

## Heavy rain leaves 34 dead in Brazil

REUTERS, Rio De Janeiro

At least 34 people died after heavy rain hit Petropolis, a city in the mountainous region of Brazil's Rio de Janeiro state, local government said yesterday.

City streets were flooded by downpours, while landslides also resulted in fatalities.

President Jair Bolsonaro, who is traveling to Russia, said on Twitter he had asked ministers to help the city and the victims of the storm.

Rio de Janeiro's Governor Claudio Castro went to Petropolis on Tuesday night.

"We are in Petropolis articulating all the help needed at this time," Castro wrote on his Twitter account.



Syrian firefighters extinguish fire following artillery shelling by the Syrian regime on a fuel depot affiliated to the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) jihadist group yesterday in the northwestern rebel-held town of Dana. At least three civilians were killed in the shelling, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

PHOTO: AFP

## HIJAB ROW IN SOUTHERN INDIA

# Security tight as schools reopen

AFP, Udupi

Schools reopened in southern India under tight security yesterday with public gatherings banned following protests over Muslim girls wearing the hijab in classrooms.

Tensions have been high in Karnataka state since late last year when at least four schoolgirls were prevented from wearing the Muslim headscarf, sparking protests that have since spread across India.

In an attempt to calm tensions, Karnataka's state government temporarily closed schools last week.

This came as the Karnataka High Court imposed a temporary ban on the wearing of all religious symbols in schools while it considers the headscarf ban.

As classrooms reopened in the state on Tuesday and yesterday, police with batons were deployed outside several schools.

Authorities also imposed Section 144 -- a law that prohibits gatherings of more than four people -- in several districts.

# Covid cases decline by 19pc

Says WHO as just over 16m new infections, about 75,000 deaths reported worldwide last week

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The number of new Covid-19 cases worldwide has dropped by 19 percent in the past week, while recorded deaths remain stable, according to the World Health Organization's (WHO) latest report on the coronavirus pandemic.

The United Nations' health agency said late on Tuesday that "just over 16 million new cases and just under 75,000 new deaths were reported" globally during the week of February 7 to February 13.

The Western Pacific was the only region to report an increase in new weekly cases, a rise of about 19 percent. Southeast Asia recorded a drop of about 37 percent, the biggest decrease across the six WHO regions.

The biggest number of new cases was seen in Russia. Cases there and elsewhere in Eastern Europe doubled in recent weeks, driven by a surge of the hugely infectious Omicron variant.

Meanwhile, the number of deaths rose by 38 percent in the Eastern Mediterranean region and by about one-third in the Western Pacific, according to the WHO's weekly report.

WHO said that all other coronavirus variants, including Alpha, Beta and Delta, continue to decline globally as Omicron crowds them out.

Among the more than 400,000 Covid-19 virus sequences uploaded to the world's biggest virus database in the last week, more than 98 percent were Omicron.

WHO said the BA.2 version of Omicron appears to be "steadily increasing" and its prevalence has risen in South Africa, Denmark, the UK and other countries.

Health officials have noted, however, that Omicron causes milder disease than previous Covid-19 variants and in countries with high vaccination rates, hospitalisation and death rates have not increased substantially, even with Omicron's spread.

## COVID-VACCINATED MOMS Strong protection for babies: CDC

AFP, Washington

Babies born to mothers fully vaccinated against the coronavirus during pregnancy were around 60 percent less likely to be hospitalised with severe Covid, a new study by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Tuesday. Such an effect had been hypothesized -- because of the transfer of antibodies through the placenta during pregnancy and through breast milk after birth -- but wasn't backed by real world evidence until now. The CDC carried out a study involving 379 babies aged up to six months, who were hospitalized in 20 pediatric centers from July 2021 to January 2022. The authors studied the odds of Covid-19 vaccination among mothers whose babies were hospitalized with the disease (176 infants) compared to the odds of vaccination among mothers whose babies were hospitalized for non-Covid reasons (203 infants), who were a control group. The study further found that completion of a two-dose vaccine series later in pregnancy was more protective than earlier in pregnancy -- 80 percent compared to 32 percent.

## STEM CELL TRANSPLANT First woman 'cured' of HIV: researchers

REUTERS, Chicago

A US patient with leukemia has become the first woman and the third person to date to be cured of HIV after receiving a stem cell transplant from a donor who was naturally resistant to the virus that causes AIDS, researchers reported on Tuesday. The case of a middle-aged woman of mixed race, presented at the



Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections in

Denver, is also the first involving

umbilical cord blood, a newer

approach that may make the

treatment available to more

people. Since receiving the

cord blood to treat her acute

myeloid leukemia -- a cancer

that starts in blood-forming cells

in the bone marrow -- the woman

has been in remission and free of the

virus for 14 months, without the need for potent HIV treatments known as antiretroviral therapy. The two prior cases occurred in males who had received adult stem cells, which are more frequently used in bone marrow transplants.

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