

News in brief

◆ **Disconsolate passengers stuck on a cruise ship moored in Lisbon's port for five days due to a COVID-19 outbreak** began disembarking early yesterday, focused on clearing the final hurdle of a negative test before boarding homebound flights. The AIDAnova, carrying 2,844 passengers and 1,353 crew, had docked in Portugal's capital on Wednesday. The ship was en route to the island of Madeira for New Year's Eve celebrations, but the cruise was cut short after COVID-19 was detected among the crew, 52 of whom tested positive between Wednesday and Friday.



Passengers leave COVID-hit cruise ship after 5 days stuck in Lisbon

◆ **Two armed drones were shot down yesterday as they approached an Iraqi military base** hosting U.S. forces near Baghdad's international airport, Iraqi security sources said, adding that nobody was hurt in the incident. The attack came as Iran and its allies in Iraq marked the second anniversary of the assassination of top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani. Soleimani was killed in a drone strike near Baghdad airport ordered by then-U.S. president Donald Trump. Commenting on the attack, an official of the U.S.-led international military coalition said the base's defence system had engaged "two fixed-wing suicide drones. They were shot down without incident".



Drone attack on US base foiled, Iraqi security sources say

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◆ **Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan** said yesterday he will make a visit next month to Saudi Arabia, whose ties with Ankara have been strained in recent years. Asked about resolving issues in exports to Saudi Arabia as he left a trade event, Erdogan said he would travel to the Gulf state in February. "He is expecting me in February. He made a promise and I will make my visit to Saudi Arabia in February," he said in a video posted on social media, without giving a name.

Turkey's Erdogan says he will visit Saudi Arabia in February



US urges civilian rule after Sudan's PM quits

◆ **The United States has urged Sudanese leaders to ensure civilian rule and end violence** against anti-military protesters after Abdalla Hamdok resigned as prime minister, throwing a transition towards elections deeper into uncertainty. Hamdok, an economist and former United Nations official widely respected abroad, had served as prime minister under a military-civilian power-sharing deal that followed the overthrow of former leader Omar al-Bashir in 2019. The military dissolved his government in an October coup, but he returned a month later under a deal to form a government of technocrats ahead of 2023 elections. Hamdok resigned on Sunday after being unable to forge a consensus to bring the transition forward.

Houthis seize vessel off Yemen t

Reuters, Al Arabiya

The Iran-aligned Houthi militia that controls northern Yemen hijacked a United Arab Emirates-flagged cargo vessel which it said was engaged in "hostile acts" but which the Saudis said was carrying hospital equipment.

The ship was heading to the Saudi port of Jizan, just north of the Yemeni Red Sea island of Socotra when it was attacked just before midnight on Sunday, Saudi state news agency SPA reported, quoting coalition spokesman Brigadier General Turki al-Malki.

Saudi Arabia is leading a military coalition that has been battling the Houthis for more than six years. The alliance has accused the Houthis of attacking shipping in the Red Sea, one of the world's busiest maritime lanes leading to the Suez Canal.

The cargo ship was hijacked off the western Yemeni port of Hodeidah, the coalition said.



A ship seized by Yemen's Houthi militia off the Yemen's Red Sea coast is seen in a frame grab from video handed out by the Houthi's media centre

The coalition called on the Houthis to immediately surrender the ship, adding that it will take all necessary measures to deal with the "piracy".

The Houthis' military spokes-

man, Yahya Sarea, confirmed seizure of the vessel which he said was carrying military equipment and engaged in "hostile acts targeting the security and stability of the Yemeni people". He added

that the crew, "of different nationalities", were still on board.

In a press briefing broadcast on the group's Masirah TV, Sarea shared photos and videos that he said they were of the seized



The Houthis are a large clan originating from Yemen's northwestern Saada province. They practice the Zaydi form of Shiism. Zaydis make up around 35 percent of Yemen's population. A Zaydi imamate ruled Yemen for 1,000 years, before being overthrown in 1962. Since then, the Zaydis - stripped of their political power - have struggled to restore their authority and influence in Yemen

Iran vows revenge for Soleimani killing if Trump not put on trial

Reuters | Dubai

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi vowed revenge yesterday for the US assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani two years ago unless former US President Donald Trump was put on trial.

Iran and groups allied with it in Iraq have been holding events to honour Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, the overseas arm of the elite Revolutionary Guards.

He was killed in Iraq in a drone strike on Jan. 3, 2020, ordered by then president Trump.

"If Trump and (former secretary of state Mike) Pompeo are not tried in a fair court for the criminal act of assassinating General Soleimani, Muslims will take our martyr's revenge," Raisi said in a televised speech yesterday.



On Sunday, Iran urged the UN Security Council in a letter to hold the United States and Israel, which Tehran says was also involved in the killing, to account, according to Iranian media.

Days after the assassination, the United States told the United Nations that the killing was self-defence and vowed to take additional action "as necessary" in the Middle East to protect US personnel and interests.

Fauci warns of da surge due to larg

● **The Omicron variant was estimated to be 58.6% of the coronavirus variants circulating in the United States as of Dec. 25**

Reuters

Top US infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci said there was still a danger of a surge in hospitalisation due to a large number of coronavirus cases even as early data suggests the Omicron COVID-19 variant is less severe.

"The only difficulty is that if you have so many cases, even if the rate of hospitalisation is lower with Omicron than it is with Delta, there is still the danger that you will have a surging of hospitalisations that might stress the healthcare system," Fauci said in an interview on Sunday with CNN.

The Omicron variant was estimated to be 58.6% of the coronavirus variants circulating in the United States as of Dec. 25, according to data from the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The sudden arrival of Omicron has brought record-setting case counts to countries around the world and dampened New Year festivities around the world.

"There will certainly be a lot more cases because this is a much more transmissible virus than Delta is," Fauci said on CNN.

However, "It looks, in fact, that



Dr Anthony Fauci speaks about the Omicron briefing at the White House in Washington

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US authorities registered at least 346,869 new coronavirus on Saturday, according to a Reuters tally. The US death toll from COVID-19 rose by at least 377 to 828,562.

it (Omicron) might be less severe, at least from data that we've gathered from South Africa, from the UK and even some from preliminary data from here in the United States," Fauci said.

Fauci added that the CDC will soon be coming out with a clarification on whether people with COVID-19 should test negative to



The most effective steps individuals can take to prevent COVID-19 virus is to keep a physical distance wear a well-fitting mask; open windows to improve ventilation or crowded spaces; keep hands clean; avoid touching your face; and get vaccinated

COVID-19 Countries worst affected

Country	Total cases	Total deaths	Global tally
1 USA	56,142,175	847,408	290,976,987
2 India	34,922,882	481,893	
3 Brazil	22,293,228	619,171	
4 UK	13,235,401	148,851	5,462,635
5 Russia	10,554,309	311,353	
6 France	10,250,358	123,942	254,741,991
7 Turkey	9,552,801	82,635	
8 Germany	7,213,067	112,897	+307,744
9 Italy	6,396,110	137,786	
10 Spain	6,294,745	89,405	New deaths
11 Iran	6,198,590	131,702	
12 Argentina	5,694,930	117,204	+2,184
13 Colombia	5,181,173	130,026	
14 Indonesia	4,263,433	144,102	

Figures as of closing

Middle East

Country	Total cases	new cases	Total deaths	New Deaths	Total recovered	Active cases
Egypt	387,159		21,797		321,568	43,794
Saudi Arabia	559,852	+1,746	8,881	+2	542,754	8,217
UAE	769,608	+2,515	2,169	+1	747,715	19,724
Kuwait	418,332		2,468		411,902	3,962
Oman	306,008	+176	4,117		300,532	1,359
Qatar	253,536	+1,177	618		246,076	6,842

Russian jets bomb rebel-held Idlib in Syria, witnesses say



An aerial view of Kafr Arouk camp for internally displaced after a heavy rainfall in Idlib, Syria

Reuters | Amman

Russian jets bombed areas near the northwestern Syrian city of Idlib on Sunday, witnesses and rebel sources said, marking a new year flare-up for the last opposition-held bastion.

War planes flying at high altitude, which tracking centres said were Russian Sukhoi jets, dropped bombs on several towns and a main water pump-

ing station serving the overcrowded city of Idlib, whose wider population is more than a million.

No immediate comment was available from Russia or the Syrian army, which says it targets the hideouts of militant groups who control the region but deny any attacks on civilians.

An official at the city's water utility service said it was out of action as a result of the strikes.