

CORONAVIRUS India reports 702 cases, six deaths in 24 hours

NDTV ONLINE

India saw a single day rise of 702 cases of Covid-19, with the number of active cases of the infection rising to 4,097, the health ministry said yesterday.

Six new fatalities - two from Maharashtra and one each from Karnataka, Kerala, West Bengal, and Delhi - were reported in a span of 24 hours, according to the ministry's data updated at 8:00 am.

The country had recorded 752 new cases on December 22.

The number of daily cases had dropped to double digits by December 5, but the cases have again gone up after emergence of a new variant and cold weather conditions.

The daily numbers were in lakhs at the peak of the pandemic in 2020 and has seen over 5.3 lakh deaths in about four years since then across the country.



Palestinians mourn relatives killed in Israeli strike at the Nasser hospital in Khan Yunis on the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. Israel has escalated its ground offensive in Gaza sharply since just before Christmas despite public pleas from its closest ally the United States to scale the campaign down in the closing weeks of the year.

PHOTO: AFP

2024 ELECTIONS

Pak polls body accepts ex- PM Sharif's nomination

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's election commission yesterday accepted former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's nomination for the 2024 elections, weeks after a court overturned two graft convictions, ARY News reported.

But Sharif still needs the removal of a life ban on holding any public office to qualify to stand, so it was not immediately clear how his nomination was accepted. A hearing on that ban will be held in January. Sharif was banned from running in elections by the Supreme Court in 2017 which declared him dishonest for not disclosing income from a company owned by his son.

More recently, a court overturned two convictions for graft.

Sharif, who arrived back home in October from four years of self-imposed exile in London, is bidding for a fourth premiership in the February 8 elections.

Sharif's biggest challenge will be to wrest back his support base from his main rival, former cricket hero Imran Khan, who, despite being in jail for graft, remains popular following his ouster from the premiership in 2022.

YEMEN'S HOUSHI ATTACKS ON SHIPPING

US allies reluctant on Red Sea task force

Analyst says countries concerned joining taskforce means supporting Israel

REUTERS, WASHINGTON

US President Joe Biden hoped to present a firm international response to Yemen's Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping by launching a new maritime force, but a week after its launch many allies don't want to be associated with it, publicly, or at all.

Two of America's European allies who were listed as contributors to Operation Prosperity Guardian - Italy and Spain - issued statements appearing to distance themselves from the maritime force.

The Pentagon says the force is a defensive coalition of more than 20 nations to ensure billions of dollars' worth of commerce can flow freely through a vital shipping chokepoint in Red Sea waters off Yemen.

But nearly half of those countries have so far not come forward to acknowledge their contributions or allowed the US to do so. Those contributions can range from dispatching warships to merely sending a staff officer.

The reluctance of some US allies to link themselves to the effort partly reflects the fissures created by the conflict in Gaza, which has seen Biden maintain firm support for Israel even as international criticism rises over its offensive, which Gaza's health ministry says has killed more than 21,000 Palestinians.

"European governments are very worried

that part of their potential electorate will turn against them," said David Hernandez, a professor of international relations at the Complutense University of Madrid, noting that European public is increasingly critical of Israel and wary of being drawn into a conflict.

The Iran-backed Houthis have attacked or seized a dozen ships with missiles and drones since November 19, trying to inflict an international cost over Israel's campaign, which followed the October 7 offensive in Gaza.

The navies of the US, Britain and France have each shot down Houthi-launched drones or missiles. A person familiar with Biden administration thinking said the US believes escalating Houthi attacks call for an international response separate from the conflict raging in Gaza.

The Red Sea is the entry point for ships using the Suez Canal, which handles about 12 percent of worldwide trade and is vital for the movement of goods between Asia and Europe. Houthi attacks have seen some ships rerouted around Africa's Cape of Good Hope, substantially increasing sailing time and costs.

Denmark's giant container firm Maersk said on Saturday it would resume shipping operations in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. But Germany's Hapag Lloyd said on Wednesday it still believes the Red Sea is too dangerous and will continue to send ships around the Cape of Good Hope.



YETI AIRLINES CRASH IN NEPAL

Mistaken cutting of power caused crash that killed 72

REUTERS, Kathmandu

A Yeti Airlines crash in Nepal that killed 72 people almost a year ago was caused by the pilots mistakenly cutting power leading to an aerodynamic stall, a report issued by a government-appointed investigation panel yesterday said.

The ATR 72, operated by privately owned Yeti Airlines, crashed just before landing in the tourist city of Pokhara on Jan. 15 in one of Nepal's worst aeroplane accidents in 30 years.

There were 72 people on the twin-engine aircraft including two infants, four crew and 15 foreign nationals. There were no survivors.

Dipak Prasad Bastola, an aeronautical engineer and a member of the investigating panel, said due to lack of awareness and lack of standard operating procedures, the pilots had put the condition levers, which control power, in the feathering position, instead of selecting the flap lever.

This led the engine to "run idle and not produce thrust", Bastola told Reuters. "But due to its momentum, the aircraft flew for up to 49 seconds before hitting the ground."

ATR is based in France and the plane's engines were manufactured in Canada by Pratt & Whitney Canada RTX.N.

It was Nepal's deadliest air crash since 1992, when a Pakistan International Airlines Airbus A300 crashed into a hillside on approach to Kathmandu, killing all 167 people on board.



Afghan burqa-clad women sit in a queue as they wait to receive food aid from a UMMAH charity in Kandahar, Afghanistan yesterday. Of Afghanistan's estimated 38 million people, at least 15 million are in dire need of food assistance.

PHOTO: AFP

Indian govt targeting high- profile journos with spyware

Say Amnesty, Washington Post in joint probe

AFP, New Delhi

India's government has again targeted high-profile journalists with Pegasus spyware, Amnesty International and The Washington Post said in a joint investigation published yesterday. Created by Israeli firm NSO Group, Pegasus can be used to access a phone's messages and emails, peruse photos, eavesdrop on calls, track locations and even film the owner with the camera. Watchdogs have documented widespread use of the spyware - which is normally only sold to governments or security agencies - against journalists and activists in dozens of countries, including India. Amnesty said journalists Siddharth Varadarajan of The Wire and Anand Mangnale of The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) had been targeted with the spyware on their iPhones. "Increasingly, journalists in India face the threat of unlawful surveillance simply for doing their jobs," said Donncha O Cearbhaill, head of Amnesty International's Security Lab. That threat compounds an already hostile climate for reporters also facing "imprisonment under draconian laws, smear campaigns, harassment, and intimidation", he added.

SPYING FOR ISRAEL

Qatar court drops death sentence for eight Indians

REUTERS, New Delhi

A Qatar court has dropped the death sentence imposed on eight Indian former naval officers arrested there last year, India's foreign ministry said yesterday.

The eight men, who were condemned to death in October, had been accused of spying for Israel according to sources though India and Qatar have not confirmed the charges.

India's foreign ministry did not say what new sentence or penalty the men would now face.

It "noted the verdict today of the Court of Appeal of Qatar" in which the sentences "have been reduced".

"We are in close touch with the legal team as well as the family members to decide on the next steps," and will "continue to take up the matter with the Qatari authorities," it added.

It declined to comment on the case further "due to the confidential and sensitive nature of proceedings".

Qatar and Israel's embassies in New Delhi did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

India expressed shock when Qatar's Court of First Instance imposed the death penalty on the eight men who were working on a submarine project with a private company for the Qatari authorities.

The Hindu newspaper reported the men were spying for a "third country", while the Times of India has said that "various reports claimed they were accused of spying for Israel". More than 800,000 Indian citizens live and work in Qatar, which is also a significant provider of natural gas for India.

Accelerate war preparations North Korea's Kim orders military, munition industry

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea leader Kim Jong Un has ordered his country's military, munitions industry and nuclear weapons sector to accelerate war preparations to counter what he called unprecedented confrontational moves by the US, state media said yesterday.

Speaking on the policy directions for the new year at a key meeting of the country's ruling party on Wednesday, Kim also said Pyongyang would expand strategic cooperation with "anti-imperialist independent" countries, news agency KCNA reported.

North Korea has been expanding ties with Russia, among others, as Washington accuses Pyongyang of supplying military equipment to Moscow for use in its war with Ukraine, while Russia provides technical support to help the North advance its military capabilities. "He (Kim) set forth the militant tasks for the People's Army and the munitions industry, nuclear weapons and civil defence sectors to further accelerate the war preparations," KCNA said. Yesterday, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol visited a frontline military unit in the eastern county of Yeoncheon to inspect its defence posture and called for an immediate retaliation if there was any provocation from North Korea. "I urge you to immediately and firmly crush the enemy's will for a provocation on the spot," Yoon told troops. During the party plenum, North Korea's Kim also laid out economic goals for the new year, calling it a "decisive year" to accomplish the country's five-year development plan, KCNA said.



Cargo ship hit mine in Black Sea, 2 hurt Says Ukraine

AFP, Kyiv

Ukrainian authorities said yesterday that a commercial ship arriving to collect grain hit a Russian naval mine in the Black Sea, injuring two sailors.

The unnamed Panama-flagged ship was heading towards Ukraine's Danube ports when it hit a mine, causing it to lose speed and control and sparking a fire on the upper deck, Ukraine border guards said.

Ukraine has created a maritime corridor for commercial ships which first pass close to the shores of Bulgaria and Romania.

The border force did not specify exactly when or where the incident happened.

The Maritime Bulletin wrote that a Greek-owned, Panama-flagged ship called Vyssos had a mine explode under its stern on Wednesday morning while on its way to the port of Izmail.