

News in brief

◆ A leading Hong Kong university has fenced off a statue on its campus that for more than two decades has commemorated pro-democracy protesters killed during China's Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. Late on Wednesday night, security guards at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) fenced off the eight-metre high, two-tonne copper sculpture called the "Pillar of Shame" that commemorates those killed by Chinese authorities more than three decades ago. A crane and at least one shipping container was brought into the campus as construction workers milled around the area, according to two Reuters reporters on the scene just after midnight local time. Loud construction noise could be heard, they said.



Hong Kong university fences off Tiananmen statue on campus

◆ Portugal's health minister yesterday predicted the Omicron variant would trigger a record number of infections in the coming days as authorities reported nearly 9,000 new cases, the highest since early February and up from 5,754 the previous day.



Portugal braces for record COVID-19 cases as Omicron spreads

Although the country has one of the world's highest rates of COVID-19 vaccination with around 87% of its 10 million population fully inoculated, daily infections have returned to levels last seen when Portugal faced its worst wave of the illness in the first two months of the year. "We will most likely reach an (all-time) record number of cases in the coming days," Health Minister Marta Temido said in an interview with TVI television.

◆ Pfizer Inc said yesterday the US Food and Drug Administration

Pfizer oral COVID-19 pill gets US authorization for at-home use



authorised its antiviral COVID-19 pill, making it the first at-home treatment for the coronavirus that is expected to become an important tool in the fight against the fast spreading Omicron variant. Data from Pfizer's clinical trial showed its antiviral regimen was 90% effective in preventing hospitalizations and deaths in patients at high risk of severe illness. Recent lab data suggests the drug retains its effectiveness against Omicron. The agency said it authorized the oral drug for emergency use for the treatment of mild-to-moderate disease in adults and pediatric patients of 12 years of age and older weighing at least 40 kilograms, or about 88 pounds, who are at high risk for progression to severe COVID-19.

◆ Harvard professor convicted by US jury of lying about China ties

A Harvard University professor was convicted on Tuesday of US charges that he lied about his ties to a China-run recruitment programme in a closely-watched case stemming from a crackdown on Chinese influence within US research. A federal jury in Boston found Charles Lieber, a renowned nanoscientist and the former chairman of Harvard's chemistry department, guilty of making false statements to authorities, filing false tax returns and failing to report a Chinese bank account.

COVID-19 Countries worst affected

Country	Total cases	Total deaths	Global tally
1 USA	52,268,647	831,253	276,988,687
2 India	34,758,481	478,325	
3 Brazil	22,219,477	617,991	
4 UK	11,647,473	147,573	5,389,832
5 Russia	10,292,983	300,269	Recovered:
6 Turkey	9,209,740	80,778	248,377,753
7 France	8,713,756	121,946	New cases
8 Germany	6,910,368	110,168	+405,154
9 Iran	6,177,885	131,211	New deaths
10 Spain	5,585,054	88,887	+4,752
11 Italy	5,472,469	136,077	
12 Argentina	5,404,380	116,953	
13 Colombia	5,110,788	129,534	
14 Indonesia	4,261,072	144,034	

Figures as of closing

Country	Total cases	new cases	Total deaths	New Deaths	Total recovered	Active cases
Egypt	377,081		21,457		313,782	41,842
Saudi Arabia	551,462	+252	8,867	+2	540,393	2,202
UAE	745,555	+665	2,154		739,277	4,124
Kuwait	414,270		2,466		411,145	659
Oman	304,938	+42	4,113		300,227	598
Qatar	247,082	+185	614		244,145	2,323

Omicron severity answered in 3-4

● Kluge said it was not clear how long immunity lasted after a third dose

● Israel is set to become the first country to offer fourth vaccine doses

● Some studies suggest Omicron causes less severe disease than the Delta variant

Reuters | Brussels

Omicron will become the dominant coronavirus variant in Europe by the start of 2022 and three to four weeks is needed to determine the severity of the COVID-19 it causes, the World Health Organisation's

People needed to adopt a "vaccine-plus" approach, with vaccinations and booster shots complemented by mask-wearing, while ruling out "non-essential" contacts over Christmas and New Year

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION'S REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR EUROPE HANS KLUGE



European head said yesterday. Hans Kluge has warned countries to brace for a "significant surge" in cases.

He told in an interview yesterday that Omicron, already dominant in Britain, Denmark and Portugal, was likely to be the main coronavirus strain in Europe "in a couple of weeks".

"There is no doubt that Europe is once again the epicentre of the global pandemic," said Kluge, the WHO Regional Director for Eu-

rope, adding that infections were up 40% from a year ago and Omicron was now taking over.

"Yes, I'm very concerned, but there is no reason for panic," he said. "The good news is... we know what to do." People needed to adopt a "vaccine-plus" approach, with vaccinations and booster shots complemented by mask-wearing, while ruling out "non-essential" contacts over Christmas and New Year, he said.

Countries should also be ready

to implement stricter measures, but lockdowns should only be used as a last resort, given the economic and social cost.

Kluge said it was not clear how long immunity lasted after a third dose. Israel is set to become the first country to offer fourth vaccine doses to more vulnerable people.

"But then let's remember that Israel was the first one to start. So I would say that a fourth dose in Israel is like a third dose in other

Death toll from Madagascar boat sinking climbs to 83



The wreck of the boat 'Francia', that sank off the coast on Monday, is pulled to the beach in northeastern Madagascar

Reuters | Antmamarivo

The death toll from the sinking of a cargo ship off the coast of northeastern Madagascar rose to 83 yesterday as bad weather ended the search for five missing passengers, the maritime agency said.

The ship, which was not authorised to take passengers, was overloaded and water flooded the engine before it sank on Monday, said Mamy Randrianavony, director of operations at sea at the Maritime and River Port Agency (APMF).

Fifty survivors have been found, APMF said. The search for the five remaining missing passengers would resume on Thursday. One of the search helicopters carrying General Serge Gellé, who heads the national Gendarmerie, crashed

at sea late on Monday. Gellé was found alive on Tuesday morning after 13 hours, during which time he used the pilot's seat as a float.

"Since I couldn't fight the waves, I knew I wouldn't make it to dry land. Yet I was very close. I arrived within 500 meters, but the waves sent me back because I was getting tired," Gellé said in a video posted by the Gendarmerie.

"I thank heaven that there was a fisherman. But the fisherman's canoe was too small. So he had to come back for a bigger canoe. So I stayed two more hours in the sea," Gellé said from a hospital in the Madagascar capital.

Another passenger from the helicopter, a mechanic, was also found alive. Two other passengers are unaccounted for.

Russia agrees to begin talks with US at start c

● Ukraine and the West have accused Russia of considering a new attack on Ukraine

● Putin said on Tuesday that Russia had no room to retreat

Reuters | Moscow



Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov

Russia will enter talks with US negotiators on security guarantees it wants from the West at the start of next year, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday, amid concerns over a Russian military build-up near Ukraine's border.

Ukraine and the West have accused Russia of considering a new attack on Ukraine as early as next month. Russia denies that, despite moving tens of thousands of troops to staging posts closer to Ukraine.

President Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday that Russia had no room to retreat in its standoff with the United States over what Moscow views as Washington's unacceptable military aid for Ukraine

and would be forced into a tough response unless the West dropped its "aggressive line".

He said that Moscow wants legally-binding security guarantees that certain offensive weapons will not be deployed to countries that neighbour Russia and for NATO to halt its eastwards expansion.

Russia has handed over a list of detailed security guarantees to Washington that it wants from the West.

"It is agreed that at the very start of next year bilateral contact between American negotiators and ours will become the first round (of talks)," Lavrov said.

He said Russia had presented American officials with a docu-

Spain's 'Fat One' Christmas lottery leaves wi

Reuters | Madrid

Lucky lottery players popped champagne corks across Spain on Wednesday afternoon as the winning numbers in a multi-billion euro Christmas draw were revealed, even as some ticket sellers protested to demand higher commissions on sales.

Known as 'El Gordo' (The Fat One), the festive draw dates back to 1812. Millions participate, eager for a piece of a large prize pot that this year reached 2.41 billion euros (\$2.72 billion).

As the same numbers can be sold multiple times, winning tickets are often spread across differ-



A man dressed in a costume sits before the draw of Spain's traditional Christmas Lottery "El Gordo" (The Fat One) at the Royal Theatre, in Madrid, Spain

ent winners in different regions, with this year's top prize landing in Madrid and the Canary Islands.

A local handball team in the Basque town of Basauri, just outside Bilbao, handed out some 120 tickets that each scooped the second prize worth 1.25 million euros, though most of them will be split among many owners.

The club president told local media around 1,200 people in the community would get a share.

"I haven't processed it yet. I was in the mountains with the dogs," said Jose Manuel Fernandez, who had a share in one of the tickets. "My wife didn't believe it,