mena and Iran tuning in for the match.

These figures also show that 99% of the adult population of Morocco watched the African nation's historic match live on beIN Sports; 82% of the adult population in Qatar watched the match on beIN Sports, 78% in Algeria, 75% in Tunisia, 67% in Lebanon and 63% in Saudi Arabia.

The semi-final decider between Argentina and Croatia, drew in 166.3mn viewers across the region. The semi-final figures represent an increase on the quarter-finals where 151.8mn viewers tuned in to see Morocco's Youssef En-Nesyri's towering header eliminate a Portuguese team replete with global superstars including Cristiano Ronaldo, Bruno Fernandes, and Ruben Dias.

beIN's social media also posted record numbers with online video views reaching 1.1bn compared to 121mn in 2018, and an even more impressive 5.5bn impressions resulting in 400mn interactions (not including SnapChat), compared with 235mn impressions in 2018 that resulted in 40mn interactions.

As the Official Broadcast Partner, beIN Sports played a central role in showcasing the historic tournament. Offering audiences premium broadcast, analysis, and commentary of each game across its seven channels in four languages, beIN Sports' viewing figures for the month-long tournament underlines the unprecedented appetite of football fans in the region for this historic first staging in the Arab World.

Ooredoo supports social investment, affordable education in CSR initiative

Ooredoo has announced that it is sponsoring an initiative that promotes accessible opportunities for learning. In line with its commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, one of which is ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education with opportunities for all, the telco leader confirmed its sponsorship of Qatar Foundation education organisation, Muallemi.

Muallemi was founded by two students with a belief in equal opportunities for education, to ensure students in Qatar could access affordable tutoring to bolster their school or university studies. Muallemi offers personalised virtual 1-to-1 sessions in Mathematics, Science, and English. Sabah Rabiah al-Kuwari, director, PR at Ooredoo, said: "We have a strategic commitment to the UNSDGs and in particular those relating to community, education, and health and well-being.

"We are entirely committed to raising awareness of the importance of gaining a quality education, to support the future generation of people that will be running our country, and are delighted to be providing our support to such a worthwhile initiative."

Available to students from school age to university, Muallemi helps to bridge any existing learning gaps, with one-to-one virtual tutoring sessions that are customised to their specific needs.

The rewards-based learning system makes the programme more engaging and enjoyable, with the overall aim being to help the students achieve improved learning outcomes.

Muallemi is incubated at Qatar Science & Technology Park and has recently completed its pilot programme with Tariq bin Ziad and Qatar Academy Sidra. In addition to 1-to-1 support offered at home, Muallemi also partners with schools in order to improve learning outcomes in the classroom.

"As we move ever further into the digital age, it's vital that students can access education digitally in the same way other aspects of their lives shift to digital. Our corporate strategy includes an aim of digital transformation, in alignment with Qatar National Vision 2030, and this latest CSR initiative is a clear demonstration of our commitment to helping our country achieve this goal," al-Kuwari added.

Broken Wings to stream online until New Year's Day

The recent London production of *Broken Wings*, which took to the stage at Charing Cross Theatre, is now available to stream online for audiences to enjoy until New Year's Day.

The critically acclaimed musical, with a beautiful original score by Middle Eastern duo: Qatari composer, and singer/songwriter Dana and West End actor, singer, and writer Nadim Naaman, was first premiered in 2018 and had sell-out shows at the Theatre Royal Haymarket in London, the Beitiddein Festival in Beirut, Katara Opera House in Qatar, and The Dubai Opera.

Based on the poetic novel of the same name by Lebanese-American writer, poet and visual artist, Kahlil Gibran, the majestic new musical available to stream has world-renowned theatre and Broadway producers, namely Katy Lipson, Bonnie



Comley, Stewart F Lane, and Edward Prophet, at the helm. Receiving 5-star reviews from the industry's most trusted sources including West End Best Friend, Dress Circle Antics, and Fairy Powered Productions, *Broken Wings* has been described by All The Dazzles as: "An absolute must-see..." and Broadway World advised: "Grab a ticket or ten for this musical while you can...". Dana, said: "Broken Wings will always hold a special significance for me, not only because it was my first musical, but because it was my first exercise in introducing this prolific figure of Arab origin to a West End audience.

"Thank you to the Aria Entertainment team for making this stream possible."

The events of *Broken Wings* highlight key issues of the time, yet the themes and debates raised remain increasingly relevant today, over a century later; the fight for gender equality, the freedom to live life to the fullest, a world where tradition and modernity is celebrated alike, wealth versus happiness, immigration, and the importance of 'home'. Audiences can stream *Broken Wings* until New Year's Day at 7.30pm GMT.

HMC hosts awareness events on pressure injuries and prevention

Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) recently observed the World Pressure Injury Prevention Day, marked every year in November to raise awareness among medical and nursing professionals about pressure ulcers and how to prevent them.

To mark the occasion, the Advanced Wound Care Unit at the Department of Surgery organised a series of events on December 21 and 22 at Hamad General Hospital (HGH) and Hazm Mebaireek General Hospital (HMGH).



The HMC team in a group photo.

Present at the event at HGH was Dr Mohamed al-Akkad, deputy chair, Surgery Department, HMC while the event at HMGH was held in the presence of Hussein al-Eshaq, executive director of HMGH; Dr Morshed Ali Salah, head of Surgery Departments at HMGH; and Dr Muayad Kasim, deputy chairman of the Department of Medicine. Dr Rashad al-Feki, senior consultant surgeon and head of the Advanced Wound Care Unit at HMC, said that reducing the incidence of pressure ulcers and their complications can result in important improvements in patients' health outcomes and benefit patients greatly.

"Pressure ulcers, also called bedsores, are defined as damage and injuries to skin layers and subcutaneous tissue, and especially skin that covers bony areas of the body, resulting from friction and prolonged pressure on the skin," Dr al-Feki said.

Bedsores are a common health issue around the world and can cause pain and severe complications for patients. Patients who stay in their beds for treatment for prolonged periods of time and those who are unable to move due to paraplegia or quadriplegia can suffer from pressure ulcers. Bedsores often appear in the lower back, back vertebrae, and bony areas such as the elbows, heels, fingertips, and the buttocks. The severity of bedsores can vary from superficial to severe, which is characterised by complete damage to the skin and the tissue surrounding it in the affected areas and muscle damage.

Severe pressure ulcers can even reach the bones in some cases. Dr al-Feki explained that pressure ulcers occur as a result of pressure of the body weighed on the affected parts, which reduces the blood flow to the tissue and leads to injuries to the skin. Pressure ulcers can also affect patients who sit in wheelchairs for long time, as well as bed-bound patients who are put on ventilators or parenteral nutrition for prolonged periods of time. He noted that the best ways to prevent bedsores include changing the patient's position on the bed constantly and ensuring the patient is lying on the bed in a comfortable position, and if possible, moving the patient out of the room in a wheelchair from time to time.

"Treatments for bedsores include specialised treatments for the skin and antibiotics, in addition to therapeutic diet to include meals that are rich in nutrients that promote wound healing," Dr al-Feki continued. "In cases where surgical intervention is performed to treat pressure ulcers, it is very important to follow the correct ways to treat wounds after surgery and to ensure that wounds are continuously taken care of by specialised medical and nursing staff until they recover fully."

Afaf al-Sayed Abdul Salam, head of the Wound Care Nursing Team at HGH, said that the events that were organised at HGH and HMGH to mark the World Pressure Injury Prevention Day included three specialised workshops in each of the two hospitals. The workshop targeted nursing staff to familiarise them with the latest methods of early detection and diagnosis of bedsores, treatment practices, and the best methods for treating wounds that result from bedsores.

PHCC nutrition drive shows BMI reduction among obese

The Primary Health Care Corporation (PHCC) has noted that its dietetics programme has been successful in significant body mass index (BMI) reduction among the obese.

PHCC provides dietetics services through trained dietitians to tackle the rising rates of obesity in Qatar. The service was initiated to support overweight and obese adults reduce their BMI through a dietetic programme.

PHCC undertook a study to evaluate the effectiveness of PHCC's dietetics services led by Dr Mohamed Tanveer Alam, consultant family physician at Airport Health Centre.

The study which is published in the American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine found PHCC's programme supports BMI reduction of up to 10% in overweight and obese subjects. The study further reported that the median time for weight reduction was 3.2 years,



Mohamed Tanveer Alam



Dr Shajitha Thekkeveettil

with women showing earlier significant weight loss than men. Greater weight reduction was seen in those with chronic diseases and who had constant follow up visits in the dietetic clinic during the study period.

Dr Alam said: "The study results are encouraging and show significant improvement in the management of adult obesity with medical nutrition therapy through involvement and guidance in the community dietetic clinics." "Given the effectiveness of PHCC's dietetics programme, it should be more widely considered as an operative strategy to prevent expensive diabetic and cardiovascular events, mainly in high-risk patients," added, Dr Shajitha Thekkeveettil, Department of Clinical Research, PHCC and a member of the research team.

The world of sport integrity mourns Frattini

The International Centre for Sport Security (ICSS) chairman and the Sport Integrity Global Alliance (SIGA) vice-chairman Mohamed Hanzab, has condoled the death of Franco Frattini *(pictured),* who has been serving since January 2022 as President of the Council of State of Italy and had chaired SIGA since 2017 until recently. Frattini, 65, died on Saturday, an ICSS statement issued yesterday, said.

The ICSS is a founding member of SIGA. Frattini served twice as Former Italian Foreign Minister and as Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security from 2004-2008. "Magistrate Franco Frattini held our hand when we were still in our baby steps and supported our efforts to establish and operate, under his visionary chairmanship, the Sport Integrity Global Alliance. We were privileged to have the opportunity to work next to a leader able to transform challenges into opportunities and to firmly remind the world that integrity in sport is the only option. Franco Frattini always put the institution first, he always prioritised the common good. We will remain grateful to him forever", Hanzab said.



Passionate about sport, Frattini also served for several years as the President of the High Court of Sport Justice of Italy. He was appointed "Knight Grand Cross of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic", and "Commander of the Legion of honour" by the President of France. In 2011, he received the Golden neck-chain of the Olympic Order, the highest honour of the International Olympic Committee, the statement added.

Audi, BMW models recalled

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI), in co-operation with Q-Auto Company, has announced the recall of 2023 Audi RS e-tron vehicles, as the rear centre seatbelt sensor wire routing is incorrect, leading to an incorrect engagement of a child seat if attached. The MoCI, in co-operation with Alfardan Automobiles, has announced the recall of BMW's 2022 735i Saloon, 760i xDrive Saloon, 740i Saloon, & i7 xDrive 60 Saloon vehicles, as the electronic chip is not connected to the mobile phone network, which leads to a failure in transferring the data to the phone network. The recall campaign comes within the framework of the MoCI's continuous efforts to protect consumers and ensure that dealers follow up on vehicle defects and repairs. The MoCI said that it will co-ordinate with the dealer to follow up on the maintenance and repair works and will communicate with customers to ensure that they carried out the necessary repairs. The MoCI urged all customers to report any violations to its Consumer Protection and Anti-Commercial Fraud Department, which processes complaints, inquires and suggestions through the following channels: Call centre: 16001, e-mail: info@moci.gov.qa, Twitter: @MOCIQATAR, Instagram: MOCIQATAR, MoCI mobile app for android and iOS: MOCIQATAR

Qatar Charity hosts Tajerat exhibition

Qatar Charity has inaugurated the 'Tajerat' exhibition at its Community Development Center in Al Rayyan, with the participation of many productive Qatari families.

Launched by Qatar Charity for the year 2022-2023, the 'Warm Heart' campaign aims to support more than 1mn displaced people, refugees, and needy families in crisis areas, disasters, and poor communities in several countries around the world, in addition to supporting workers and people with limited incomes inside Qatar.

The exhibition is being held from Dec 25-29, and it will be open in morning and evening. The morning period extends from 9am-12pm, while the evening period extends from 4pm-8pm.

The exhibition products are characterised by diversity, where the shoppers will find perfumes, clothes, and food. The participations from productive families were selected to support them in marketing their products. The exhibition will run for a week. In this context, the Head of the Community Center, Maryam Ateeq al-Abdullah said that the idea of the "Tajerat" exhibition intends to support productive families and provide an opportunity for home-based entrepreneurs to display and market their products.

Al-Ateeq expressed her thanks to Qatar Traders for answering Qatar Charity's call to participate in an exhibition dedicated to supporting its various projects.

Many participants in the exhibition from Qatari productive families expressed their happiness to contribute to this event to support humanitarian projects and affirmed their keenness to participate and support Qatar Charity to help poor families and orphans.

The owner of the incense perfume booth Salam al-Kuwari praised this experience and said that she is excited about this idea of donating to the needy, adding that it complements the path of grandmothers and mothers in the way of supporting goodness and helping the needy wherever they are. For her part, Umm Saleh thanked Qatar Charity for providing the opportunity to participate, stressing that her contribution comes to support doing good and Qatar Charity's projects in humanitarian work in various parts of the world. **(QNA)**



The exhibition products are characterised by diversity, where the shoppers will find perfumes, clothes, and food.

QATAR

Winners picked in LuLu 'Win 2 Million Promotion' mega draw



The mega draw pertaining to 'Win 2 Million Promotion' was held yesterday at LuLu Hypermarket, D-Ring Road branch under the supervision of an inspector from the Ministry of Commerce & Industry. The first, second and third winners received their prizes by way of 50% cash and 50% LuLu Gift Vouchers and the remaining 280 winners were given prizes by way of LuLu Gift Vouchers. Officials from LuLu Hypermarket were present at the draw.

Municipality ministry intensifies efforts to deal with rain

The Ministry of Municipality's joint rainfall emergency committee has intensified preparations and readiness to deal with the rains through co-operation and co-ordination between the competent authorities in the municipalities, the ministry's unified call centre and the authorities concerned in the country.
In co-operation with the ministry's competent departments, the rain emergency teams in the municipalities supplied work teams with equipment and mechanisms necessary to handle waterlogging on a timely basis and around the clock. In addition, co-ordination took place between the joint rainfall emergency committee and the Ministry of Interior's authorities concerned to facilitate traffic movement. **(QNA)**



HE the Minister of Education and Higher Education Buthaina bint Ali al-Jabr al-Nuaimi is seen during an interaction.

AAB reveals new Toyota GR86 Coupe

Sports car enthusiasts in the Qatar can look forward to an exciting addition to Toyota's GR collection with the launch of the new GR86, AAB announced yesterday.

The sleek and stylish coupe provides an entry point to Toyota's GR range, bringing the rewards of sports-focused handling and performance to a wider audience, it was explained in a statement.

The new GR86 is an evolution of the previous GT86; the model launched a decade ago, signalling Toyota's renewed commitment to sports car engineering. The coupe retains the classic configuration of a front-mounted engine with rear-wheel drive.

The development of Toyota's ever-growing GR models by the Toyota Gazoo Racing team fulfills the company's mission to use the experience and know-how gained from participation in motorsport to build 'ever-better cars.'

The GR86 inherits the front-independent MacPherson struts and rear double-wishbone suspension system featured on the GT86, with a performance tuned for an even higher level of response and stable handling. The lowering of the centre of gravity is central to the car's superior handling and exhilarating driving experience. The overall dimensions of the new GR86 are close to those of its predecessor, yet, the height has been lowered by 10mm (to 1,310 mm), while 5mm has been added to the wheelbase (2,575mm).

The rear-wheel-drive coupe's handling changes come in the form of front and rear-frame reinforcements that increase rigidity. Functional exterior air vents have been added to further support steering stability. In addition, weight-shaving details, such as aluminum roof panels and fenders, ensure a nimble curb weight of just over 1,270kg.



The sleek and stylish coupe provides an entry point to Toyota's GR range, bringing the rewards of sports-focused handling and performance to a wider audience.



The 2.4L naturally aspirated, horizontally opposed four-cylinder boxer engine brings a significant power upgrade, increasing from 205 to 228hp and 212 to 250 nm of torque. The power boost stems from a series of tweaks, including increased bore size, changes to the intake and exhaust systems, and optimisation of the Toyota D-4S dual injection technology. Drivers can choose between a 6-speed manual (MT) or automatic transmission (AT). The bigger engine also improves zero-to-60 times, from 7.0 to 6.3 seconds for the MT and from 8.0 to 6.9 seconds for the AT.

With a refined, aerodynamic profile, the front of the new GR86 features a GR-specific functional Matrix 'G Mesh' grille. The angular LED headlights complement the aerodynamic front air dams and vents, with side sill spoilers to aid steering responsiveness and stability. The tightened wheel arches at the vehicle's rear express a wide stance, while arch fins control airflow.

The 2023 GR86's driver-focused cockpit features a 7-inch Thin Film Transistor (TFT) screen, which displays all-new three-mode digital instrumentation, including Normal, Sport, and Track modes. While in Track mode, drivers receive real-time readouts of gear position, engine speed, water temperature, and oil temperature. Standard sport front bucket seats with side bolster firmly hold drivers in place around each corner. The GR86 also brings everyday usability, with 2+2 seating that offers the versatility of fold-down rear seats.

The vehicle's cabin hosts a range of practical features, including an 8-inch multimedia touchscreen compatible with wired Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, Bluetooth for hands-free phone capability, two USB ports and one auxiliary port, a six-speaker sound system, a powerful automatic dual-zone air conditioning system, and many more.

The new GR86 comes equipped with a comprehensive array of safety features, such as seven SRS airbags (including driver's knee airbag), Vehicle Stability Control, Traction Control, Anti-lock Braking System, Electronic Brake-force Distribution, Brake Assist, Emergency Brake Signal System, Hill-start Assist Control, and Tyre Pressure Warning System.

The new GR86 comes in a choice of seven exterior colours - Crystal White Pearl, Crystal Black Silica, Bright Blue, Magnetite Gray Metallic, and Ice Silver Metallic, as well as two new colours; Spark Red and Sapphire Blue. The interior is available in a choice of Black or Black and GR Red. Customers can also choose between two types of newly designed wheels, with 17-inch alloy wheels consisting of five twin spokes or 18-inch matte black alloy sports wheels.

Minister stresses scholarship support for labour market

HE Minister of Education and Higher Education Buthaina bint Ali al-Jabr al-Nuaimi said yesterday that the diversity of scientific disciplines for Qatari students on scholarships abroad will provide the national labour market with multiple competencies in various fields, which will benefit Qatar's renaissance project.

Addressing a gathering held by the Ministry's Higher Education Affairs Sector for students on scholarships abroad, the minister said the scholarships provide knowledge and represent an opportunity to interact and learn about different cultures, which will develop the human skills of the students on scholarship and help create independent personalities able to serve their country, and to compete in the labour market locally, regionally and internationally.

"You are Qatar's human capital, and you are its future knowledge force, and the State counts on you to achieve the goals and objectives of the Qatar National Vision 2030. The country has overcome all difficulties for you to move towards broad horizons, to receive useful knowledge that will benefit the country," she told the students.

HE Acting Assistant Undersecretary for Higher Education Affairs in the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Dr

Khalid al-Ali said that this open meeting is part of the ministry's commitment to support and qualify distinguished students, by providing scholarships in various scientific disciplines, and in the most prestigious international universities. He added that this event reflects the interest of the ministry to benefit from international expertise and to harness it to serve the students of Qatar, a move in line with the strategic plans aimed at graduating Qatari competencies capable of contributing to serving the country, and achieving its development and growth, in light of the Qatar National Vision 2030.

Director of Admissions and Registration at the Department of Scholarships Saleh al-Muftah presented the statistics related to the academic and financial aspects of the scholarship students. **(QNA)**

Doha Port to receive 58 cruises in 2022/23 season

From Page 1

Tawfeeq Travel Group chief executive Rehan Ali Syed had earlier told *Gulf Times* the cruise season is expected to create a series of benefits to domestic tourism in Qatar.
"The start of the cruise season will definitely be a booster for the tourism in the country. Some of the major shore excursions enjoyed by the travellers are desert safari, museum visits, and trips to the shopping malls," according to him. In August 2021, Qatar Tourism had entered into partnership with Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) UK and Ireland to promote the destination in the region and with CLIA's wider community of cruise lines, travel agents and stakeholders.

QT chief lauds Doha winning Arab Tourism Capital for 2023 title

The Arab Ministerial Council for Tourism's recent declaration of Doha as the "Arab Tourism Capital" for 2023, is recognition for the truly remarkable city which offers a spectacular tourism experience for all international travellers, Qatar Tourism chairman and Qatar Airways Group Chief Executive HE Akbar al-Baker said.

The honour was bestowed on Doha in the 25th session of the Arab Ministerial Council for Tourism, at the Arab League General Secretariat headquarters in Cairo, Egypt.

Cities were evaluated based on a selection of criteria including tourism management, infrastructure and resources, safety and security, diversity of tourism activations, and preservation and protection of the environment.

Commenting on the latest win, HE al-Baker, explained: "The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 has allowed many to directly experience Qatar's warm hospitality and authentic culture and heritage. There is more in store, as we look ahead to an exciting calendar of events in 2023 and further attractions and leisure destinations opening across the country in the new year."

In the lead up to the global sporting event, Qatar has seen a swift expansion of its tourism landscape, with the recent opening of West Bay Beach, Al Maha Island and Lusail Boulevard marking a few of the latest attractions in the country.

By 2030, Qatar Tourism's strategy aims to attract 6mn visitors a year, focusing on 15 priority markets and identifying distinct opportunities from point to point and stopover travel.



Inland Sea

Quad bikes restriction extended at Sealine

The ban on the use of quad bikes outside the fenced parts at the Sealine Area has been extended to maintain the safety and security of the users and the visitors, local Arabic daily *Arrayah* reported.
The ban was earlier enforced during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 to enhance the safety of visitors and allow tourists to enjoy a unique experience of the local wild environment.
The working hours of the shops that rent out quad bikes have also been set from 10am to 11pm, the daily explained.
Mohamed Abdulwahab, quad bike fan, said the ban is a good decision but it should be only applicable for riders under 21.



Quad bike users in action.

He suggested introducing of more safety rules and regulations, such as making it mandatory to wear a helmet and rental shops providing a guide to accompany the riders.
Mohamed al-Qahtan, quad bike rental shop owner, said the ban on renting out quad bikes after sunset causes big loss of business. "The powerful quad bikes are not suitable to drive within the limits of fenced areas, as they become unsafe there," he opined. Mohamed Ibrahim, another quad bike fan, said that the fenced areas are suitable for those under 21, but not for the older ones, as many of them have excellent control over the vehicle while riding through the sand dunes.

Fahad al-Kubaisi to release new 'mini album'

Popular Qatari singer Fahad al-Kubaisi is to release a new mini album in the next few days, local Arabic daily *Arrayah* reported. "I have handed over the mini album to Rotana, in preparation for presenting it to my beloved audience," he said. For the 4-song album, al-Kubaisi collaborated with a distinguished group of composers and poets.



Qeeri Corrosion Centre renews ties with industry partners, stakeholders

Qatar Environment and Energy Research Institute (Qeeri) at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, recently convened the annual Technical Steering Committee meeting for its Corrosion Centre.

The meeting brought together more than 35 attendees, among them corrosion and materials engineering experts from the oil and gas industry, ministries in Qatar, and international experts, including corrosion researchers from Curtin University.

Corrosion continues to remain a key issue facing companies operating in Qatar, with the conditions present being some of the harshest and aggressive environments encountered globally, it was pointed out

The Technical Steering Committee meeting is an integral part of determining the guiding strategy for the programmes at Qeeri's Corrosion Centre. The meeting was an opportunity for Qeeri to present current programmes and projects to industry members for feedback and comments to ensure they are in line with the needs of Qatar's industries. The Corrosion Centre's core in-house programmes include pipeline integrity management, corrosion inhibitors qualification and monitoring, material for hydrogen energy, stress corrosion cracking, and reinforced concrete corrosion. It also has joint projects with Curtin Corrosion Centre as part of the Qeeri-Curtin Corrosion Centre alliance. These projects focus on corrosion under insulation, microbiological-induced corrosion, acid gas corrosion, and coating degradation, among other areas.



Participants in the annual technical steering committee meeting.

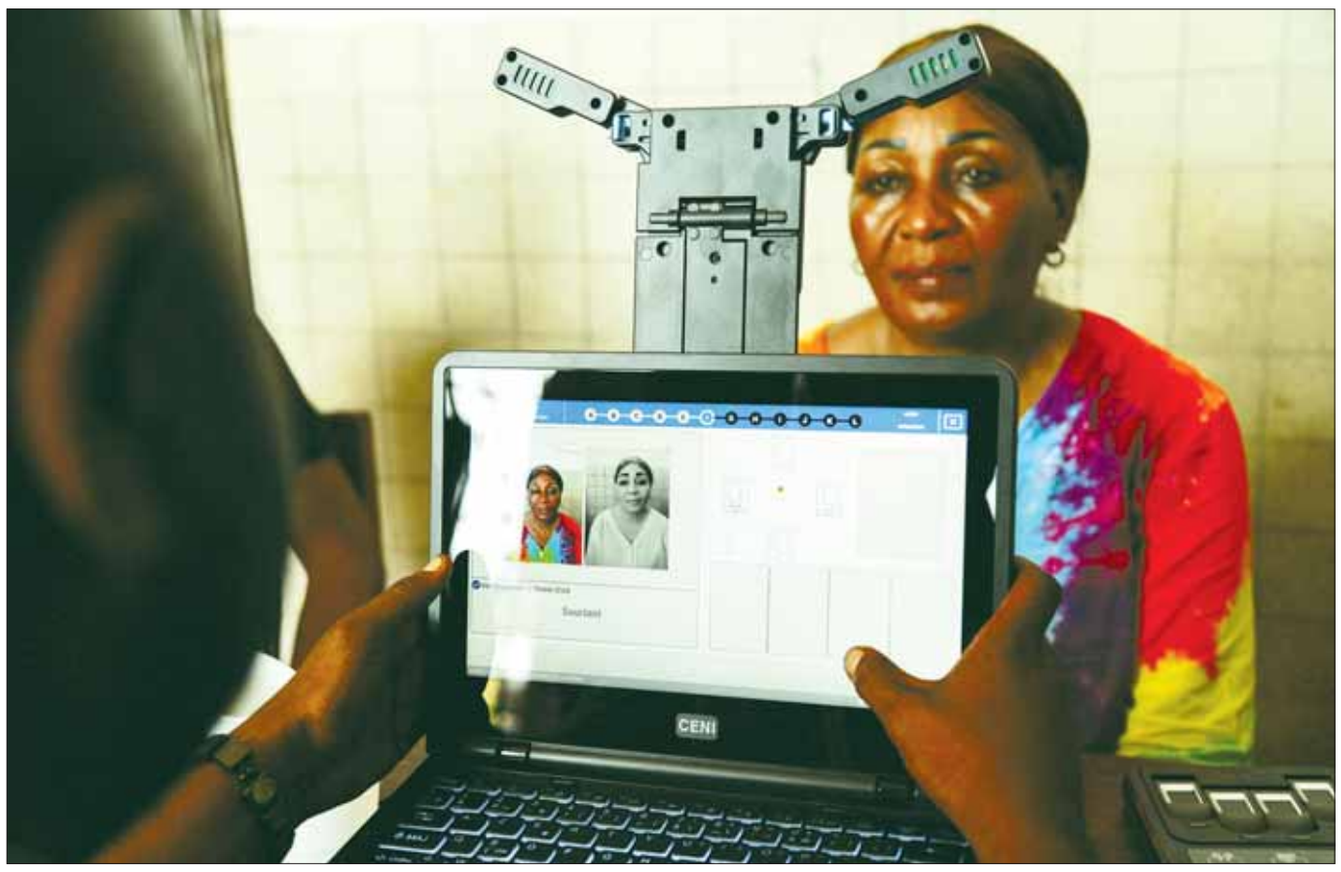
"The Technical Steering Committee is crucial to our operations at the Qeeri Corrosion Centre," said Dr Hanan Farhat, senior research director of the centre. "Every project we conduct has an industrial partner and an industrial challenge that needs to be resolved. We believe that our work has to be relevant and meet industry needs. This is why we conduct our tests either in field conditions or in simulated field conditions to better represent the environment that contributes to material corrosion."

Yousef al-Jaber, vice president, Innovation and Change Management at TotalEnergies, who attended the meeting, said: "Qeeri's Corrosion Centre provides a unique opportunity for the energy sector to work with world-class researchers on topics that are crucial for our operations. In the field of corrosion, understanding the local ecosystem is key to finding the most suitable solutions. The Corrosion Centre has been very successful in establishing strong ties with the local industry and breaking the barriers between the research community and industry."

It not only allowed for connection and networking opportunities between the Corrosion Centre and industry but ensured the centre's programmes remain relevant to industry needs, according to Dr Marc Vermeersch, Qeeri executive director.

Congo voter registration marred by early kit shortages

Reuters
Kinshasa



A Congolese woman sits as she begins her registration process during the launch of the voter registration process for the December 2023 general elections in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Voter registration kicked off in Democratic Republic of Congo over the weekend, as the country prepares the for December 2023 general election.

President Felix Tshisekedi is expected to seek re-election after a first term marked by economic hardship and a resurge of rebel activity in the east.

Almost 50 million people across the central African nation's 26 provinces are expected to register to vote over the next three months.

The logistical challenges of holding an election in a such vast country with limited resources were felt early on, however, as registration opened in the first 10 provinces on Saturday morning to long lines and undersupplied stations.

"There are no machines. They should have postponed instead of setting a date and then doing nothing when people arrive," said medical student Mike Tshamala, waiting with a dozen others at a registration point in central Kinshasa.

Congo's electoral commission (CENI) rolled out a new cellphone pre-registration system to speed up the process and prevent the long queues that formed during past polls.

Iris scans have also been added to limit fraud. But most registration stations in the capital Kinshasa failed to open as scheduled due to lack of staff and material, Reuters reporters observed. Citizens in other provinces made similar observations.

An election observer who did not wish to be named told Reuters only 6,900 out of over 11,000 kits needed for the first phase of registration had arrived at the start of last week.

"It's like a car, you start...in first gear, you don't go directly to third gear," CENI chairman Denis Kadima said after signing up in Kinshasa on Saturday.

Tshisekedi, 59, also registered on Saturday in the northwest city of Mbandaka, where an Ebola outbreak occurred earlier this year. Martin Fayulu, the second-place finisher in the last presidential vote, has already announced his intention to run against Tshisekedi again.

Opposition leader Moise Katumbi, the powerful ex-governor of Congo's copper-producing Katanga province, will also run. Congo's economy has been battered by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war since he was first elected in 2019, hiking inflation and the cost of living in the mineral-rich country.

Insecurity has spiralled in Congo's volatile east since the M23 rebel group, which Congo accuses Rwanda of backing, staged a major offensive in March this year.

Eight killed in northwest Syria clashes

AFP
Beirut

Eight Turkiye-backed Syrian fighters were killed in clashes with regime troops that raged yesterday in the country's northwest, a rebel alliance said.

A statement from the Faylaq al-Sham group said six of its fighters were killed and three more wounded in an offensive launched by Syrian government forces backed by Kurdish fighters from Sunday night.

It later said two more fighters had been killed in the clashes in the Afrin region near the Turkish border, bringing the death toll to eight.

Faylaq al-Sham is an alliance of rebel groups considered close to the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The fighting died down early yesterday evening, an AFP correspondent said. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has a wide network of sources on the ground, said the regime troops and Kurdish forces took control of two Faylaq al-Sham positions in intense fighting involving heavy weapons.

Exchanges of fire occur regularly between Syrian regime forces and rebels who control part of the border. Faylaq al-Sham has taken part in Turkish army offensives launched since 2016 in northern Syria, mainly against Kurdish fighters.

Hezbollah supporter detained in probe of peacekeeper's killing

Reuters
Beirut

The Lebanese army detained over the weekend a main suspect in the recent killing of an Irish UN peacekeeper in a move co-ordinated with powerful Hezbollah, two security sources and a Hezbollah spokesperson said.

The man is a supporter of a militia and heavyweight political party, but not a member of the group, the Hezbollah spokesperson told Reuters. The security sources said the man was suspected of firing shots at a United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) vehicle that was travelling through south Lebanon on Dec 15.

Private Sean Rooney, 23, was killed in the incident, the first fatal attack on UN peacekeepers in Lebanon since 2015. Hezbollah has officially denied involvement in the incident, calling the killing an "unintentional incident" that took place solely between the town's residents and UNIFIL.

On Dec 16, Ireland's then-foreign and defence minister Simon Coveney told state broadcaster RTE that he did not accept Hezbollah's assurances that it had no involvement.

"We don't accept any assurances until we have a full investigation concluded to establish the full truth," he said.

UNIFIL has operated in Lebanon since 1978 to maintain peace along its border with Israel.It was expanded after a UN resolution that halted the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war in southern Lebanon.

Ethiopia govt team makes first visit to Tigray after peace deal

AFP
Nairobi

A high-level Ethiopian government delegation yesterday made the first visit to the capital of rebel-held Tigray since the signing of a peace deal last month aimed at ending a brutal two-year conflict.

Both sides applauded the visit, which aimed at building on the November 2 accord, while the Tigrayans said the talks also focussed on restoring key services to the crippled region.

"The delegation is the first of its stature as a high-level federal government body heading to Mekele in two years," the Ethiopian government said in a statement.

"This gesture is an attestation to the peace agreement getting on the right track and progressing," it said.

The team was led by House of Peoples Representatives speaker Tagesse Chafo and includes Redwan Hussein, who is the security adviser to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, as well as the ministers of justice, transport and communication and labour.

The head of Ethiopia's road infrastructure authority and the heads of Ethiopian Airlines, Ethio Telecom and Commercial Bank of Ethiopia were also present, the government said.

Tigrayan spokesman Getachew Reda on Twitter described the visit as "a milestone" in the peace agreement.

"Fruitful discussions were held & important understanding reached," he said.

In addition to expediting the peace agreement, the talks also looked at restoring services, he said later.

After staying several hours, the officials and CEOs returned to Addis Ababa, but "technical staff are staying here," Getachew said.

The war began in November 2020 when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray after accusing the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the ruling party in the region, of attacking army bases.

Estimates of casualties vary widely, with the United States saying that as many as half a million people have died.

The conflict has also unleashed one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters in recent times. More than 2mn people have been displaced, hundreds of thousands have been driven to the brink of famine and more than 13mn people are dependent on humanitarian aid, according to UN figures.

The agreement signed in the South African capital Pretoria provides for the disarmament of rebel forces, the re-establishment of federal authority in Tigray and the reopening of access to the region.

The two sides on Thursday agreed to create a joint monitoring and compliance mechanism to oversee the deal and receive complaints about any abuse towards civilians.

Getachew said none of the delegation members bothered to bring close protection guards — "a testament to their confidence in Tigray's commitment to the peace agreement."

"Tigray on its part has welcomed and treated its guests with a sense of respect and responsibility.

"We will continue to build on the progress while addressing challenges ahead," he said.

Aid has started trickling back into Tigray since the peace deal was signed, going some way to alleviating dire shortages of food, fuel, cash and medicines.

But the region of 6mn is still largely without electricity and phone lines, while Internet and banking services have only partly been restored.

The capital Mekele was hooked up to the national electricity grid on December 6, and the country's biggest bank, the Commercial bank of Ethiopia, announced on December 19 that financial operations had resumed in some towns.

The rebels say that two-thirds of their forces have disengaged from the front lines.

Pro-government forces — specifically troops from Eritrea to the north, and militias from the Ethiopian region of Amhara — are not mentioned in the peace deal but remain in Tigray.

The rebel authorities, local people and aid workers there have said that these forces have carried out looting, abuse, summary executions and abductions.

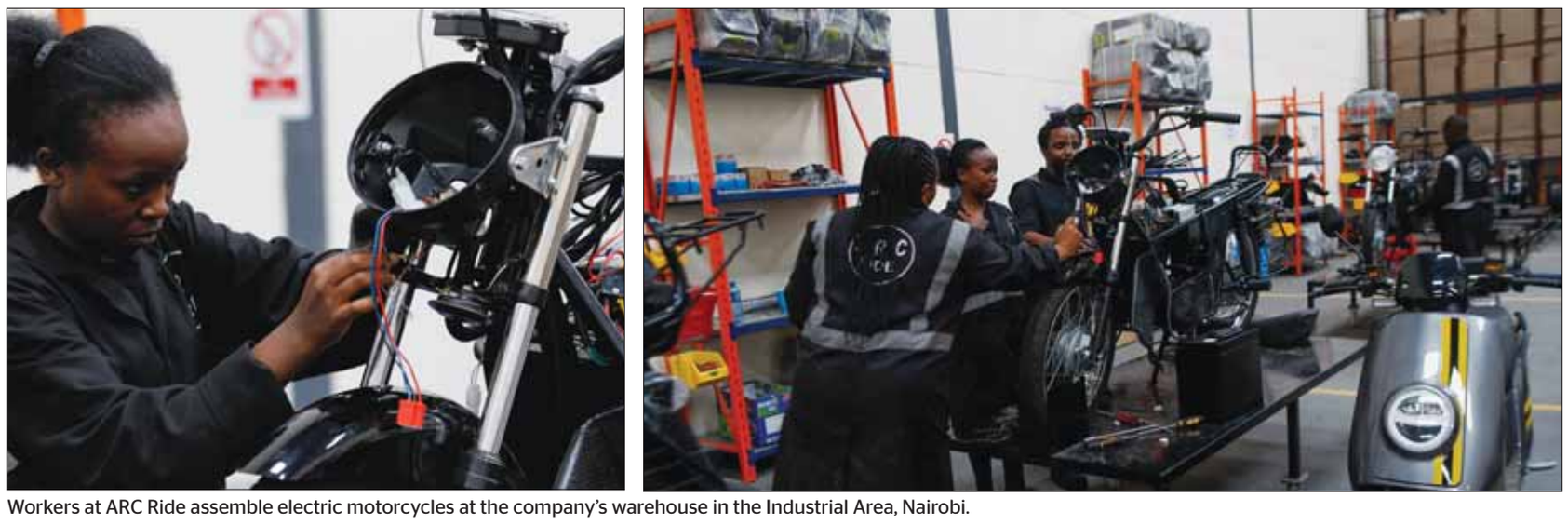
Access to the region is extremely difficult, and it has not been possible to verify these accounts independently.

10 dead after Burkina Faso bus hits landmine

At least 10 people were killed and five others injured when a passenger bus triggered a landmine in eastern Burkina Faso on Christmas Day, the government said in a statement yesterday, Reuters reported.
The bus was travelling from the market town of Fada N'Gourma around 220km from the capital Ouagadougou, to the border town of Kantchari near neighbouring Niger. No one has claimed responsibility, but the attack occurred in an area where the government is battling insurgents linked to Al Qaeda in north Africa and Islamic State fighters. The insurgents control swathes of territory in Burkina Faso. Since 2015 they have carried out raids and blockades of several towns in the north and eastern regions of the country, killing more than 2,000 people.

Battery swapping spurs Kenya's electric motorbike drive

Reuters
Nairobi


Workers at ARC Ride assemble electric motorcycles at the company's warehouse in the Industrial Area, Nairobi.

Over recent months, sets of sturdy, brightly-branded battery swapping stations have cropped up around Kenya's capital Nairobi, allowing electric motorcyclists to exchange their low battery for a fully-charged one.

It is a sign of an electric motorcyle revolution starting to unfold in Kenya where combustion-engine motorbikes are a cheaper and quicker way to get around than cars but environmental experts say are 10 times more polluting.

East Africa's biggest economy is betting on electric-powered motorcycles, its renewables-heavy power supply and position as a technology and startup hub to lead the region's shift to zero-emission electric mobility.

The battery swapping system not only saves time — essential for Kenya's more than 1mn motorcyclists, most of whom use the bikes commercially — but also saves buyers money as many sellers follow a model in which they retain ownership of the battery, the bike's most expensive part. "It doesn't make a lot of economic and business sense for them to acquire a battery...which would almost double the cost of the bike," said Steve Juma, the co-founder of electric bike company Ecobodaa.

Ecobodaa has 50 test electric motorcyles on the road now and plans to have 1,000 by the end of 2023 which it sells for about $1,500 each — roughly the same price as combustion-engine bikes thanks to the exclusion of the battery from the cost.

After the initial purchase, the electric motorcyle — designed to be sturdy enough to traverse rocky roads — is cheaper to run than petrol-guzzling ones.

"With the normal bike, I will use fuel worth approximately 700-800 Kenyan shillings ($5.70-$6.51) each day, but with this bike, when I swap a battery I get one battery at 300 shillings," said Kevin Macharia, 28, who transports goods and passengers around Nairobi.

Ecobodaa is just one of several Nairobi-based electric motorcycle startups working to prove themselves in Kenya before eventually expanding in East Africa.

Kenya's consistent power supply which is about 95% renewable led by hydroelectricity and has a widespread network, was a major support for growth of the sector, said Jo Hurst-Croft, founder of ARC Ride, another Nairobi-based electric motorcycle startup.

The country's power utility estimates it generates enough to charge 2mn electric motorcycles a day: electricity access in the country is over 75%, according to the World Bank, and even higher in Nairobi.

Uganda and Tanzania also have robust and renewables-heavy grids that could support electric mobility, said Hurst-Croft.

"We're putting over 200 swapping stations in Nairobi and expanding to Dar es Salaam and Kampala," said Hurst-Croft.

WORLD

South Korea scrambles jets as North sends drones over border

Reuters
Seoul

Five North Korean drones crossed into South Korea yesterday and South Korea responded by scrambling jets and attack helicopters and opening fire to try to shoot down the North Korean aircraft, the South Korean military said.

As part of its response, the South Korea military also sent surveillance aircraft into the North to photograph its military installations, a South Korean military official said.

"This is a clear act of provocation by the North violating our airspace," a South Korean official with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lee Seung-o, told a briefing.

One of the five North Korean drones flew near the South Korean capital, Seoul, and the others flew near the west coast, Lee said the South Korea military "operated assets to shoot down" the drones. He did not say if any drones had been shot down but the Yonhap news agency later said South Korea's military fired about 100 shots but failed to shoot any down. Lee said South Korea initially fired "warning shots" when it first detected the drones.

One of the drones was known to have returned to North Korea while South Korea lost track of the other four, Yonhap reported, citing the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

North Korea has no channel for media queries from South Korea and its state media made no mention of any drones. South Korean reconnaissance aircraft flew into the North to take photographs in action corresponding to the North Korean drone flights, Lee said, suggesting the North Korean drones were also meant for reconnaissance.

South Korea tracked the drones crossing from North Korea over the so-called Military Demarcation Line between the two countries after detecting them in the skies of the western city of Gimpo at around 10:25am, the military said earlier.

The drones are the first confirmed to have come from the isolated neighbour since 2017, when a North Korean drone believed to be on a spy mission crashed and was found on a mountain near the border. In 2014, a North Korean drone was discovered on a South Korean border island. Those drones were considered crude aircraft mounted with cameras. Lee said the North Korean drones on Monday were small, of about two metres, but he gave no further details including what equipment, if any, they were carrying.

Relations between North Korea and US ally South Korea have been poor for decades but have recently been growing even more tense after a new, conservative government took over in South Korea and North Korea presses on with its nuclear and missile programmes. South Korea and US forces have responded to a record number of North Korean missile tests this year with stepped up military exercises. North Korea sees such exercises as preparations for an invasion. Those have been met with more tests and drills from North Korea, including rare warplane sorties near the border.

South Korea's transport ministry said earlier that flights departing from its Incheon and Gimpo airports were suspended following a request from the military.

The suspension began at 1:08pm at Gimpo and at 1:22pm at Incheon and lasted for about an hour before flight departures resumed at around 2:10pm, a ministry official told Reuters. While scrambling to counter the drones, a South Korean KA-1 light attack aircraft crashed shortly after taking off from its base at Wonju in the country's east, a defence ministry official said. Its two pilots were able to escape before the crash and are in the hospital.

Beijing, Shanghai residents back to work after shift in Covid-19 policy

Reuters
Shanghai

Mask-wearing Beijing and Shanghai commuters crowded subway trains yesterday as China's two biggest cities edged closer to living with Covid-19 even as frontline medical workers scrambled to cope with millions of new infections.

After three years of harsh anti-coronavirus curbs, President Xi Jinping scrapped the country's zero-Covid policy of lockdowns and relentless testing this month in the face of protests and a widening outbreak.

The virus is now spreading largely unchecked across the country, with doubts mounting among health experts and residents over China's statistics, which show no new Covid deaths reported for the six days through Sunday. Doctors say hospitals are overwhelmed with five-to-six-times more patients than usual, mostly elderly. But after the initial shock of the policy U-turn, and a few weeks in which people in Beijing and Shanghai stayed indoors, either dealing with the disease or trying to avoid it, there are signs that life, at least for those able to cope with the disease, is on track to returning closer to normal.

Subway trains in Beijing and Shanghai were packed, while some major traffic arteries in the two cities were jammed with slow-moving cars yesterday as residents commuted to work. "I am prepared to live with the pandemic," said 25-year-old Shanghai resident Lin Zixin. "Lockdowns are not a long-term solution. This year, in an effort to prevent infections from spiralling out of control across the country, the 25mn people in China's commercial hub endured two months of bitter isolation under a strict lockdown that lasted until June 1.

Shanghai's lively streets were a sharp contrast with the atmosphere in April and May, when hardly anyone went outside. An annual Christmas market held at the Bund, a commercial area in Shanghai, was popular with city residents over the weekend. Crowds thronged the winter festive season at Shanghai Disneyland and Beijing's Universal Studios on Sunday, queuing up for rides in Christmas-themed outfits. The number of trips to scenic spots in the southern city of Guangzhou this weekend increased by 132% from last weekend, local newspaper The 21st Century Business Herald reported. "Now basically everyone has returned to a normal routine," said a 29-year-old Beijing resident surnamed Han.

China is the last major country to move toward treating Covid as endemic. Its containment measures had slowed the $17tn economy to its lowest growth rate in nearly half a century, disrupting global supply chains and trade. The world's second-largest economy is expected to suffer further in the short-term, as the Covid wave spreads toward manufacturing areas and workforces fall ill, before bouncing back next year, analysts say.

Tesla suspended production at its Shanghai plant on Saturday, bringing ahead a plan to pause most work at the plant in the last week of December. The company did not give a reason. The world's most populous country has narrowed its definition for classifying deaths as Covid-related, counting only those involving Covid-caused pneumonia or respiratory failure, raising eyebrows among world health experts. The country's healthcare system has been under enormous strain, with staff being asked to work while sick and retired medical workers in rural communities being rehired to help, according to state media.


A woman wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) amid the Covid-19 pandemic walks along a street in Beijing.


A health worker takes a swab sample from a man to be tested for Covid-19 at a hospital in Beijing.

"The hospital is just overwhelmed from top to bottom," doctor Howard Bernstein at the privately owned Beijing United Family Hospital said.

The provincial government of Zhejiang, a big industrial province near Shanghai with a population of 65.4 million, said on Sunday it was battling about a million new daily Covid-19 infections, a number expected to double in the days ahead. Health authorities in the southeastern Jiangxi province have said infections would hit an apex in early January, adding that there could be other peaks as people travel next month for Lunar New Year celebrations, state media reported.

They warned that the wave of infections would last three months and that about 80% of the province's 45mn residents could get infected. The city of Qingdao, in the eastern Shandong province, has estimated that up to 530,000 residents were being infected each day.


A worker produces face masks at a factory in Handan in China's northern Hebei province.

Cities across China have been racing to add intensive-care units and fever clinics, facilities designed to prevent the wider spread of contagious disease in hospitals. The Beijing municipal government has said the number of fever clinics in the city had increased from 94 to almost 1,300, state media said. Shanghai has 2,600 such clinics and has transferred doctors from less-strained medical departments to help out.

Worries remain about the ability of less-affluent cities in China to cope with a surge in severe infections, especially as hundreds of millions of rural migrant workers are expected to return to their families for Lunar New Year. "I am worried the flow of people will be huge ... (and) the epidemic will break out again," said Lin, the Shanghai resident.

Xi urges steps to 'protect' lives

Chinese President Xi Jinping urged officials yesterday to take steps to protect lives in his first public remarks on Covid-19 since Beijing dramatically loosened hardline containment measures this month. Having mostly cut itself off from the rest of the world during the pandemic, China is now experiencing the planet's biggest surge in infections after abruptly lifting restrictions that torpedoed the economy.

Studies have estimated that around 1mn people could die over the next few months. Many in the population are now grappling with shortages of medicine, while emergency medical facilities are strained by an influx of undervaccinated elderly patients. "At present, Covid-19 prevention and control in China are facing a new situation and new tasks," Xi said in a directive, according to state broadcaster CCTV. "We should launch the patriotic health campaign in a more targeted way... fortify a community line of defence for epidemic prevention and control, and effectively protect people's lives, safety and health," Xi said.

Hospitals and crematoriums across the country have been overflowing with Covid patients and victims, while China's National Health Commission on Sunday announced it would stop publishing daily nationwide infection and death statistics. The decision to scrap the daily virus count comes amid concerns that the country's blooming wave of infections is not being accurately reflected in official statistics.

Philippines floods force tens of thousands to flee homes

AFP
Manila

Christmas Day floods in the Philippines forced the evacuation of nearly 46,000 people from their homes, civil defence officials said yesterday. Eleven people were killed and 19 others were missing after a week's worth of heavy seasonal rain in the southern and eastern regions of the country, they said, updating earlier official figures.

The flooding hit the south on Sunday, with the disaster dampening celebrations on the mainly Catholic nation's most important holiday.

Rivers overflowed, swamping rural villages and highways as well as the cities of Ozamiz and Oroquieta, governor Henry Oaminal for the province of Misamis Occidental said on government radio. "The heart of the city was flooded including the public market. Power was cut off and there was no (telephone) signal," he said, referring to Oroquieta, the provincial capital with 72,000 residents.


A rescuer helps people affected by floods in Gingoog city, Philippines, in this screen grab obtained from a social media video.

"We've had floods before, but these are the worst rainfall and water flow levels we have ever had," he added.

"The waters rose above the chest in some areas, but today the rains have ceased," civil defence worker Robinson Lacre told AFP by phone from Gingoog city, which accounted for 33,000 of the 45,700 people evacuated from their homes.

The coastguard said it rescued members of more than two dozen families in Ozamiz and nearby Clarin town at the height of the flooding. Photos released by the coastguard showed its orange-clad rescuers cradling toddlers plucked from homes at nighttime in waist-deep floodwaters. Seven deaths - mostly from drowning - were reported in Clarin and the nearby southern towns of Jimenez and Tudela.

The coastguard also said strong winds and big waves sank a fishing boat on Christmas Day off the coast of the central island of Leyte. Two crew members were killed, while six others were rescued.

Two others, including a baby girl, drowned in the eastern towns of Libmanan and Tinambac after they were hit by floods several days before Christmas, the civil defence office said.

The coastguard said it also rescued 23 fishermen aboard two boats that capsized when hit by big waves off the southern city of Zamboanga on Sunday.

Nineteen people remain missing, most of them subsistence fishermen from the country's Pacific seaboard who went to sea despite rough conditions.

The weather turned bad as the disaster-prone nation of 110 million people prepared for a long Christmas holiday.

Millions of people travel to their hometowns for family reunions during this period. The Philippines is ranked among the most vulnerable nations to the impacts of climate change. Scientists have warned that storms are becoming more powerful as the world gets warmer.

Final verdicts in Suu Kyi junta trial set for Friday

AFP
Yangon

A Myanmar junta court will give its verdicts on five remaining charges in the 18-month trial of jailed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Friday, a legal source told AFP. Suu Kyi has been a prisoner since the military toppled her government in February last year, ending the southeast Asian nation's brief period of democracy.

The Nobel laureate, 77, has already been found guilty on 14 charges ranging from corruption to illegally importing walkie-talkies and breaching the official secrets act, and has been jailed for 26 years.

"Both sides gave final arguments today at court," said a source with knowledge of the case yesterday who requested anonymity as they were not authorised to speak to the media. "There will be a verdict on coming Friday (30th) December." Suu Kyi appeared in good health, the source added. Rights groups have slammed the trial as a sham, and on Wednesday the UN Security Council called on the junta to release Suu Kyi in its first resolution on the situation in Myanmar since the coup. The resolution marked a moment of relative council unity after permanent members and close junta allies China and Russia abstained, opting not to wield vetoes following amendments to the wording.

The remaining five corruption charges Suu Kyi faces relate to the rental of a helicopter for a government minister, a case in which she had allegedly not followed regulations and caused "a loss to the state".

Each carries a maximum jail term of 15 years. In previous corruption cases, the court has generally sentenced Suu Kyi to three years per charge.

Suu Kyi is currently imprisoned in a compound in the capital Naypyidaw, close to the courthouse where her trial is being held, and has been deprived of her household staff and pet dog Taichido.

Since the coup, she has largely disappeared from view, seen only in grainy state media photos from the bare courtroom. The country has been plunged into turmoil, with some established ethnic rebel groups renewing fighting with the military in border areas, and the economy in tatters. Dozens of "People's Defence Forces" eschewing Suu Kyi's strict policy of non-violence have also sprung up to battle the junta and have surprised the military with their effectiveness, analysts say. There are almost daily killings of low-level junta officials or anti-coup fighters, with details murky and reprisals often following quickly.

Analysts say the junta may allow Suu Kyi to serve some of her sentence under house arrest while it prepares for elections it has said it will hold next year. The military alleged there was widespread voter fraud during 2020 elections won resoundingly by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, although international observers said the poll was largely free and fair.

More than 2,600 people have been killed in the military's crackdown on dissent, according to a local monitoring group. Rights groups have accused the military of extrajudicial killings and launching air strikes on civilians that amount to war crimes. The latest civilian death toll issued by the junta stands at over 4,000.

Paying tribute to tsunami victims





People light candles during a ceremony for the victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, at Pattinapakkam beach in Chennai yesterday. ***Right:*** People prepare for a ceremony for the victims of the tsunami of 2004 at Nochikuppam beach in Chennai.

Nepal's new govt seeks to balance ties with India, China

●Former Maoist rebel chief becomes PM for third time
●He has support of opposition UML, five other groups

Reuters
Kathmandu



Nepal's newly-elected Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal (right) gestures after being sworn-in by the President Bidya Devi Bhandari at the President's House in Kathmandu yesterday.

Nepal's new government, led by the former Maoist rebel chief, will try to balance ties with its immediate neighbours China and India as it seeks economic growth in one of the world's poorest countries, officials of the ruling coalition told Reuters.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who still goes by his nom de guerre Prachanda, unexpectedly became prime minister for a third time on Sunday after leaving his previous coalition and securing the support of the opposition Communist Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) party and five other smaller groups.

Last month's election had returned a hung parliament.

The UML leader and former prime minister, Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, is believed to be pro-China.

Nepal is one of several South Asian countries where India and China both seek influence.

India has long considered Hindu-majority Nepal, a Himalayan country of 30mn, as a natural ally based on their close historical ties and long open border.

"We'll maintain relationships of equi-proximity with both our neighbours," Narayan Kaji Shrestha, a senior member of Prachanda's Maoist Centre party, told Reuters.

Shrestha was later named as a deputy prime minister.

"We must immediately focus on containing inflation, maintain reserves, raise capital expenses, narrow the trade deficit and lower interest rates."

Prachanda also named six other ministers and gave the key finance portfolio to Bishnu Prasad Paudel of the UML party.

Paudel has been finance minister twice before.

Another key appointment is that of Rabi Lamichhane, a television talk show host, to the home (interior) ministry.

Prachanda kept the foreign ministry for himself. Beijing and New Delhi have poured billions of dollars in aid and investment into Nepal, which is rich in potential to generate hydroelectric power.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, which is Nepal's biggest trade and economic partner, was one of the first foreign leaders to congratulate Prachanda on his appointment. "The unique relationship between India & Nepal is based on deep cultural connect & warm people-to-people ties," Modi said on Twitter. "I look forward to working together with you to further strengthen this friendship."

A Chinese embassy spokesperson in Kathmandu, in a Twitter post, also congratulated Prachanda.

Analysts said Nepal's $40bn economy, emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, needed the immediate attention of the new government which must regain the trust of investors and businesses as well as boost production.

Inflation is at more than 8%, the highest in six years.

Nepal also faces dwindling foreign exchange reserves, with an increasing dependence on imports of basic goods.

Former finance minister Yuba Raj Khatiwada, who worked under Oli, said Prachanda must focus on boosting manufacturing products such as cement for export, and also agriculture to substitute imports.

Prachanda, who led a decade-long Maoist insurgency against Nepal's then monarchy from 1996, gave up communist dogma and embraced liberalisation after joining the mainstream under a peace deal in 2006.

The conflict caused 17,000 deaths. Nepal has had 10 government changes since the 239-year-old monarchy was abolished in 2008.

UK to stop publishing Covid R number as cases decline

Reuters
London

Britain will stop publishing the Covid-19 R number that measures how quickly the disease is spreading among the population, saying yesterday it was not needed anymore thanks to vaccines and drugs.

The R number, or "reproduction number", has been a staple of coronavirus data bulletins in the last three years.

An R value of greater than 1 indicates that Covid-19 cases are increasing. An R number of 2, for example, means a person with Covid-19 will infect two other people.

"Now that vaccines and therapeutics have allowed us to move to a phase where we are living with Covid-19, with surveillance scaled down but still closely monitored through a number of different indicators, the publication of this specific data is no longer necessary," UK Health Security Agency Chief Data Scientist Nick Watkins said in a statement.

The R range for England was 1-1.2 as of Friday, the final release of such data. Although Covid-19 cases have been increasing in the last few weeks, they are significantly lower than during a peak in July of around 30,000 cases a day in England alone.

"All data publications are kept under constant review and this modelling data can be reintroduced promptly if needed, for example, if a new Variant of Concern was to be identified," Watkins added.

Britain will continue to publish its weekly flu and Covid-19 surveillance report and infection surveys.

Jersey blast death toll rises to 10

AFP
London

The death toll in a suspected gas explosion in Jersey has risen to 10 following the death of a 73-year-old woman, police said yesterday.

The blast early on December 10 flattened a three-storey apartment complex in St Helier, the capital of the self-governing British Crown dependency off the coast of northern France. The woman who died lived in an adjacent building to the one which collapsed. She died in Jersey General Hospital on Christmas Day after being admitted following the incident, Jersey police said in a statement.

An independent investigation is probing the cause of the explosion after the fire service said crews were called to investigate a smell of gas seven hours beforehand.

Ukraine's Zelensky seeks India PM's help with 'peace formula'

Reuters
New Delhi

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky yesterday said he sought India's help with implementing a "peace formula" in a phone call with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The conversation comes at a time when India is seeking to strengthen trade relations with Moscow while Western nations introduce new measures to limit Russia's funding of the war.

"I had a phone call with PM Narendra Modi and wished a successful G20 presidency," Zelensky wrote on Twitter. "It was on this platform that I announced the peace formula and now I count on India's participation in its implementation."

Zelensky asked the Group of 20 (G20) major economies last month to adopt Ukraine's 10-point peace formula and to end the war. India holds the G20 presidency for a year.

The Indian government said in statement late yesterday that the two leaders discussed opportunities for strengthening bilateral co-operation.

"The prime minister explained the main priorities of India's G20 Presidency, including giving a voice to the concerns of developing nations on issues like food and energy security."

Modi also "strongly reiterated" his call for an immediate end to hostilities in Ukraine and conveyed India's support for any peace efforts.

India, which has not explicitly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has emerged as the largest buyer of Russian oil after China, this month taking barrels of Urals crude at well below a $60 price cap agreed by Western nations.

Boxing Day sale queue



People queue outside Hamleys, during the traditional Boxing Day sales in London yesterday.

Deadliest year for Rohingya in years as 180 presumed drowned

Reuters
New Delhi/Dhaka

The possible sinking of a boat in recent weeks with 180 Rohingya on board could make 2022 one of the deadliest years at sea in almost a decade for the community, a UN agency said, as refugees try to flee desperate conditions in Bangladesh camps.

Nearly 1mn Rohingya from Myanmar are living in crowded facilities in Bangladesh, including tens of thousands who fled their home country after its military conducted a deadly crackdown in 2017.

The number of Rohingya leaving Bangladesh in boats this year has jumped more than five-fold from a year earlier to nearly 2,400, rights groups estimate.

It is not clear if the lifting of Covid restrictions in Southeast Asia, a favoured destination, has led to the rush of people.

In Buddhist-majority Myanmar, most Rohingya are denied citizenship and are seen as illegal immigrants from South Asia.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said it feared that a boat that set sail at the end of November was missing, with all 180 on board presumed dead.

The UNHCR said the vessel may have started to crack in early December before losing contact.

It added it was not clear where the boat started, but three Rohingya men, including one whose family were onboard, said it set off from Bangladesh.

Nearly 200 Rohingya were already feared dead or missing at sea this year."We hope against hope that the 180 missing are still alive somewhere," said UNHCR spokesperson Babar Baloch.

Thai authorities said four women and one man were found floating near Thailand's Surin island and another woman at Similan islands and were rescued by fishermen. Authorities had not yet confirmed their identities.

A local fisherman told Reuters he and his crew had rescued people hanging onto a floating water tank.

UNHCR's Baloch said 2022 was one of the worst years for dead and missing after 2013 and 2014, when 900 and 700 Rohingya died or went missing in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal after inter-communal violence forced them to flee. Sayedur Rahman, 38, who fled to Malaysia in 2012 from Myanmar, said his wife and three children were among the missing on the vessel.

"In 2017, my family came to Bangladesh to save their lives," Rahman said. "But they are now all gone...I'm totally devastated...We Rohingya are left to die... on the land, at sea. Everywhere." Bangladesh has in the past arrested people smugglers.

The densely populated country has also asked the international community to help ease the load of hosting so many refugees.

Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project that works to support the Rohingya, told Reuters that a boat that drifted for weeks after leaving Bangladesh carrying nearly 200 had landed in Indonesia's Aceh province yesterday evening. Earlier this month, she said many people from the same boat may have died of hunger or thirst.

"It's outrageous that they were left adrift for nearly four weeks, either completely ignored without food and water or towed out towards Indonesia," Lewa said.

WORLD

More NGOs suspend work in Afghanistan

AFP/Reuters
London/Kabul

Christian Aid and ActionAid became yesterday the latest foreign aid groups to suspend operations in Afghanistan after the country's Taliban rulers ordered all non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to stop women staff from working.

Announcements by the two groups take to six the number of major bodies who have paused their operations in the country.

Christian Aid is "rapidly seeking clarity ... and urging the authorities to reverse the ban", head of global programmes Ray Hasan said in a statement.

"Whilst we do this, we are unfortunately pausing the work of our programmes," he added.

ActionAid said that if women are banned from working with the group, it would "prevent us from reaching out to half of the population that are already reeling from hunger".

"ActionAid has made the difficult decision to temporarily halt most of its programmes in Afghanistan until a clearer picture emerges," it said in a statement.

On Sunday Save the Children, the Norwegian Refugee Council and CARE all announced putting their operations on hold.

The International Rescue Committee, which provides emergency response in health, education and other areas and employs 3,000 women across Afghanistan, also said it is suspending services.

Other smaller NGOs have also announced suspensions, including UK-based Islamic Relief Worldwide.

"Millions of people in Afghanistan are on the verge of starvation," Christian Aid's Hasan said yesterday.

"Reports that families are so desperate they have been forced to sell their children to buy food are utterly heartbreaking," he said, adding that a ban on women aid workers would "only curtail our ability to help the growing number of people in need".

The ban is the latest blow against women's rights in Afghanistan since the Taliban reclaimed power last year.

Less than a week ago, the Taliban also barred women from attending universities, prompting global outrage and protests in some Afghan cities.

A senior UN official has urged Afghanistan's Taliban administration to reverse the latest ban that charities fear will worsen winter hardships.

"Millions of Afghans need humanitarian assistance and removing barriers is vital," UNAMA said in the statement, adding that its acting head and humanitarian co-ordinator Ramiz Alakbarov had met economy minister Mohamed Hanif.

The directives barring women from working at NGOs came from Hanif's ministry.

The orders do not apply directly to the United Nations, but many of its programmes are carried out by NGOs subject to the order.

NGOs are also a critical source of employment for tens of thousands of Afghans, particularly women, as the local economy has collapsed following the withdrawal of US-led foreign forces and the subsequent Taliban takeover last year.

One such employee, a 27-year-old female aid worker in western Afghanistan who asked for her identity to be concealed because she feared retribution, told Reuters that her NGO had shut its office on Saturday and she could not go to work.

The NGO, funded by a Western country, worked with women in the agriculture sector, helping them set up sustainable incomes.

She said she is worried that losing her job would have a huge impact on her family because she is a single woman and the sole breadwinner.

Her father is dead and her mother is a housewife, she said, adding that she supports four sisters, three of whom were university students who cannot complete their degrees since the Taliban administration barred women from attending university last week.



Afghans queue over the weekend for food aid from a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Kabul. Several foreign aid groups have announced that they are suspending their operations in Afghanistan after the country's Taliban rulers ordered all NGOs to stop women staff from working.

Historic winter storm leaves nearly 50 dead across the US

AFP/Reuters
New York

US emergency crews counted the grim costs of a colossal winter storm that brought Christmas chaos to millions, especially in hard-hit western New York, where the death toll reached 25 yesterday in what authorities described as a "war with mother nature".

Blizzard conditions continue to prevail in parts of the US Northeast, the stubborn remnants of a massive sprawl of extreme weather including severe cold that gripped the country over several days, causing widespread power outages, travel delays and at least 47 deaths nationwide.

The extreme weather forced the cancellation of more than 15,000 flights in recent days including more than 1,700 yesterday, according to tracking site Flightaware.com.

Buffalo – a US city that is no stranger to foul winter weather – has been buried under staggering amounts of snow, with the National Weather Service (NWS) forecasting up to 14" (0.35m) in addition to the several feet that have already left the city marooned, with a virtual collapse of emergency services.

The blizzard has stubbornly refused to release its grip on western New York's Erie County, where Buffalo is located and which has become the epicentre of the crisis.

"In addition to the 13 confirmed deaths yesterday, the Erie County Department of Health medical examiner's office has confirmed an additional 12 deaths, bringing the total for the blizzard to 25 deaths county-wide," Erie County executive Mark Poloncarz said in a press briefing.

The ferocious weather makes this "the worst storm probably in our lifetime, and the history of the city", Poloncarz said, noting the death toll in Erie will likely surpass that of Buffalo's infamous blizzard of 1977, when nearly 30 people died.

More deaths had been reported, he said, but the county medical examiner was trying to determine if they were directly attributable to the weather.

"There still are probably additional deaths that will be announced later," Poloncarz said.

With more snow in the forecast and most of Buffalo "impassable", he warned residents to bunker down and stay in place.

"This is not the end yet, we are not there," the Erie County official said.





A view of a truck covered in snow, following a winter storm that struck the region, in Buffalo, New York. Meanwhile, a woman and her child play on the frozen Capitol Reflecting Pool in Washington, DC, while another child slides on the ice.

National Guard members and other teams have rescued hundreds of people from snow-covered cars and homes without electricity, but authorities have said more people remain trapped.

New York Governor Kathy Hochul, a native of Buffalo, said she was stunned by what she saw during a Sunday reconnaissance tour of the city.

"It is (like) going to a war zone, and the vehicles along the sides of the roads are shocking," Hochul said, describing 8' (2.4m) snow drifts against homes and how power outages made for life-threatening conditions.

"This is a war with mother nature," she said.

The extreme weather sent wind chill temperatures in all 48 contiguous US states below freezing over the weekend.

At one point on Saturday, nearly 1.7mn customers were without electricity in the biting cold, according to tracker poweroutage.us.

That number has dropped substantially, although there were still some 50,000 without electricity yesterday morning on the US east coast.

Due to frozen electric substations, some Erie County residents were not expected to regain power until today, with one substation reportedly buried under 18' of snow, a senior county official said.

Officials described historically dangerous conditions in the snow-prone Buffalo region, with hours-long whiteouts and bodies discovered in vehicles and under snow banks.

Emergency workers continued the difficult search for those in need of rescue.

The city's international airport remains closed until Tuesday and a driving ban remained in effect for Buffalo and much of Erie County.

Road ice and white-out conditions also led to the temporary closure of some of the nation's busiest transport routes, including part of the cross-country Interstate 70 highway.

Drivers were being warned not to take to the roads – even as the nation reached what is usually its busiest time of year for travel.

Peru arrests six generals amid probe into ex-president

Reuters
Lima

The anti-corruption unit of Peru's attorney-general's office has detained six generals amid an investigation into allegations the government of ousted former president Pedro Castillo illegally promoted police and military officers.

Police also seized "documents and devices" during a raid of the home of Castillo's former defence minister Walter Ayala, the anti-corruption unit said.

Castillo, who was arrested earlier this month after lawmakers voted him out of office for attempting to illegally dissolve Congress, is being investigated for influence peddling.

He faces six separate charges of corruption, all of which he has denied.

"Through these interventions, six of those investigated were arrested. The proceedings ... include 26 raids nationwide," the attorney-general's office said on Twitter.

The leftist former president is serving 48 months of pretrial detention while he is being investigated on charges of "rebellion".

The attorney-general's office said on Twitter that the detained generals are being investigated for "allegedly having paid to rise in rank in 2021 with the authorisation of former president Pedro Castillo".

Former defence minister Ayala criticised the search of his home and the arrest of the generals.

"This has been unnecessary, because they haven't found anything," Ayala told reporters. "This investigation is more than a year old ... this is a show."

Argentina president to comply with court ruling on Buenos Aires funding

Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez has said that his government would abide by a recent Supreme Court ruling and give a larger proportion of state funds to the opposition-controlled city of Buenos Aires.

The announcement signalled a reversal from a decision last week that drew a backlash, when Fernandez declared that he was rejecting a ruling from the court that increased funding to the capital.

"Judicial rulings are binding even when they are deemed to be disadvantageous and unfair," Fernandez said on Twitter, clarifying that the funds will be paid in peso-denominated bonds.

In a ruling last Wednesday, the Supreme Court ruled that the capital city should return to receiving 2.95% of federal funds, which it received before the national government cut the percentage in 2020 to 1.4%.

The city, the richest and most populous in the country, is controlled by a conservative mayor and has been pushing for a large slice of funds, which Argentina law requires be distributed between the country's regions.

On Thursday, Fernandez sparked a legal crisis when he pledged to ignore the "incongruous and impossible-to-enforce" ruling, which he called politically motivated ahead of general elections next year and said would hurt the other provinces. ***– Reuters***

Outgoing leader's call to arms inspired foiled Brazil bomb plot, police told

Reuters/AFP
Brasilia

A man arrested for attempting to set off a bomb in protest against Brazil's election result was inspired to build up an arsenal by far-right President Jair Bolsonaro's call to arms, according to a copy of his police testimony seen by Reuters.

George Washington de Oliveira Sousa was arrested on Saturday, the day after police said they foiled his plot to set off an explosive device near the Brasilia airport.

The incident added a new dimension to post-election violence in Brazil, where tensions remain high after the most fraught election in a generation.

Incoming Justice Minister Flavio Dino said in a television interview yesterday that security would need to be beefed up for Sunday's inauguration of leftist President-elect Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who defeated the incumbent Bolsonaro.

"We're not talking about a lone wolf," Dino said of Sousa. "There are powerful people behind this and the police will investigate. We won't allow political terrorism in Brazil."

Sousa's initial lawyer, Wallison dos Reis Pereira, said he had confessed and is co-operating with police.

His current lawyer, Jorge Chediak, said he had yet to speak with Sousa, who is in jail, but said his confession to police was full of "contradictions".

A 54-year-old gas station manager from the northern state of Para, Sousa told police that Bolsonaro's sowing of election doubts inspired his December 12 journey to the capital.

After arriving in Brasilia, he joined an encampment of pro-Bolsonaro election-deniers outside the army headquarters who were calling for a coup.

"My trip to Brasilia was so I could join the protests in front of the army headquarters and wait for the armed forces to authorise me to take up arms and destroy communism," he said, according to the copy of his testimony.

Sousa said he had become a registered gun-owner, known as CAC, in October last year, joining a group that has swelled six-fold to nearly 700,000 people since Bolsonaro was elected in 2018 and began loosening gun laws.

He said he had invested nearly 160,000 reais ($30,800) since then to grow his arsenal.

He said he took two 12-gauge shotguns, two revolvers, three pistols, a rifle, over a thousand rounds and five sticks of dynamite with him on his drive to Brasilia.

"What motivated me to buy the guns were the words of President Bolsonaro, who always emphasised the importance of civilians being armed by saying, 'An armed population will never be enslaved'," Sousa said.



This picture taken on Saturday shows anti-bomb federal police at work after what is believed to be an explosive device was found in Brasilia.

He added that he planned to share his weapons with other CAC-holders in the Brasilia camp.

On December 12, the day Lula's victory was certified, some of the camp-dwellers attacked the federal police headquarters in Brasilia.

Sousa said he enjoyed some level of official support.

After the December 12 attack, he said police and firefighters near the camp told him they would not arrest any protesters for vandalism, as long as they did not attack cops.

Their comments led him to believe that "the armed forces' intervention would be declared soon".

However, as the weeks passed without a coup, he said he and others in the camp came up with a plan to prevent Lula from taking office.

Their idea, he said, was "to provoke a military intervention and the decree of a state of siege to prevent the installation of communism in Brazil".

An initial scheme was to blow up a bomb in the car park of Brasilia's airport, followed by anonymous tips of two more bombs in the departure lounge, he said.

The plotters also considered blowing up an electrical sub-station, he added.

Sousa told police he built the bomb on December 23, using the dynamite he had brought with him from Para, and a remote triggering device that someone else in the camp gave him.

He said he handed the bomb to a fellow camp-dweller, asking him to install it by the sub-station as "I did not agree with the idea of exploding it in the airport carpark".

That same day, Sousa saw on the news that police had found the bomb near the airport.

The following day, after seeing strange men near his rented apartment, he decided to pack his bags and put his weapons in the trunk of his car to leave Brasilia, but was arrested by police before he could depart.

Lula, a 77-year-old leftist who already served as president of Brazil from 2003 to 2010, will assume power for the third time with a grand inauguration in Brasilia.

Bolsonaro, 67, has meanwhile maintained an extremely low profile since his election loss, with limited public appearances.

On Christmas Eve, he rode his motorcycle for the first time since his defeat and chatted with supporters.

And on Sunday, he posted a video on social media in which he wished viewers a "Merry Christmas".

Suspect charged with last week's deadly shooting of Kurds in Paris

AFP
Paris

France has charged a suspected gunman with last week's murder of three Kurds in Paris, as hundreds of people marched in the French capital to pay tribute to the victims.

The 69-year-old suspect had confessed to a "pathological" hatred for foreigners and spent nearly a day in a psychiatric facility before being returned to police custody on Sunday, authorities said.

The judge charged the man with murder, attempted murder because of race, ethnicity, nationality or religion as well as for the unauthorised procurement and possession of a weapon, a judicial source said.

The shooting at a Kurdish cultural centre and a nearby hairdressing salon on Friday sparked panic in the city's bustling 10th district, home to numerous shops and restaurants and a large Kurdish population.

Three others were wounded in the attack but none were in a life-threatening condition, with one out of hospital.

The violence has revived the trauma of three unresolved murders of Kurds in 2013.

The community has also expressed anger at the French security services, saying that they had done too little to prevent the shooting.

The frustration boiled over on Saturday and furious demonstrators clashed with police in central Paris for a second day running after a tribute rally.

Yesterday several hundred people marched in the 10th district, chanting "Our martyrs do not die" in Kurdish and demanding "truth and justice".

Small altars bearing candles, flowers and the photographs of the three victims who were fatally shot were put up on the pavement.

A procession headed to another street in the same neighbourhood where three activists from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an organisation that Turkiye and its Western allies deem terrorist, were killed in January 2013.

Some in the Kurdish community raised their suspicion that Turkiye was involved in Friday's shooting, but French investigators have not made any announcements to that effect.

"We decided to come as soon as we heard about Friday's terrorist attack," one young woman told AFP, declining to give her name.

Turkiye has lashed out at Paris over the protests in France.

Yesterday the Turkish foreign ministry summoned France's ambassador over "anti-Turkiye propaganda" that it alleged French officials did little to stop.

The suspect – named as William M by French media – is a gun enthusiast with a history of weapons offences who had been released on bail earlier this month.

The retired train driver was convicted for armed violence in 2016 by a court in Seine-Saint-Denis, but appealed.

A year later he was convicted for illegally possessing a firearm.

The suspect said he initially wanted to kill people in the northern Paris suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis, which has a large immigrant population.

However, he changed his mind as few people were around and his clothing made it difficult for him to reload his weapon, the prosecutor said of the Friday shooting.

He then returned to his parents' house before deciding to go to the 10th district instead.

Last year, he was charged with racist violence after allegedly stabbing migrants and slashing their tents with a sword in a park in eastern Paris.

The Paris prosecutor said the suspect, described as "depressive" and "suicidal", admitted to investigators a long-held desire to kill migrants and foreigners since a burglary at his home in 2016.

The prosecutor said no links with an extremist ideology were found following a search of his parents' home, a computer and a smartphone.

The suspect said he acquired his weapon four years ago from a member of a shooting club, hid it at his parents' house and had never used it before.

Often described as the world's largest people without a state, the Kurds are a Muslim ethnic group spread across Syria, Turkiye, Iraq and Iran.



Protesters hold portraits of victims of the Enghien Street shooting in Paris this week, and those of La Fayette street murders in 2013, during a march yesterday in solidarity with the Kurdish community.

Suspected infiltration by Ukrainian drone causes blast at Russian air base

Reuters/AFP
Kyiv/Moscow

A drone believed to be Ukrainian penetrated hundreds of kilometres through Russian airspace, causing a deadly explosion at the main base for Moscow's strategic bombers in the latest attack to expose gaps in its air defences.

Moscow said it had shot the drone down causing it to crash at the Engels air base, where three service members were killed.

Under its usual policy on incidents inside Russia, Ukraine did not comment.

The base, the main airfield for the bombers that Kyiv says Moscow has used in recent months to attack Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, is hundreds of miles from the Ukrainian frontier.

The same planes are also designed to launch nuclear-capable missiles as part of Russia's long-term strategic deterrent.

A suspected drone already struck it on December 5, exposing what was widely described at the time as a humiliating hole in Russia's air defences that the latest attack suggests Moscow has yet to plug.

The Russian defence ministry said in a statement no planes were damaged, but Russian and Ukrainian social media accounts said several had been destroyed.

Reuters was not able to independently verify the reports.

As the war entered its 11th month, Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted leaders of other former Soviet states in St Petersburg yesterday for a summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) group, which Ukraine has long since quit.

In televised remarks, Putin made no direct reference to the war.

"Unfortunately challenges and threats in this area, especially from the outside, are only growing each year," he said. "We also have to acknowledge unfortunately that disagreements also arise between member states of the commonwealth."

The invasion of Ukraine has been a test of Russia's longstanding authority among other ex-Soviet states.

Fighting has surged in recent months between CIS members Armenia and Azerbaijan in a conflict where Russia has peacemakers, while a border dispute has flared between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Putin said such disagreements should be resolved through "comradely help and mediating action".

On Sunday, Putin said he is open to negotiations over Ukraine, blaming Kyiv and its Western allies for failing to engage in talks.

He has shown no sign of stepping back from his demand that Ukraine recognise Moscow's armed conquest of a fifth the country.

Kyiv says that it will fight until Russia withdraws.

"We are ready to negotiate with everyone involved about acceptable solutions, but that is up to them – we are not the ones refusing to negotiate, they are," Putin said in an interview on Rossiya 1 state television.

An adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky dismissed the remarks.

"Russia single-handedly attacked Ukraine and is killing citizens," Mykhailo Podolyak said on Twitter. "Russia doesn't want negotiations, but tries to avoid responsibility."

Since the invasion, Ukraine has driven Russian forces from the north, defeated them on the outskirts of the capital and forced Russian retreats in the east and south.

However, Moscow still controls swathes of eastern and southern land that Putin claims to have annexed.

Tens of thousands of Ukrainian civilians have died in cities Russia razed to the ground, and thousands of troops on both sides have been killed, forcing Putin to call up hundreds of thousands of reservists for the first time since World War II.

The Ukrainian military said early yesterday that Moscow had shelled dozens of towns in the Luhansk, Donetsk, Kharkiv, Kherson and Zaporizhzia regions, along the front line.

Since October, Russia has been deliberately targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure with drones and missiles.

Moscow says the aim is to degrade Kyiv's ability to fight.

Ukraine says the attacks have no military purpose and are intended to harm civilians as winter sets in, a war crime.

Ukraine's energy grid operator said power was still significantly lacking yesterday, with emergency consumption restrictions introduced in five Ukrainian regions and the capital.

Ukraine has meanwhile urged the exclusion of Russia – a permanent member of the UN Security Council – from the world body.

"Ukraine calls on the member states of the UN ... to deprive the Russian Federation of its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and to exclude it from the UN as a whole," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

"We have a very simple question: Does Russia have the right to remain a permanent member of the UN Security Council and to be in the United Nations at all?" Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Sunday. "We have a convincing and reasoned answer – no, it does not."

The five permanent members of the 15-seat Security Council have veto power that can block any resolution.



Caesar, a 50-year-old Russian who joined the Freedom of Russia Legion to fight on the side of Ukraine, stands in front of a destroyed monastery in Dolyna, eastern Ukraine.

Cyclists brave Lahore smog to convince drivers to ditch cars

AFP
Lahore

Cyclists in Pakistan's smog-smothered Lahore are enduring hazardous pollution levels, abuse from drivers and social stigma in a campaign to get people to ditch their cars.

Each week around 100 adults and children, some wearing masks or scarves wrapped around their mouths and noses, jump on their bikes to cycle around landmarks in the city of more than 11mn people.

"The smog is a huge concern for us because there are so many cars now and the population has increased so much," said Afia Khan, who joined the initiative in August.

However, it is an uphill challenge encouraging people to take up the environmentally friendly mode of transport, and the group often require a police escort to keep them safe in a city that lacks dedicated bicycle lanes.

Cyclists are "at the mercy of these ruthless motorbikes, chingchies (auto rickshaws) and cars" that have not embraced the idea of sharing the roads with cyclists, said Rana Sohail, the head of Clean Pakistan Green Pakistan, which launched the venture with Critical Mass Lahore.

"The government needs to create a more cycling-friendly infrastructure," participant Humayun Qureshi told AFP at the latest event on Sunday, which he attended with his wife and two daughters.

There is also a pervasive attitude in among the deeply conservative segments of Pakistan that sport, including cycling, is inappropriate for women, who risk harassment from men.

"Going biking alone as a woman can be difficult because of the harassment you're going to face," Zarwa Jamal, a student who was cycling with her whole family, told AFP. "It's truly great to be able to go with the group because I'm assured of my safety."

Lahore consistently ranks as one of the world's most polluted large cities, with industrial pollutants, smoke from seasonal crop burn-off, fumes from vehicles and colder winter temperatures coalescing into toxic smog.

In November a court ruling forced authorities to close schools on Fridays and Saturdays, as well as the usual Sunday break, due to high levels of air pollution.

Understanding about the terrible health impacts of smog has increased in the past few years, putting pressure on the authorities to come up with measures to tackle the problem.

"The point of reaching actual awareness is still far, but hopefully we will slowly achieve it," said cyclist Tanzeel ur Rehman.



Cyclists take part in a pollution and smog awareness campaign along a street in Lahore.

Staff struggling to save tropical plants of Kyiv's Botanical Garden

Reuters
Kyiv

In the lush greenhouses of Kyiv's National Botanical Garden, staff are struggling to save a decades-old collection of tropical plants after months of Russian attacks on Ukraine's power grid led to electricity outages, threatening the garden's heating supply.

"These collections cannot be restored. This is not a greenhouse with cucumbers and tomatoes ... the loss of this collection would be a great national loss for Ukraine," said Lyudmyla Buiun, responsible for tropical and subtropical plants.

"Plants cannot be told ... 'please endure, because today it is -15° Celsius.' It is impossible," she said, pointing out signs of cold damage on plants.

The plants would face a serious crisis if the temperature in the greenhouse dropped -15C, she added.

Finding ways to maintain a tropical climate in a freezing Kyiv hit by frequent power outages is very difficult, and garden workers are now preemptively heating the greenhouses by burning firewood, although smoke poses a risk to plants.

They would usually create heat by burning wood in electric ovens.

However, the frequent power cuts disrupt the heating cycle and it takes hours to restart the ovens, boiler room operator Yurii Nai said.

The garden's administration has now connected to Kyiv's central heating system to have a backup, but fears further missile strikes on the power grid.

All missing people found alive after avalanche

The last two people unaccounted for after an avalanche in the Lech/Zuers skiing area in western Austria contacted authorities late on Sunday, and a search and rescue operation was suspended, the Austrian Press Agency (APA) reported yesterday.
The avalanche occurred shortly before 3pm (1400 GMT) on Sunday, APA said, adding the initial suspicion that 10 people were buried by the avalanche was based on a skier's video.
One person was quickly rescued from the snow and flown to the hospital in Innsbruck with serious injuries.
Four were injured in total.
The remainder of those who could be seen on the video came forward during the course of Sunday evening, APA said.
Some had descended into the valley on their own and did not report their involvement in the avalanche incident at first.
Lech/Zuers markets itself as "one of the best ski areas in the world" and part of the cradle of Alpine skiing. – ***Reuters***

Serbian city declares emergency after ammonia leak

Fifteen people were hospitalised and an emergency situation declared in the southeastern Serbian city of Pirot following an ammonia leak caused by a cargo train derailing nearby, local media reported.
Among those taken to hospital in nearby Nis with symptoms of poisoning was one child, the reports said.
No one was in a life threatening condition, they added.
The 20-wagon train was carrying ammonia from Bulgaria's Agropolychim to Serbian fertiliser producer Zorka Eliksir, located in the town of Sabac, 90km west of Belgrade.
The media reports said that two wagons had left the tracks on Sunday afternoon and turned over, causing one to leak.
Infrastructure minister Goran Vesic said the poor condition of the rail tracks, which were scheduled for repairs, was the cause of the accident.
Nova S news Web portal reported that there was a fog and strong ammonia smell in Pirot yesterday morning.
Schools and kindergartens were closed due to the emergency situation and people were advised not to go out if not necessary. – ***Reuters***

COMMENT

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GULF TIMES

Who's ready to fight plastic pollution?

In late November, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution met for the first time. The INC was established by the United Nations Environment Assembly with a well-defined mission: to create the first-ever legally binding global agreement on plastic pollution. The fact that delegates and observers finally met to have this discussion is welcome. But the meeting results are just the beginning of addressing the scale or scope of the problem.

Plastic pollution threatens people's health and endangers the environment. And plastic causes harm throughout its entire lifecycle, beginning with resource extraction and continuing after disposal.

But the problem is not just plastic itself. Plastic contains over 10,000 chemicals, more than a quarter of which are toxic to humans and wildlife. In the absence of a global requirement that companies make known exactly which chemicals are in which plastic materials and goods, what we know about plastic in our lives is dictated by the whims of individual manufacturers and national legislatures. As a result, we are ignorant of the full extent of the problem. No one – from workers facing occupational hazards to parents trying to make healthy choices for their children – has all the information they could and should have.

Plastic does not affect everyone equally. Vulnerable groups like low-income families, indigenous communities, and people of colour are especially at risk. For example, the vulnerable and disadvantaged are more likely to live or work near petrochemical manufacturing facilities and refineries, exposing them to air, water, and soil pollution from the toxic chemicals used to manufacture plastic products.

Plastic contains over 10,000 chemicals, more than a quarter of which are toxic to humans and wildlife

This inequality exists within and between countries. Plastic products are often made in developing countries, transported to developed countries, and then returned to developing countries as waste. It is not only the last stage of plastics' lifecycle that creates pollution and endangers communities. Plastic production itself is hazardous.

Consider the textile sector, where workers create clothes from synthetic firers made of plastics. The workers are largely unaware of the toxicity of the chemicals they are using while they assemble skirts and shirts for people an ocean away. They do not have all the information they need to understand the risks they are facing from doing their jobs. There is an obvious gendered component to this, too, given that the textile sector in developing countries is dominated by women.

But while people are unfairly and unevenly affected by plastic pollution, the reality is that no one is spared. Plastic pollution does not respect borders. Women everywhere use menstrual products containing plastics with chemicals that pose a direct risk to their health. Children all over the world, including in wealthy countries, play with cheap plastic toys containing unknown chemicals.

Given the high-stakes challenges facing the first INC, it is disappointing that delegates did not even manage to adopt procedural rules. More substantive negotiations will be delayed until they do.

There were some small successes. The presence of observers permitted corridor conversations in which they could help delegates better understand the link between plastic, chemicals, and health. This was reflected in some delegates' statements, which highlighted the need for transparency on chemicals in plastics.

That is not nothing. But it is also not enough.

In May 2023, delegates will have another chance. Representatives of governments from around the world will convene in Paris for the INC's second meeting. Their mission will once again be to work toward a legally binding agreement on plastic pollution.

Delegates cannot simply retread the same ground as in November. Delegates will need to demonstrate their governments' commitment to reducing plastic production. Together, they will need to consider the entire plastic lifecycle and the dangers that it poses to communities, people, and the environment.

Perhaps most important, they will need to remember that the point of these meetings is to establish a global, legally binding instrument, not to shrug and sigh and let countries follow mere voluntary guidelines, effectively allowing business as usual to continue.

In Paris next year, negotiations on plastic pollution need to be both more efficient and more ambitious. Delegates must act as though they are saving the world. If they get this right, they will be.
– Project Syndicate

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After Covid-19, Ebola lockdowns drive Ugandan workers into debt

- **Uganda lifted two-month Ebola restrictions on December 17**
- **Informal workers face increased debt due to earnings loss**
- **More support needed for informal businesses, activists say**

By Musinguzi Blanshe
Kampala

Uganda motorbike taxi driver Charles Ssebale fears his vehicle could be repossessed at any moment, having failed to keep up with his loan repayments after the East African nation imposed a two-month lockdown to contain a deadly outbreak of Ebola.

The 41-year-old father-of-seven saw his usual daily earnings - about 40,000 Ugandan shillings ($11) — drop by about 75% during the lockdown, which ended on December 17.

Ssebale said his creditor — an entrepreneur in his community who sells motorbikes — has been incessantly calling him demanding the arrears. The debt is worth about $870, he said.

"I will resume working hard and pay (the loan)," he told Context by phone from Kassanda district, which is located 117km southeast of the Ugandan capital, Kampala.

"The people who gave me the motorcycle assured me they will not take it back, despite continuing to remind me to pay in the lockdown times," Ssebale added.

Many informal workers have ended up in debt, campaigners said, since Uganda on October 15 imposed an overnight curfew, closed places of worship and entertainment, and restricted movement into and out of two districts — Kassanda and Mubende.

The measures were aimed at curbing the spread of the deadly Ebola virus, which has infected 142 people and killed at least 55 since the country declared the outbreak in September.

Allana Kembabazi — programme manager at the NGO Initiative for Social and Economic Rights — said the restrictions were yet another blow for informal workers who had just been recovering from coronavirus lockdowns and struggling with rising inflation.

"You can't impose a lockdown without having thought through how you're going to feed them, how you're going to provide support to informal sector workers," said Kembabazi.

"The government has done a very poor job of having data to know who the informal sector are, who are those that (are) just going to be most constrained," she said. "We hope the government steps up soon and recognises the predicament of these people."

However, state communication minister Godfrey Kabbyanga told Context that the government had distributed food rations in the Ebola-hit districts, and highlighted that it was also dealing with food insecurity in other parts of the country.

"It was not only Ebola-affected communities that needed relief. We distributed what we had as government," he said.

Informal sector challenges

Although there is no official data on the informal sector, some studies suggest that workers such as motorbike taxi drivers, market traders, manual labourers and domestic helpers account for more than 75% of Uganda's total workforce.

Much of this work is insecure, poorly-paid and often unsafe, according to campaigners, with workers usually earning below minimum wage, not receiving sick leave or paid holidays, and being vulnerable to exploitation from employers and authorities.

The Covid-19 pandemic hit informal workers worldwide the hardest — and one in two people in low-income countries saw their earnings drop, US-based polling company Gallup found.

In Uganda, where more than 40% of the country's 45 million people live in extreme poverty on less than $2.15 a day, according to the World Bank, pandemic-related restrictions were longer and stricter than in many of its neighbouring countries.

Schools and many businesses were closed for two years, inter-district travel and open markets were banned, and bars, nightclubs and other entertainment activities were shut down, leaving many Ugandans unable to earn an income.

A study by Uganda's finance ministry published this month found that less than 5% of informal businesses received any form of financial support from the government during the pandemic.

"This could be attributed to the fact that a large proportion of government support during the crisis mainly targeted formal business," the study said.

'I am suffering'

Social equality campaigners said the government should learn lessons from the impact of the Covid-19 and Ebola restrictions and boost support to workers outside of the formal economy.

Measures could include placing a moratorium on the repossession of vehicles used for taxi services, or providing interest-free loans to informal businesses, they said.

Informal workers interviewed by Context said the Ebola restrictions had left them unable to afford food for their families, cover children's school fees, or meet loan repayments.

Namande Agnes, 25, a food seller in Mubende district, 135km from Kampala, said she had borrowed USh450,000 ($123) to invest in her roadside stall, but had fallen behind with her repayments after the Ebola restrictions were imposed.

"I am suffering ... the bank will come and take my land," said Agnes, who sells local fast food such as roast chicken, plantain and chips.

"The one thing (the) government should do is talk to banks on our behalf," she added. — Thomson Reuters Foundation



A health official educating the people about the Ebola transmission.

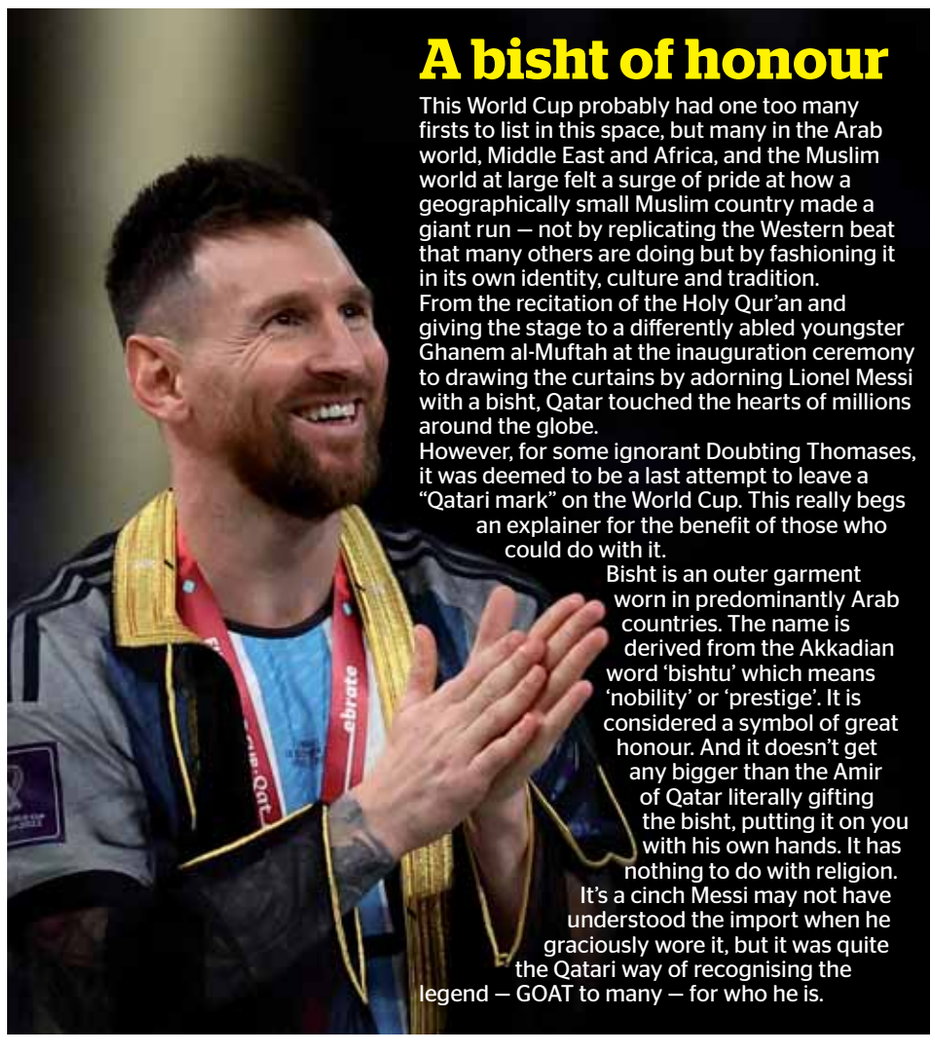
COMMENT

How Qatar won hearts and minds

The grand success of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 has justifiably won the country global acclaim with the general consensus being it was the 'best edition ever'



A general view shows the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 Group C football match between Argentina and Saudi Arabia at the Lusail Stadium last month. (**AFP**)



A bisht of honour

This World Cup probably had one too many firsts to list in this space, but many in the Arab world, Middle East and Africa, and the Muslim world at large felt a surge of pride at how a geographically small Muslim country made a giant run — not by replicating the Western beat that many others are doing but by fashioning it in its own identity, culture and tradition.

From the recitation of the Holy Qur'an and giving the stage to a differently abled youngster Ghanem al-Muftah at the inauguration ceremony to drawing the curtains by adorning Lionel Messi with a bisht, Qatar touched the hearts of millions around the globe.

However, for some ignorant Doubting Thomases, it was deemed to be a last attempt to leave a "Qatari mark" on the World Cup. This really begs an explainer for the benefit of those who could do with it.

Bisht is an outer garment worn in predominantly Arab countries. The name is derived from the Akkadian word 'bishtu' which means 'nobility' or 'prestige'. It is considered a symbol of great honour. And it doesn't get any bigger than the Amir of Qatar literally gifting the bisht, putting it on you with his own hands. It has nothing to do with religion.

It's a cinch Messi may not have understood the import when he graciously wore it, but it was quite the Qatari way of recognising the legend — GOAT to many — for who he is.

By Kamran Rehmat
Doha

Rarely has the hosting of a global tournament won so many converts virtually overnight. But the sheer majesty of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 did just that against all odds — topped by a never-before-seen pulsating final that simply took the breath away.

The Amir of Qatar His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani's tweet following the conclusion of the World Cup pretty much encapsulates the essence of what the mega event manifested.

"Qatar has fulfilled its promise of delivering an exceptional tournament from the land of Arabs, providing the chance for peoples of the world to learn about the enriched and authentic Arab culture and values," he tweeted.

From the stunning state-of-the-art stadiums, sophisticated organisation with an accent on seamless transportation, the all-round safety and security to the festive atmosphere, the warmth and hospitality of the locals, and the world-class events and activities it had everything that a fan could only have dreamt about.

A recurring — and popular — declaration across the country, region and the world at large was that the Qatar edition was the best ever in the history of the tournament for sheer quality — a sentiment echoed by no less than the FIFA President Giovanni Infantino in a presser.

Talking of numbers, the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 recorded an impressive attendance of 3,404,252 fans over 29 days — from November 20 to December 18.

The final last Sunday at the electric Lusail Stadium, which saw Argentina put it across France 4-2 with a heart-stopping shootout to lift the trophy, was attended by 88,966 spectators.

The attendance for the final match pushed the cumulative total for this FIFA World Cup to over 3.4 million spectators, with an average attendance capacity of 96.3%.

It ranks only third in terms of attendance history. The US in 1994 tops the list with 3,587,538 fans, while Brazil in 2014 is second with a tally of 3,429,873.

Fan attendance at the end of the group stage of Qatar 2022 was 2,457,059, while the Round of 16 was witnessed in the stadiums by 411,609 fans in eight matches.

In the quarter-finals, 245,221 fans were present in the stadia — 43,893 in the Croatia-Brazil match at Education City Stadium; 44,198 in the Morocco-Portugal showdown at Al Thumama Stadium; 88,235 fans in The Netherlands-Argentina encounter at Lusail Stadium, and another 68,895 at the France-England rumble at Al Bayt Stadium.

A total of 157,260 fans attended the semi-finals at Lusail and Al Bayt stadiums: the Argentina-Croatia clash saw an attendance of 88,966 fans, while the Morocco-France header at Al Bayt Stadium had 68,294 fans.

The third-place play-off between Morocco and Croatia at Khalifa International Stadium was watched by 44,137 fans.

Overall, the organisers estimate that more than 1.4 million fans from across the globe visited Qatar for the mega event.



Argentine captain Lionel Messi lifts the World Cup trophy alongside his teammates as they celebrate after beating France 4-2 in a penalty shootout at the end of a pulsating final at the Lusail Stadium on December 18. (**Reuters**)

The Qatar edition also had television audiences around the world hooked in record numbers. For instance, the World Cup final set a new all-time record for viewership in France with an average of 24.1 million watching the humdinger. Earlier, in Japan, the group match between Japan and Costa Rica on November 27 drew an average audience of 36.37 million viewers. This surpassed the audience of their incredible comeback against Germany in the tournament opener by over 10 million — making it 74% higher than the average domestic group stage audience during the FIFA World Cup in 2018!

But what took the cake in terms of fan convenience was how thousands of them were able to attend more than one match per day – the first time this has been made possible in modern World Cup history.

The transportation won particular praise from all comers, with the Doha Metro, Lusail Tram, Mowasalat (Karwa) buses, multiple taxi services, and the Education City and Msheireb trams safely ferrying millions.

Mowasalat also deployed 4,000 buses and a workforce of more than 18,000 staff from 90 countries, including thousands of specially trained drivers. A whopping 26.8 million passengers were safely transported through all services, including the public bus and Metro-link network, which operated for extended hours during the tournament on more than 200 routes.

Another milestone was the deployment of around 900 E-buses, which reduced the carbon footprint of the event in an equivalent of the CO2 absorption of 18,078 trees.

When not watching the action, the fans were thronging a host of entertainment events, including the FIFA Fan Festival, Corniche Activation as well as music and fashion extravaganzas. The world's biggest fashion show took place at the Stadium 974 on the eve of the finals. More than 530,000 attended the entertainment events daily throughout the tournament, according to the organisers.

The FIFA Fan Festival at Al Bidda Park, easily the centre stage of celebrations, saw more than 1.8 million fans enjoy live broadcasts and entertainment. Opening on November 19, the FIFA Fan Festival was quite the hub for both local and global fans during the tournament, showing every FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 game on an iconic 1,800sq m screen and providing free entertainment with some of the most famous celebrities from music world. The 145,000sq m and 40,000-capacity venue welcomed an average of 70,000 visitors per day.

Last but not least, Qatar reinforced its image of being one of the world's safest countries by returning zero major crime — which cannot be said of even the most advanced countries with massive security apparatuses. Once again, it was a recurring theme with visitors, who were bowled over with how convenient it was to move from one place to another. During the entire World Cup, Doha's famous metro plied absolutely free of cost!

To state the obvious the World Cup is a primer for great things to come. Qatar is next slated to host the Asian Football Cup in 2023, the World Swimming Championships in 2024, the World Table Tennis Championships in 2025 and the Asian Games in 2030 (the second time it will do so after 2006). Its next bigger dream however, is the aspiration for Olympic Games in 2036. Given the awe and facility with which it just completed what is widely being dubbed the best World Cup ever, it cannot be counted out.

TAIL PIECE: The World Cup saw many converts — not in the least from Britain, which was one of the countries to lose the 2022 bid to Qatar and, for years, its media subjected the country to unjust, if voluminous and vocal, criticism. However, Charlie Brooks of *The Telegraph*, for instance, would now have none of it. Said he: Compare Qatar to the drug-fuelled chaos when we hosted the Euro final, then ask yourself where you'd rather (have) taken your 10-year-old daughter. His comment appeared in an article entitled: *Perhaps we should be asking Qatar for advice*.



An array of slick buses ferrying fans to and from the stadiums during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.



A colourful view of the much frequented Fan Festivals.

QATAR









Rainy day, cooler weather

It was a rainy day across Qatar yesterday. Scattered to thundery rain was received at many places, the Met office said. The minimum and maximum temperatures were 15° Celsius and 21° Celsius, respectively. The forecast for today (Tuesday) mentions a chance of rain at places, with a minimum and maximum temperatures of 15C and 23C, respectively. Pictured are rainy scenes from various spots in Doha.
PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



